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FBI's No. 2 Was 'Deep Throat' Mark Felt Ends 30-Year Mystery of The Post's Watergate Source

By David Von Drehle
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, June 1, 2005

Deep Throat, the secret source whose insider guidance was vital to The Washington Post's groundbreaking coverage of the Watergate scandal, was a pillar of the FBI named W. Mark Felt, The Post confirmed yesterday.

As the bureau's second- and third-ranking official during a period when the FBI was battling for its independence against the administration of President Richard M. Nixon, Felt had the means and the motive to help uncover the web of internal spies, secret surveillance, dirty tricks and coverups that led to Nixon's unprecedented resignation on Aug. 9, 1974, and to prison sentences for some of Nixon's highest-ranking aides.

Felt's identity as Washington's most celebrated secret source had been an object of speculation for more than 30 years until yesterday, when his role was revealed by his family in a Vanity Fair magazine article. Even Nixon was caught on tape speculating that Felt was "an informer" as early as February 1973, at a time when Deep Throat was supplying confirmation and context for some of The Post's most explosive Watergate stories.

But Felt's repeated denials, and the stalwart silence of the reporters he aided -- Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein -- kept the cloak of mystery drawn up around Deep Throat. In place of a name and a face, the source acquired a magic and a mystique.

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He was the romantic truth teller half hidden in the shadows of a Washington area parking garage. This image was rendered indelibly by the dramatic best-selling memoir Woodward and Bernstein published in 1974, "All the President's Men." Two years later, in a blockbuster movie of the same name, actor Hal Holbrook breathed whispery urgency into the suspenseful late-

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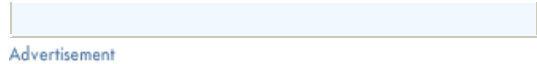
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night encounters between Woodward and his source.



For many Americans under 40, this is the most potent distillation of the complicated brew that was Watergate. Students who lack the time or interest to follow each element of the scandal's slow unraveling in comprehensive history books can quickly digest the vivid relationship of a nervous elder guiding a relentless reporter.

As dramatic as those portrayals were, they hewed closely to the truth, Woodward said.

"Mark Felt at that time was a dashing gray-haired figure," Woodward recalled, and his experience as an anti-Nazi spy hunter early in his career at the FBI had endowed him with a whole bag of counterintelligence tricks. Felt dreamed up the signal by which Woodward would summon him to a meeting (a flowerpot innocuously displayed on the reporter's balcony) and also hatched the countersign by which Felt could contact Woodward (a clock face inked on Page 20 of Woodward's daily New York Times).

"He knew he was taking a monumental risk," said Woodward, now an assistant managing editor of The Post whose catalogue of prizewinning and best-selling work has been built on the sort of confidential relationships he maintained with Deep Throat.

Felt also knew, by firsthand experience, that Nixon's administration was willing to use wiretaps and break-ins to hunt down leakers, so no amount of caution was too great in his mind. Woodward rode multiple taxis, sometimes in the wrong direction, and often walked long distances to reach the middle-of-the-night meetings.

For once, real life was as rich as the Hollywood imagination. But yesterday Woodward and Bernstein expressed a concern that the Deep Throat story has, over the years, come to obscure the many other elements that went into exposing the Watergate story: other sources, other investigators, high-impact Senate hearings, a shocking trove of secret White House tape recordings and the decisive intervention of a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court.

By tethering the myth to a real and imperfect human being, Americans may be able to get a clearer picture of Watergate in the future, they said. "Felt's role in all this can be overstated," said Bernstein, who went on after Watergate to a career of books, magazine articles and television investigations. "When we wrote the book, we didn't think his role would achieve such mythical dimensions. You see there that Felt/Deep Throat largely confirmed information we had already gotten from other sources."

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The identification is also likely to encourage new arguments about the essential meaning of Watergate, which has been construed by partisans and historians as the fruit of Vietnam, of Nixon's obsession with the Kennedy family, of the president's mental instability, and as a press coup, a congressional uprising and more. Felt's role places the fact of a disgruntled FBI front and center.

Felt, 91 and enfeebled by a stroke, lives in California, his memory dimmed. For decades, Woodward, Bernstein and Benjamin C. Bradlee, The Post's executive editor during the Watergate coverage, maintained that they would not disclose his identity until after his death. "We've kept that secret because we keep our word," Woodward said.

