

## The Secret That Wasn't: Deep Throat Exposed in 1973

By Max Holland

Editor's Note: This week marked publication of a new book by Bob Woodward. *The War Within* is the fourth installment of his quartet on the Bush administration. And, as has been the case since 1974, when *All the President's Men* was published, Woodward's latest book contains headline-making revelations.

*Washington Decoded* first examined the Watergate roots of the phenomenon that is Woodward in a May 2007 piece entitled "[Deep Throat 3.0](#)." The article below draws from newly-found evidence.

Of all the legends about Watergate, perhaps the most enduring is that Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein religiously protected the identity of W. Mark Felt, aka "Deep Throat." In fact, they did more to expose their fabled secret source than has ever been appreciated.

One big fat clue escaped all notice during the many years of guessing. It appeared in *The Washington Post* on June 17, 1973, a year to the day after the break-in and 10 months before Woodward and Bernstein's 1974 best-seller, *All the President's Men*, introduced the American public to Deep Throat. If this clue in plain sight had been remembered, it's unlikely that "Who Was Deep Throat?" would have ever surpassed "What Happened to [Judge Crater](#)?" as the national guessing game. It all but pointed the finger at W. Mark Felt because it indicated where Deep Throat worked in the federal government: the FBI.

• • • • •

In the late spring of 1973, just as Watergate was bursting open, a distinguished *Washington Post* reporter named Laurence Stern got it into his head to write what turned out to be a most insightful article about the all-consuming scandal. Stern's idea was simple: to juxtapose the first year of Watergate with what had been one of the most traumatic years ever at the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Such a thoughtful approach was second nature for Stern, who had been "winning awards and cutting a wide swath in both American and international journalism" since

joining *The Washington Post* in 1952. He had started off just as Bob Woodward had—on the metropolitan staff—and for nine years worked his way up through local, suburban, and state news beats. By the time of the Watergate break-in, Stern was the *Post*'s so-called “Dulles airport correspondent,” meaning he was available 24/7 to cover the latest cold war crisis anywhere in the world.<sup>[1]</sup> As the biggest home-grown star in the firmament, Stern had almost a free rein at the newspaper and moved effortlessly between national and international stories.

During the latter half of 1972 and into 1973, as the Watergate story slowly gained hurricane force, Stern was preoccupied with other, seemingly bigger stories: the ongoing war in Vietnam and agonizing peace negotiations in Paris; the presidential election, including George McGovern's ill-fated choice of a running mate; and the involvement of the IT&T Corporation in Chilean politics.

By late April, however, as Watergate began destroying the reputations of men and institutions, Stern's involvement became inevitable. In May, he took charge of one of the story's hottest elements: was the Central Intelligence Agency complicit in the June 1972 break-in? And had the Nixon White House attempted to circumscribe the FBI's investigation by falsely invoking CIA equities? It already seemed as if the reputation, if not fate, of the Nixon presidency might hinge on that question.<sup>[2]</sup>

Stern died from a heart attack in 1979, at the age of 50, so his reasoning cannot be retraced. But the idea for a story about the FBI and Watergate seems to have come out of Stern's dozen or so articles about CIA involvement in the scandal. He interviewed several top CIA officials, including Richard Helms, the CIA director at the time of the break-in, for these stories, and it is highly likely that the one FBI article Stern wrote was inspired by something he gleaned from these conversations.

The leaks to the media right after the break-in had been the subject of intense speculation among top CIA officials, and for good reason. Many of the disclosures kept pointing to some kind of CIA involvement, and that left the agency in the difficult position of trying to prove a negative. As Helms suggested in his 2003 memoir—published two years before Felt was unmasked as Deep Throat—CIA officials in 1972 thought that someone in the FBI was the likely culprit. Wrote Helms, “One question arose repeatedly: were the leaks coming from the FBI? In J. Edgar Hoover's day this would not have been the case. But what about the new bureau administration? Was discipline as strong as it had been? We did not know.”<sup>[3]</sup>

