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How Mark Felt Became 'Deep Throat'

As a Friendship -- and the Watergate Story -- Developed, Source's Motives Remained a Mystery to Woodward

By Bob Woodward
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, June 2, 2005

In 1970, when I was serving as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy and assigned to Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, the chief of naval operations, I sometimes acted as a courier, taking documents to the White House.

One evening I was dispatched with a package to the lower level of the West Wing of the White House, where there was a little waiting area near the Situation Room. It could be a long wait for the right person to come out and sign for the material, sometimes an hour or more, and after I had been waiting for a while a tall man with perfectly combed gray hair came in and sat down near me. His suit was dark, his shirt white and his necktie subdued. He was probably 25 to 30 years older than I and was carrying what looked like a file case or briefcase. He was very distinguished-looking and had a studied air of confidence, the posture and calm of someone used to giving orders and having them obeyed instantly.

I could tell he was watching the situation very carefully. There was nothing overbearing in his attentiveness, but his eyes were darting about in a kind of gentlemanly surveillance. After several minutes, I introduced myself. "Lieutenant Bob Woodward," I said, carefully appending a deferential "sir."

Advertisement "Mark Felt," he said.

I began telling him about myself, that this was my last year in the Navy and I was bringing documents from Adm. Moorer's office. Felt was in no hurry to explain anything about himself or why he was there.

This was a time in my life of considerable anxiety, even consternation, about my future. I had graduated in 1965 from Yale, where I had a Naval Reserve Officers' Training Corps scholarship that required that I go into the Navy after getting my degree. After four years of service, I had been involuntarily extended an additional year because of the Vietnam War.

During that year in Washington, I expended a great deal of energy trying to find things or people who were interesting. I had a college classmate who was going to clerk for

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Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, and I made an effort to develop a friendship with that classmate. To quell my angst and sense of drift, I was taking graduate courses at George Washington University. One course was in Shakespeare, another in international relations.

When I mentioned the graduate work to Felt, he perked up immediately, saying he had gone to night law school at GW in the 1930s before joining -- and this is the first time he mentioned it -- the FBI. While in law school, he said, he had worked full time for a senator -- his home-state senator from Idaho. I said that I had been doing some volunteer work at the office of my congressman, John Erlenborn, a Republican from the district in Wheaton, Ill., where I had been raised.

So we had two connections -- graduate work at GW and work with elected representatives from our home states.

Felt and I were like two passengers sitting next to each other on a long airline flight with nowhere to go and nothing really to do but resign ourselves to the dead time. He showed no interest in striking up a long conversation, but I was intent on it. I finally extracted from him the information that he was an assistant director of the FBI in charge of the inspection division, an important post under Director J. Edgar Hoover. That meant he led teams of agents who went around to FBI field offices to make sure they were adhering to procedures and carrying out Hoover's orders. I later learned that this was called the "goon squad."







Here was someone at the center of the secret world I was only glimpsing in my Navy assignment, so I peppered him with questions about his job and his world. As I think back on this accidental but crucial encounter -- one of the most important in my life -- I see that my patter probably verged on the adolescent. Since he wasn't saying much about himself, I turned it into a career-counseling session.

I was deferential, but I must have seemed very needy. He was friendly, and his interest in me seemed somehow paternal. Still the most vivid impression I have is that of his distant but formal manner, in most ways a product of Hoover's FBI. I asked Felt for his phone number, and he gave me the direct line to his office.

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I believe I encountered him only one more time at the White House. But I had set the hook. He was going to be one of the people I consulted in depth about my future, which now loomed more ominously as the date of my discharge from the Navy approached. At some point I called him, first at the FBI and then at his home in Virginia. I was a little desperate, and I'm sure I poured out my heart. I had applied to several law schools for that fall, but, at 27, I wondered if I could really stand spending three years in law school before starting real work.

Felt seemed sympathetic to the lost-soul quality of my questions. He said that after he had his law degree his first job had been with the Federal Trade Commission. His first assignment was to determine whether toilet paper with the brand name Red Cross was at an unfair competitive advantage because people thought it was endorsed or approved by the American Red Cross. The FTC was a classic federal bureaucracy -- slow and leaden -- and he hated it. Within a year he had applied to the FBI and been accepted. Law school opened the most doors, he seemed to be saying, but don't get caught in your own equivalent of a toilet-paper investigation.

A TWO WEEK TRYOUT: Coming to The Post

In August 1970, I was formally discharged from the Navy. I had subscribed to The Washington Post, which I knew was led by a colorful, hard-charging editor named Ben Bradlee. There was a toughness and edge to the news coverage that I liked; it seemed to fit the times, to fit with a general sense of where the world was much more than law school. Maybe reporting was something I could do.

