

Postgate: How the Washington Post Betrayed Deep Throat, Covered Up Watergate, and Began Today's Partisan Advocacy Journalism

John O'Connor

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John O'Connor Jumps the Shark

By Mark Feldstein

Some people don't know when to leave well enough alone.

In 2002, John O'Connor, a San Francisco trial lawyer, got lucky. He discovered that a young acquaintance was the grandson of W. Mark Felt, the FBI executive long rumored to be "Deep Throat," the anonymous Watergate source of *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward. O'Connor asked to meet the 89-year-old retired G-man and tried to get him to open up about his still-secret role in Watergate. But Felt had dementia and denied being Deep Throat: "An FBI agent doesn't act like that."

Undeterred, O'Connor lobbied Felt's daughter, who prodded the old man. Eventually, Felt relented after being persuaded that going public could "help raise some tuition money" for his grandsons. O'Connor revealed Deep Throat's identity in a 2005 article for *Vanity Fair* and then spun his article into a 2006 book, [*A G-Man's Life*](#), which borrowed heavily from Felt's 1979 [memoir](#), ghost-written by Ralph de Toledano.^[1]

That would have been the end of the story for most people. But the whole exercise left O'Connor nursing a grudge against Woodward, and the litigator is now displaying it for all to see in a new book, [*Postgate: How the Washington Post Betrayed Deep Throat, Covered Up Watergate, and Began Today's Partisan Advocacy Journalism*](#).

O'Connor should have quit while he was ahead. His *Vanity Fair* article and previous book about Felt were already painfully thin on new Watergate facts because of the FBI veteran's mental infirmity. O'Connor's latest literary effort—billed as a "shocking exposé"—is a convoluted and embarrassing mish-mash of sour grapes, conspiracy theorizing, and conservative diatribe.^[2]

The author's feud with Woodward seems to stem from a failed effort to get the famous journalist to collaborate on a book about Felt. O'Connor portrays Woodward as a weasel who feigned interest in cooperating while scheming to kill the project. By O'Connor's account, Woodward had no interest in working with him—and why should he? Felt was too senile to offer any meaningful cooperation and would have sucked up half the profits in any joint deal. Woodward undoubtedly regarded O'Connor as an interloper who glommed onto Felt's family, interfering with the reporter's decades-old plan to dramatically reveal Deep Throat's identity upon his death. "My client had made millions for Woodward," O'Connor writes, "and now the old guy's family was begging in vain for scraps." Felt's lawyer shouldn't have been surprised: investigative reporters aren't generally known for selflessness, especially those who make it to the top of the heap.[\[3\]](#)

O'Connor's anger also seems rooted in the fact that Woodward beat him to the punch with *The Secret Man*, the reporter's own book about Felt, and that it received far more attention and sold more copies than *A G-Man's Life*. O'Connor expresses particular indignation over Woodward's admission that during Watergate, he publicly referred to Felt and quoted him anonymously, despite promising not to. "By Woodward's own admission," O'Connor fumes, "he had betrayed the guy who made his career! . . . The enormity of this treachery was mind-boggling." O'Connor also criticizes Woodward for using material from Felt's obscure 1979 memoir, *The FBI Pyramid*, even though O'Connor recycled far more material from the same book in *A G-Man's Life*.[\[4\]](#)

Both O'Connor and Woodward relied on Felt's old book because there wasn't much else to go on. Felt's interactions with the two authors were quite limited: Felt only told Woodward what he wanted to, and the then-young reporter never got to know him in a meaningful way. By the time O'Connor got to him, Felt was senile, his full story lost to history. In the end, for all the words expended on Deep Throat, surprisingly little is known with certainty about Felt's actions during Watergate.

The author uncritically accepts—and relentlessly tries to perpetuate—the popular mythology of Felt's importance and heroism. Yet Deep Throat was actually a "bit player" who "barely figured" in the *Washington Post's* coverage, its Watergate editor, Barry Sussman, wrote. "As a mole, he was pretty feeble . . . [his] role as a key Watergate source for the *Post* is a myth, created by a movie ["All the President's Men"] and sustained by hype." Moreover, Felt was a devoted protégé of the authoritarian J. Edgar Hoover and personally authorized illegal FBI wiretaps and burglaries. Although O'Connor claims that Felt was an "idealistic Hooverite"—an oxymoron—and blew his Watergate whistle to protect "our system of justice," it strains credulity to believe that a top architect of the FBI's notorious "black bag" operations was morally repulsed by similar misconduct in the Nixon White. More plausible motives for Felt are ambition and revenge: he wanted and expected to succeed Hoover as director of the FBI but President Nixon instead promoted an inexperienced lackey, L. Patrick Gray.[\[5\]](#)

O'Connor never explores this less flattering but more complex side of Felt—even as he criticizes Woodward for failing to "illuminate Felt's motive" and "delv[e] into what

made his source tick.” Particularly glaring is O’Connor’s failure to grapple with an insight into Deep Throat’s behavior first put forward by Edward J. Epstein in a 1974 *Commentary* article, later developed in detail by Max Holland in his 2012 book, [Leak: Why Mark Felt Became Deep Throat](#). Unlike O’Connor, Holland conducted dozens of interviews with Watergate figures and plumbed an array of archives, including overlooked oral history interviews with retired FBI agents who worked with Felt. These men nicknamed Felt “The White Rat” for his thick white hair and proclivity for “squealing” to advance his interests. *Leak* makes a persuasive case that Felt’s motive wasn’t moral outrage or even retribution but ambition. As Holland tells it, Felt’s carefully orchestrated leaks—to Woodward and to other reporters—were part of a larger effort to gain the FBI’s top job by making Gray look weak and incompetent, unable to control the flow of information to the press from his own agency. Felt engaged in a dangerous Machiavellian game of blaming bureaucratic rivals for his leaks and feigning loyalty to the boss he was undermining, while slyly pushing Gray to aggressively investigate Watergate, knowing this would infuriate Nixon and weaken White House support for Felt’s rival. It is a fascinating account of Beltway intrigue that seems far more plausible than the hoary notion of Felt as selfless idealist. But O’Connor doesn’t even acknowledge, let alone grapple with, this more sophisticated interpretation.^[6]