During his career, Helms was widely regarded as an incisive analyst, a detached observer of men, institutions (including his own), and what was really going on behind newspaper headlines, out of the public's eye or ken. And few officials were shrewder students of the FBI than Helms, owing to his first-hand exposure to the bureau's machinations under long-time director J. Edgar Hoover. Helms considered Hoover “the most accomplished American bureaucrat of the twentieth century . . . with a superb grasp of how things are done in Washington.” That description was not intended to be ironic.<sup>[4]</sup>

One of Stern's [CIA articles, dated May 16](#), quoted Helms to make a penetrating and under-appreciated point about the bureau from an insider's point of view. The break-in had occurred just one month after Hoover's death in office, which had hit the FBI like the death of a dictator: utterly predictable and incomprehensible at the same time. "Can you imagine the predicament of a new FBI director," Helms said, "coming into office and having this thing break over his head?"<sup>[5]</sup> This remark suggests that the former CIA director shared with Stern his educated conjectures about what had really been going on.

The gist of Stern's [June 17 article](#) on the FBI was that the Watergate scandal had "brought egg to [the FBI's] face and demoralization to its ranks." L. Patrick Gray III, the acting director who had the misfortune of succeeding Hoover, was only the most obvious victim of the wreckage. The bureau's reputation and image, long the most unsullied in Washington, was in tatters. It stood accused of "leaking like a sieve, relaxing surveillance of domestic subversives, and turning its back on the rest of the intelligence community." Bereft of Hoover, whom Stern aptly described as the "Compleat Bureaucratic Infighter," the FBI faced more questions and uncertainty about its future than at any time since 1924, when Hoover, then 29 years old, inherited an agency steeped in scandal, political intrigue, and illegal activities.<sup>[6]</sup>

Stern traced the stunning estrangement that had developed between the bureau and the Nixon administration. No president had seemed more likely to get along with Hoover than Nixon, who, 20 years earlier, had exposed Alger Hiss as a Soviet spy. Instead, Hoover's advancing age, caution, and territoriality had been a continuous source of frustration for the Nixon White House, which felt itself (and the nation) under siege from violent radicals, shrill anti-war protesters, and black militants.

This portion of Stern's article was not exactly novel, as similar accounts had been published elsewhere. Rather, it was the rest of the article that was the real gem. It provided exactly the kind of insight that had given Stern a deserved reputation for writing about the news in a way that was unusually profound.

Stern noted that the past year had witnessed a "form of guerrilla warfare against the administration from within the ranks of the FBI." And the primary evidence of this was that the FBI "may have been instrumental in getting the initial Watergate revelations into public print." To buttress this point, Stern quoted numerous sources: an anonymous but "highly placed FBI executive;" acting FBI director William Ruckelshaus, who had succeeded Gray after he was forced to step down; and former White House aide John Ehrlichman, whose recent testimony before the Senate Watergate committee was cited.<sup>[7]</sup>

But the most intriguing corroboration came from an unnamed journalist, identified only as a "Watergate reportorial specialist." Wrote Stern,

Reporters who covered the case acknowledge the role of [FBI] agents in opening up the initial peepholes in the cover-up façade some administration officials were trying to erect.

“It wasn’t a matter of getting rancorous leaks dumped in your lap,” said one Watergate reportorial specialist. “You’d have to go to them and say, what about this or what about that? They’d respond, ‘Yes, that’s right.’ I can think of *one guy in the bureau without whom we wouldn’t have gotten anywhere.*” [emphasis added][\[8\]](#)

This description, of course, dovetails with the *Post*’s secret source irreverently christened “Deep Throat,” whose “words and guidance had immense, at times even staggering, authority.”[\[9\]](#) And in June 1973, of course, there were only two people who knew the true identity of this “one guy” at the FBI whose information had been instrumental to the *Post*’s coverage. One was Carl Bernstein, and the other, Bob Woodward.[\[10\]](#)

There are several reasons, all complementary, for believing that the “Watergate reportorial specialist” quoted by Stern was either Bernstein or Woodward. One is a nearly contemporaneous, on-the-record remark that Bernstein and Woodward made in January 1973.