During my scramble and search for a future, I had sent a letter to The Post asking for a job as a reporter. Somehow -- I don't remember exactly how -- Harry Rosenfeld, the metropolitan editor, agreed to see me. He stared at me through his glasses in some bewilderment. Why, he wondered, would I want to be a reporter? I had zero -- zero! -- experience. Why, he said, would The Washington Post want to hire someone with no experience? But this is just crazy enough, Rosenfeld finally said, that we ought to try it. We'll give you a two-week tryout.

After two weeks, I had written perhaps a dozen stories or fragments of stories. None had been published or come close to being published. None had even been edited.

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See, you don't know how to do this, Rosenfeld said, bringing my tryout to a merciful close. But I left the newsroom more enthralled than ever. Though I had failed the tryout -- it was a spectacular crash -- I realized I had found something that I loved. The sense of immediacy in the newspaper was overwhelming to me, and I took a job at the Montgomery Sentinel, where Rosenfeld said I could learn how to be a reporter. I told my father that law school was off and that I was taking a job, at about \$115 a week, as a reporter at a weekly newspaper in Maryland.

"You're crazy," my father said, in one of the rare judgmental statements he had ever made to me.

I also called Mark Felt, who, in a gentler way, indicated that he, too, thought this was crazy. He said he thought newspapers were too shallow and too quick on the draw. Newspapers didn't do in-depth work and rarely got to the bottom of events.

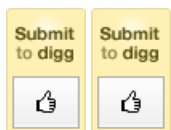
Well, I said, I was elated. Maybe he could help me with stories.

He didn't answer, I recall.

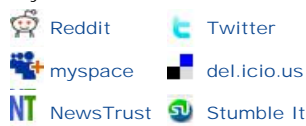
During the year I spent on the Sentinel, I kept in touch with Felt through phone calls to his office and home. We were becoming friends of a sort. He was the mentor, keeping me from toilet-paper investigations, and I kept asking for advice. One weekend I drove out to his home in Virginia and met his wife, Audrey.

Somewhat to my astonishment, Felt was an admirer of J. Edgar Hoover. He appreciated his orderliness and the way he ran the bureau with rigid procedures and an iron fist. Felt said he appreciated that Hoover arrived at the office at 6:30 each morning and everyone knew what was expected. The Nixon White House was another matter, Felt said. The political pressures were immense, he said without being specific. I believe he called it "corrupt" and sinister. Hoover, Felt and the old guard were the wall that protected the FBI, he said.

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In his own memoir, "The FBI Pyramid: From the Inside," which received almost no attention when it was published in 1979, five years after President Richard M. Nixon's resignation, Felt angrily called this a "White House-Justice Department cabal."

At the time, pre-Watergate, there was little or no public knowledge of the vast pushing, shoving and outright acrimony between the Nixon White House and Hoover's FBI. The Watergate investigations later revealed that in 1970 a young White House aide named Tom Charles Huston had come up with a plan to authorize the CIA, the FBI and military intelligence units to intensify electronic surveillance of "domestic security threats," authorize illegal opening of mail, and lift the restrictions on surreptitious entries or break-ins to gather intelligence.

Huston warned in a top-secret memo that the plan was "clearly illegal." Nixon initially approved the plan anyway. Hoover strenuously objected, because eavesdropping, opening mail and breaking into homes and offices of domestic security threats were basically the FBI bailiwick and the bureau didn't want competition. Four days later, Nixon rescinded the Huston plan.

Felt, a much more learned man than most realized, later wrote that he considered Huston "a kind of White House gauleiter over the intelligence community." The word "gauleiter" is not in most dictionaries, but in the four-inch-thick Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language it is defined as "the leader or chief official of a political district under Nazi control."

There is little doubt Felt thought the Nixon team were Nazis. During this period, he had to stop efforts by others in the bureau to "identify every member of every hippie commune" in the Los Angeles area, for example, or to open a file on every member of Students for a Democratic Society.

None of this surfaced directly in our discussions, but clearly he was a man under pressure, and the threat to the integrity and independence of the bureau was real and seemed uppermost in his mind.

On July 1, 1971 -- about a year before Hoover's death and the Watergate break-in -- Hoover promoted Felt to be the number three official in the FBI. Though Hoover's

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sidekick, Clyde Tolson, was technically the number two official, Tolson was also ill and did not come to work many days, meaning he had no operational control of the bureau. Thus, my friend became the day-to-day manager of all FBI matters as long as he kept Hoover and Tolson informed or sought Hoover's approval on policy matters.