Postgate isn’t helped by factual errors. Contrary to O’Connor’s claim, the “definitive” and “most widely respected summary of Watergate” was not reporter J. Anthony Lukas’s 1976 book [Nightmare](#), which was published before much of the evidence had been declassified; it was historian Stanley I. Kutler’s [The Wars of Watergate](#), published in 1991, after additional archival material came out, most crucially Nixon’s White House tapes, which Kutler was instrumental in making public. O’Connor also has a number of factual errors about syndicated columnist Jack Anderson, a subject I happen to know well because I wrote a [book](#) about him. O’Connor twists facts about an aborted 1972 plot to assassinate Anderson and blames it on the CIA. In fact, the murder plan was developed in the White House in response to a string of relentless Anderson exposés that enraged Nixon.^[7]

O’Connor’s animus toward the *Post* leads him to embrace and embellish various discredited Watergate conspiracy theories that were first advanced by the Nixon White House to try to cover up the scandal. The most enduring of these unsubstantiated claims is that the CIA, not Nixon’s men, were behind the bugging of the Democratic National Committee. In some accounts, the CIA was involved in a power struggle with Nixon. In others, right-wing military officers thought Nixon insufficiently hawkish and wanted to oust him in a secret coup. In perhaps the most outlandish version, White House counsel John Dean supposedly tricked Nixon’s men into bugging offices in the Watergate not to spy on Nixon’s opponents, but to gather information about a call-girl ring purportedly connected to the Democratic National Committee.

The author serves up a mixture of these conspiracy theories and then adds a new twist: what he calls “a profoundly shocking tale of journalistic deceit.” O’Connor claims that Woodward and the *Post* knew about the CIA’s secret role in Watergate but deliberately covered it up to protect the intelligence agency and the newspaper’s “beloved

ideological brother, the DNC.” O’Connor spins a fantastic web of speculation in service of his argument, but he provides no genuine proof to back it up.^[8]

O’Connor never really makes good on his subtitle’s claim that the *Washington Post* “began today’s partisan advocacy journalism” or his book jacket’s assertion that “today’s strikingly deceptive partisan journalism can be laid at the doorstep of the *Washington Post*.” These would be difficult propositions to back up: partisan journalism has been a staple of American newspapers since the beginning of the Republic, and its contemporary iteration owes more to Fox News, MSNBC and Breitbart than to the Graham family’s stewardship of the *Post*. O’Connor attempts to expand his brief against the “liberal bias” of the *Post* by criticizing its coverage of independent counsel Kenneth Starr, former FBI director James Comey, and shooting victim Trayvon Martin, among others: “When facts needed to be molded to fit a preconceived narrative . . . the *Post* complied, covering up exculpatory facts while distorting others in order to destroy the designated villain.” But O’Connor never backs this up, either. Instead of a well-reasoned argument, he offers obsessive bile about his journalistic bogeyman.^[9]

Professional historians have long dismissed an array of Watergate conspiracy theories. Yet they have endured, thanks to a small coterie of amateur sleuths who have relentlessly promoted a set of “alternative facts” in a society increasingly suspicious of historical and scientific truth. John O’Connor is the latest to join the Watergate version of this parallel universe.

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[1] O’Connor, *Postgate*, 41.

[2] O’Connor, *Postgate*, jacket cover.

[3] O’Connor, *Postgate*, 45.

[4] O’Connor, *Postgate*, 68. O’Connor spends a lot of time complaining that he was mistreated by his publisher, PublicAffairs, and throws in self-absorbed details about his TV appearances, although he makes a plausible case that the publisher promoted his book tepidly in part to curry favor with the *Washington Post*.

[5] Barry Sussman, “[Why Deep Throat Was an Unimportant Source and Other Reflections on Watergate](#),” niemanwatchdog.orgw, 29 July 2005; and Barry Sussman, “[Watergate 25 Years Later](#),” watergate.info, 17 June 1997; O’Connor, *Postgate*, 33, 77.

[6] O'Connor, *Postgate*, 72; Edward J. Epstein, "Did the Press Uncover Watergate?" *Commentary*, July 1974; Max Holland, *Leak: Why Mark Felt Became Deep Throat* (Lawrence, KN: University of Kansas Press, 2012). Especially striking is O'Connor's seeming failure to engage with William Ruckelshaus, the acting FBI director who succeeded Gray and forced Felt's departure from the Bureau. Ruckelshaus believed Felt schemed to undermine his attempts to clean up the FBI and publicly said that Felt was no hero during Watergate, just "a guy obsessed with taking Hoover's place as FBI director . . . trying to feather his own nest and undercut his bosses at the FBI." O'Connor could easily have interviewed the approachable Ruckelshaus—but if he did, but he gives no evidence of it. Mark F. Bernstein, "[Q & A: William Ruckelshaus '55 on the Watergate Scandal](#)," *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 9 October 2013.

[7] O'Connor, *Postgate*, 117, 154; Mark Feldstein, *Poisoning the Press: Richard Nixon, Jack Anderson, and the Rise of Washington's Scandal Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 282, 289-290.

[8] O'Connor, *Postgate*, jacket cover, 264.

[9] O'Connor, *Postage*, jacket cover, xiii, xiv.