The secrecy held through some amazing twists of fate. In 1980, Felt and another senior FBI veteran were convicted of conspiring nearly a decade earlier to violate the civil rights of domestic dissidents in the Weather Underground movement; President Ronald Reagan then issued a pardon.

Woodward had prepared for Felt's eventual death by writing a short book about a relationship he describes as intense and sometimes troubling. His longtime publisher, Simon & Schuster, is rushing the volume to press -- but the careful unveiling of the information did not proceed as Woodward or The Post had envisioned.

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Yesterday morning, Vanity Fair released an article by a California lawyer named John D. O'Connor, who was enlisted by Felt's daughter, Joan Felt, to help coax her father into admitting his role in history. O'Connor's article quoted a number of Felt's friends and family members saying that he had shared his secret with them, and it went on to say that Felt told the author -- under the shield of attorney-client privilege -- "I'm the guy they used to call Deep Throat."

O'Connor wrote that he was released from his obligation of secrecy by Mark and Joan Felt. He also reported that the Felts were not paid for cooperating with the Vanity Fair article, though they do hope the revelation will "make at least enough money to pay some bills," as Joan Felt is quoted in the magazine.

Woodward and others at The Post were caught by surprise. Woodward had known that family members were considering going public; in fact, they had talked repeatedly with Woodward about the possibility of jointly writing a book to reveal the news. An e-mail from Felt's daughter over the Memorial Day weekend continued to hold out the idea that Woodward and Felt would disclose the secret together.

Throughout those contacts, Woodward was dogged by reservations about Felt's mental condition, he said yesterday, wondering whether the source was competent to undo the long-standing pledge of anonymity that bound them.

Caught flatfooted by Vanity Fair's announcement, Woodward and Bernstein initially issued a terse statement reaffirming their promise to keep the secret until Deep Throat died. But the Vanity Fair article was enough to bring the current executive editor of The Post, Leonard Downie Jr., back to Washington from a corporate retreat in Maryland. After he consulted with Woodward, Bernstein and Bradlee, "the newspaper decided that the newspaper had been released from its obligation by Mark Felt's family and by his lawyer, through the publication of this piece," Downie said. "They revealed him as the source. We confirmed it."

Downie praised Woodward's willingness to abide by his pledge even while the Felt family was exploring "what many people would view as a scoop."

"This demonstrates clearly the lengths to which Bob and this newspaper will go to protect sources and a confidential relationship," Downie said.

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Bradlee said he was amazed that the mystery had lasted through the decades. "What would you think the odds were that this town could keep that secret for this long?" he said.

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It wasn't for lack of sleuths. "Who was Deep Throat?" has been among the most compelling questions of modern American history, dissected in books, in films, on the Internet, and in thousands of articles and hundreds of television programs. Virtually every figure in the Nixon administration, from Henry A. Kissinger to Patrick J. Buchanan to Diane Sawyer, has been nominated for the role -- sometimes by other Nixon veterans. Former White House counsel John W. Dean III, who tried to cover up Watergate on Nixon's instructions and then gave crucial testimony about the scheme, was a frequent contributor to the speculation, as was another Nixon lawyer, Leonard Garment.

Recently, an investigative-reporting class at the University of Illinois compiled what professor Bill Gaines believed to be a definitive case that Deep Throat was the deputy White House counsel, Fred F. Fielding. Those findings were publicized around the world. Perhaps the most insightful argument was mustered in the Atlantic magazine by journalist James Mann in 1992. "He could well have been Mark Felt," Mann wrote cautiously in a piece that laid bare the institutional reasons why FBI loyalists came to fear and resent Nixon's presidency.

Felt fended off the searchlight each time it swung in his direction. "I never leaked information to Woodward and Bernstein or to anyone else!" he wrote in his 1979 memoir, "The FBI Pyramid."

"It would be contrary to my responsibility as a loyal employee of the FBI to leak information," he told journalist Timothy Noah six years ago.

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In an article being prepared for tomorrow's Washington Post, Woodward will detail the "accident of history" that connected a young reporter fresh from the suburbs to a man whom many FBI agents considered the best choice to succeed the legendary J. Edgar Hoover as director of the bureau. Woodward and Felt met by chance, he said, but their friendship quickly became a source of information for the reporter. On May 15, 1972, presidential candidate George Wallace was shot and severely wounded by Arthur H. Bremer, in a parking lot in Laurel.

Eager to break news on a local story of major national importance, Woodward contacted Felt for information on the FBI's investigation. Unlike many in the bureau, Felt was known to talk with reporters, and he provided Woodward with a series of front-page nuggets -- though not with his name attached.