EARLY TIPS: Agnew, and Then Wallace

In August, a year after my failed tryout, Rosenfeld decided to hire me. I started at The Post the next month.

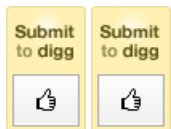
Though I was busy in my new job, I kept Felt on my call list and checked in with him. He was relatively free with me but insisted that he, the FBI and the Justice Department be kept out of anything I might use indirectly or pass onto others. He was stern and strict about those rules with a booming, insistent voice. I promised, and he said that it was essential that I be careful. The only way to ensure that was to tell no one that we knew each other or talked or that I knew someone in the FBI or Justice Department. No one.

In the spring, he said in utter confidence that the FBI had some information that Vice President Spiro T. Agnew had received a bribe of \$2,500 in cash that Agnew had put in his desk drawer. I passed this on to Richard Cohen, the top Maryland reporter for The Post, not identifying the source at all. Cohen said, and later wrote in his book on the Agnew investigation, that he thought it was "preposterous." Another Post reporter and I spent a day chasing around Baltimore for the alleged person who supposedly knew about the bribe. We got nowhere. Two years later, the Agnew investigation revealed that the vice president had received such a bribe in his office.

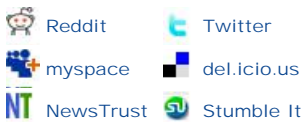
About 9:45 a.m. on May 2, 1972, Felt was in his office at the FBI when an assistant director came to report that Hoover had died at his home. Felt was stunned. For practical purposes, he was next in line to take over the bureau.

Yet Felt was soon to be visited with immense disappointment. Nixon nominated L. Patrick Gray III to be the acting director. Gray was a Nixon loyalist going back years. He had resigned from the Navy in 1960 to work for candidate Nixon during the presidential contest that Nixon lost to John F. Kennedy.

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As best I could tell Felt was crushed, but he put on a good face. "Had I been wiser, I would have retired," Felt wrote.

On May 15, less than two weeks after Hoover's death, a lone gunman shot Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace, then campaigning for president, at a Laurel shopping center. The wounds were serious, but Wallace survived.

Wallace had a strong following in the deep South, an increasing source of Nixon's support. Wallace's spoiler candidacy four years earlier in 1968 could have cost Nixon the election that year, and Nixon monitored Wallace's every move closely as the 1972 presidential contest continued.

That evening, Nixon called Felt -- not Gray, who was out of town -- at home for an update. It was the first time Felt had spoken directly with Nixon. Felt reported that Arthur H. Bremer, the would-be assassin, was in custody but in the hospital because he had been roughed up and given a few bruises by those who subdued and captured him after he shot Wallace.

"Well, it's too bad they didn't really rough up the son of a bitch!" Nixon told Felt.

Felt was offended that the president would make such a remark. Nixon was so agitated and worried, attaching such urgency to the shooting, that he said he wanted full updates every 30 minutes from Felt on any new information that was being discovered in the investigation of Bremer.

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In the following days I called Felt several times and he very carefully gave me leads as we tried to find out more about Bremer. It turned out that he had stalked some of the other candidates, and I went to New York to pick up the trail. This led to several front-page stories about Bremer's travels, completing a portrait of a madman not singling out Wallace but rather looking for any presidential candidate to shoot. On May 18, I did a Page One article that said, among other things, "High federal officials who have reviewed investigative reports on the Wallace shooting said yesterday that there is no evidence whatsoever to indicate that Bremer was a hired killer."

It was rather brazen of me. Though I was technically protecting my source and talked to

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others besides Felt, I did not do a good job of concealing where the information was coming from. Felt chastised me mildly. But the story that Bremer acted alone and without accomplices was a story that both the White House and the FBI wanted out.

THE STORY BREAKS: Secrecy Is Paramount

A month later, on Saturday, June 17, the FBI night supervisor called Felt at home. Five men in business suits, pockets stuffed with \$100 bills, and carrying eavesdropping and photographic equipment, had been arrested inside the Democrats' national headquarters at the Watergate office building about 2:30 a.m.

By 8:30 a.m. Felt was in his office at the FBI, seeking more details. About the same time, The Post's city editor woke me at home and asked me to come in to cover an unusual burglary.

The first paragraph of the front-page story that ran the next day in The Post read: "Five men, one of whom said he is a former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency, were arrested at 2:30 a.m. yesterday in what authorities described as an elaborate plot to bug the offices of the Democratic National Committee here."

The next day, Carl Bernstein and I wrote our first article together, identifying one of the burglars, James W. McCord Jr., as the salaried security coordinator for Nixon's reelection committee. On Monday, I went to work on E. Howard Hunt, whose telephone number had been found in the address books of two of the burglars with the small notations "W. House" and "W.H." by his name.

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How Mark Felt Became 'Deep Throat'

This was the moment when a source or friend in the investigative agencies of government is invaluable. I called Felt at the FBI, reaching him through his secretary. It would be our first talk about Watergate. He reminded me how he disliked phone calls at the office but said the Watergate burglary case was going to "heat up" for reasons he could not explain. He then hung up abruptly.

I was tentatively assigned to write the next day's Watergate bugging story, but I was not sure I had anything. Carl had the day off. I picked up the phone and dialed 456-1414 -- the White House -- and asked for Howard Hunt. There was no answer, but the operator helpfully said he might be in the office of Charles W. Colson, Nixon's special counsel. Colson's secretary said Hunt was not there this moment but might be at a public relations firm where he worked as a writer. I called and reached Hunt and asked why his name was in the address book of two of the Watergate burglars.

"Good God!" Hunt shouted before slamming down the phone. I called the president of the public relations firm, Robert F. Bennett, who is now a Republican U.S. senator from Utah. "I guess it's no secret that Howard was with the CIA," Bennett said blandly.

It had been a secret to me, and a CIA spokesman confirmed that Hunt had been with the agency from 1949 to 1970. I called Felt again at the FBI. Colson, White House, CIA, I said. What did I have? Anyone could have someone's name in an address book. I wanted to be careful about guilt by association.

Advertisement Felt sounded nervous. He said off the record -- meaning I could not use the information -- that Hunt was a prime suspect in the burglary at the Watergate for many reasons beyond the address books. So reporting the connections forcefully would not be unfair.

In July, Carl went to Miami, home of four of the burglars, on the money trail, and he ingeniously tracked down a local prosecutor and his chief investigator, who had copies of \$89,000 in Mexican checks and a \$25,000 check that had gone into the account of Bernard L. Barker, one of the burglars. We were able to establish that the \$25,000 check had been campaign money that had been given to Maurice H. Stans, Nixon's chief fundraiser, on a Florida golf course. The Aug. 1 story on this was the first to tie Nixon campaign money directly to Watergate.

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I tried to call Felt, but he wouldn't take the call. I tried his home in Virginia and had no better luck. So one night I showed up at his Fairfax home. It was a plain-vanilla, perfectly kept, everything-in-its-place suburban house. His manner made me nervous. He said no more phone calls, no more visits to his home, nothing in the open.

I did not know then that in Felt's earliest days in the FBI, during World War II, he had been assigned to work on the general desk of the Espionage Section. Felt learned a great deal about German spying in the job, and after the war he spent time keeping suspected Soviet agents under surveillance.

So at his home in Virginia that summer, Felt said that if we were to talk it would have to be face to face where no one could observe us.

I said anything would be fine with me.

We would need a preplanned notification system -- a change in the environment that no one else would notice or attach any meaning to. I didn't know what he was talking about.

If you keep the drapes in your apartment closed, open them and that could signal me, he said. I could check each day or have them checked, and if they were open we could meet that night at a designated place. I liked to let the light in at times, I explained.

We needed another signal, he said, indicating that he could check my apartment regularly. He never explained how he could do this.

Feeling under some pressure, I said that I had a red cloth flag, less than a foot square -- the kind used as warnings on long truck loads -- that a girlfriend had found on the street. She had stuck it in an empty flowerpot on my apartment balcony.

Felt and I agreed that I would move the flowerpot with the flag, which usually was in the front near the railing, to the rear of the balcony if I urgently needed a meeting. This would have to be important and rare, he said sternly. The signal, he said, would mean we would meet that same night about 2 a.m. on the bottom level of an underground garage just over the Key Bridge in Rosslyn.

Felt said I would have to follow strict countersurveillance techniques. How did I get out of my apartment?

I walked out, down the hall, and took the elevator.

Which takes you to the lobby? he asked.

Yes.

Did I have back stairs to my apartment house?

Yes.

Use them when you are heading for a meeting. Do they open into an alley?

Yes.

Take the alley. Don't use your own car. Take a taxi to several blocks from a hotel where there are cabs after midnight, get dropped off and then walk to get a second cab to Rosslyn. Don't get dropped off directly at the parking garage. Walk the last several blocks. If you are being followed, don't go down to the garage. I'll understand if you don't show. All this was like a lecture. The key was taking the necessary time -- one to two hours to get there. Be patient, serene. Trust the prearrangements. There was no fallback meeting place or time. If we both didn't show, there would be no meeting.