By coincidence, the Bremer case came two weeks after the death of Hoover, an epochal moment for the FBI, which had never been led by anyone else. Felt wanted the job, he later wrote. He also wanted his beloved bureau to maintain its independence. And so his motivations were complex when Woodward called a month later seeking clues to the strange case of a burglary at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex. Again, the young reporter had a metro angle on a national story, because the five alleged burglars were arraigned before a local judge.

Wounded that he was passed over for the top job, furious at Nixon's choice of an outsider, Assistant Attorney General L. Patrick Gray III, as acting FBI director, and determined that the White House not be allowed to steer and stall the bureau's Watergate investigation, Mark Felt slipped into the role that would forever alter his life.

He makes his first appearance as a literary figure in Chapter 4 of "All the President's Men."

"Woodward had a source in the Executive Branch who had access to information at [Nixon's campaign committee] as well as at the White House," Bernstein and Woodward wrote. "His identity was unknown to anyone else. He could be contacted only on very important occasions. Woodward had promised he would never identify him or his position to anyone."

Felt established extremely strict initial ground rules: He could never be quoted -- even as an anonymous source -- and he would not provide information. He would "confirm information that had been obtained elsewhere and . . . add some perspective," in the words of the book.

At first, the two men spoke by telephone. But Watergate was, after all, a case that began with a telephone wiretap. Felt had been summoned at least once to the White House, before Watergate, to discuss the use of telephone surveillance against administration leakers. He soon concluded that his own phones -- and the reporters' -- might be tapped. That's when he developed the system of coded signals and parking-garage encounters.

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The relationship immediately bore fruit. On June 19, 1972, two days after the botched break-in, Felt assured Woodward that The Post could safely make a connection between burglars and a former CIA agent linked to the White House, E. Howard Hunt. Three months later, Felt again provided key context and reassurance, telling Woodward that a story tying Nixon's campaign committee to the break-in could be "much stronger" than the first draft, and still be on solid ground.

One of the most important encounters between Woodward and his source came a month later, on Oct. 8, 1972. In four months the scandal had grown in its reach yet faded in its seeming importance. Nixon was sailing to what would be a landslide reelection, and his opponent, Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.), was having no luck making a campaign issue of Watergate.

In the wee hours in a deserted garage, Felt laid out a much broader view of the scandal than Woodward and Bernstein had yet imagined.

From the book: Woodward "arrived at the garage at 1:30 a.m.

"Deep Throat was already there, smoking a cigarette. . . .

Advertisement "On evenings such as these, Deep Throat had talked about how politics had infiltrated every corner of government -- a strong-arm takeover of the agencies by the Nixon White House. . . . He had once called it the 'switchblade mentality' -- and had referred to the willingness of the president's men to fight dirty and for keeps. . . .

"The Nixon White House worried him. 'They are underhanded and unknowable,' he had said numerous times. He also distrusted the press. 'I don't like newspapers,' he had said flatly."

As Felt talked through the night -- of his love for gossip and his competing his desire for exactitude, of the danger Nixon posed to the government and The Post specifically -- he urged Woodward to follow the case to the top: to Nixon's former attorney general, John N. Mitchell; to Nixon's inner brace of aides, H.R. "Bob" Haldeman and John H. Ehrlichman; and even to Nixon himself.

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"Only the president and Mitchell know" everything, he hinted.

That meeting and others gave senior Post editors the confidence they needed to stick with the story through withering fire from the administration and its defenders.

Later that month, at what Bradlee called "the low point" of the saga, Woodward and Bernstein misunderstood a key detail of a major story linking Haldeman to the financing of Watergate and other dirty tricks. When Nixon's defenders -- and other media outlets -- pounced on The Post's mistake, Felt provided both a scolding to Woodward that he must be more careful and the encouragement that the reporters were still on the right track.

"He gave us encouragement," Bernstein said yesterday.

"And he gave Ben comfort," Woodward added, although Bradlee knew only Felt's status as a top FBI official. The editor did not learn Felt's name until after The Post had won the Pulitzer Prize for its Watergate coverage and Nixon had resigned.

Woodward's source became such a key part of the discussions among the Post brass that then-Managing Editor Howard Simons decided he needed a nickname. "Deep Throat" was a blend of the rules of engagement Felt had with Woodward -- "deep background" -- and the title of a notorious pornographic movie.

When the book and then the movie were released, Woodward said, Felt was shocked to have his place in history tagged with such a tawdry title.

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