Felt said that if he had something for me, he could get me a message. He quizzed me about my daily routine, what came to my apartment, the mailbox, etc. The Post was

delivered outside my apartment door. I did have a subscription to the New York Times. A number of people in my apartment building near Dupont Circle got the Times. The copies were left in the lobby with the apartment number. Mine was No. 617, and it was written clearly on the outside of each paper in marker pen. Felt said if there was something important he could get to my New York Times -- how, I never knew. Page 20 would be circled, and the hands of a clock in the lower part of the page would be drawn to indicate the time of the meeting that night, probably 2 a.m., in the same Rosslyn parking garage.

The relationship was a compact of trust; nothing about it was to be discussed or shared with anyone, he said.

How he could have made a daily observation of my balcony is still a mystery to me. At the time, before the era of intensive security, the back of the building was not enclosed, so anyone could have driven in the back alley to observe my balcony. In addition, my balcony and the back of the apartment complex faced onto a courtyard or back area that was shared with a number of other apartment or office buildings in the area. My balcony could have been seen from dozens of apartments or offices, as best I can tell.

A number of embassies were located in the area. The Iraqi Embassy was down the street, and I thought it possible that the FBI had surveillance or listening posts nearby. Could Felt have had the counterintelligence agents regularly report on the status of my flag and flowerpot? That seems highly unlikely, if not impossible.

A KINSHIP: Felt Knew Reporters' Plight

In the course of this and other discussions, I was somewhat apologetic for plaguing him and being such a nag, but I explained that we had nowhere else to turn. Carl and I had obtained a list of everyone who worked for Nixon's reelection committee and were frequently going out into the night knocking on the doors of these people to try to interview them. I explained to Felt that we were getting lots of doors slammed in our faces. There also were lots of frightened looks. I was frustrated.

Felt said I should not worry about pushing him. He had done his time as a street agent, interviewing people. The FBI, like the press, had to rely on voluntary cooperation. Most people wanted to help the FBI, but the FBI knew about rejection. Felt perhaps tolerated my aggressiveness and pushy approach because he had been the same way himself when he was younger, once talking his way into an interview with Hoover and telling him of his ambition to become a special agent in charge of an FBI field office.

It was an unusual message, emphatically encouraging me to get in his face.

With a story as enticing, complex, competitive and fast-breaking as Watergate, there was little tendency or time to consider the motives of our sources. What was important was whether the information checked out and whether it was true. We were swimming, really living, in the fast-moving rapids. There was no time to ask why they were talking or whether they had an ax to grind.

I was thankful for any morsel of information, confirmation or assistance Felt gave me while Carl and I were attempting to understand the many-headed monster of Watergate. Because of his position virtually atop the chief investigative agency, his words and guidance had immense, at times even staggering, authority. The weight, authenticity and his restraint were more important than his design, if he had one.

It was only later after Nixon resigned that I began to wonder why Felt had talked when doing so carried substantial risks for him and the FBI. Had he been exposed early on, Felt would have been no hero. Technically, it was illegal to talk about grand jury information or FBI files -- or it could have been made to look illegal.

Felt believed he was protecting the bureau by finding a way, clandestine as it was, to push some of the information from the FBI interviews and files out to the public, to help

build public and political pressure to make Nixon and his people answerable. He had nothing but contempt for the Nixon White House and their efforts to manipulate the bureau for political reasons. The young eager-beaver patrol of White House underlings, best exemplified by John W. Dean III, was odious to him.

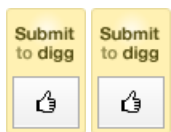
His reverence for Hoover and strict bureau procedure made Gray's appointment as director all the more shocking. Felt obviously concluded he was Hoover's logical successor.

And the former World War II spy hunter liked the game. I suspect in his mind I was his agent. He beat it into my head: secrecy at all cost, no loose talk, no talk about him at all, no indication to anyone that such a secret source existed.

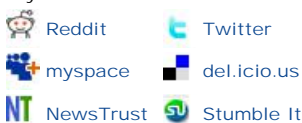
In our book "All the President's Men," Carl and I described how we had speculated about Deep Throat and his piecemeal approach to providing information. Maybe it was to minimize his risk. Or because one or two big stories, no matter how devastating, could be blunted by the White House. Maybe it was simply to make the game more interesting. More likely, we concluded, "Deep Throat was trying to protect the office, to effect a change in its conduct before all was lost."

Each time I raised the question with Felt, he had the same answer: "I have to do this my way."

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








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