Executive editor Ben Bradlee had long prohibited the duo from being interviewed about their Watergate coverage. But in January 1973, Bradlee relented and allowed Woodward and Bernstein to talk to Timothy Crouse, who was completing a book about media coverage of the 1972 campaign. Woodward and Bernstein were so close now that they “often finished each other’s sentences,” observed Crouse. And when *The Boys on the Bus* appeared in November 1973, it contained a passage that resonated with Stern’s quote about the *Post* reporters not merely being on the receiving end of “rancorous leaks.”

“People seem to have a conception of our sources as the classic . . . leaker-who-mails-documents-in-the-night,” Woodward said with a smile. “But our sources weren’t like that.”

They used sources in the FBI, the Justice Department, and even the Committee to Re-elect the President . . . but none of these sources was a leak. Bernstein and Woodward got their information through the tedious, time-honored method of investigative reporting: get a piece of information and then use it to pry loose more information.

“Some of the sources,” said Bernstein, “are responsible people who have no ax to grind but know that we have a piece of the story and want to help make the story accurate.”[\[11\]](#)

To be sure, there were other reporters who specialized in Watergate from late June until late October 1972, the period Stern was describing. But that club was very small. According to David Halberstam’s 1979 book, *The Powers That Be*, the reporters who actually broke news about the scandal then were (in addition to Woodward and Bernstein) Sandy Smith from *TIME* magazine’s Washington bureau, and Jack Nelson,

Ronald J. Ostrow, and Robert L. Jackson from the Washington bureau of the *Los Angeles Times*.

When recently contacted, Nelson, Ostrow, and Jackson all said separately that they were not the “reportorial specialist” quoted in Stern’s article. That would seem to leave Sandy Smith, who died in 2005, as an alternative. Yet anyone who knew him also knows how unlikely this is. Smith, whose Watergate coverage was second only to Woodward and Bernstein’s in terms of scoops, was notoriously tight-lipped about his sources and eschewed all publicity.[\[12\]](#)

In any case, even if Stern did go outside the *Post* on the delicate subject of sources, sitting only a few yards away from his desk were the two reporters whose Watergate coverage had recently gained the *Post* a then-rare Pulitzer Prize. It strains credulity to think he did not talk to Woodward and/or Bernstein, or that they would have told the *Post*’s esteemed national reporter to “get lost” once he approached them.[\[13\]](#)

Bernstein and Woodward were recently asked via e-mail if either recalled being interviewed by Stern in 1973 for his story on the FBI. Bernstein did not respond, and Woodward wrote that the article “does not ring a bell with me. Remember by June 1973 the *Post* had a dozen or more reporters on the story.”[\[14\]](#)

While the second sentence is true, it ignores the fact that Bernstein and Woodward had an almost proprietary interest in the topic—one that was respected as such by the paper’s editors and reporters, starting with Bradlee. Woodward and Bernstein had fought hard and successfully to stay assigned to the story despite their unchanged status as metro staff reporters. But more to the point, Stern was clearly writing about press coverage of the scandal in the months immediately following the break-in. That was precisely when Woodward and Bernstein so dominated Watergate coverage in and outside the *Post* that they became the seamless reportorial team known as “Woodstein.”

• • • • •

Stern’s article could be dismissed as little more than a historical curiosity, just a missed clue to a mystery that endured for more than 30 years. Or it could be seen as another hard fact that contradicts the legend that Woodward and Bernstein zealously protected the identity of their Watergate oracle—and one that brings to mind the famous line from John Ford’s film masterpiece, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*: “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

But after some reflection, Stern’s article would seem to have a little more significance than that.

One year after Stern’s article appeared, *All the President’s Men*, Woodward and Bernstein’s personal account of how they got the story, was published. Now the public became privy to Deep Throat’s existence and instrumentality, as the book peeled away nearly every condition Felt had set when he agreed to be Woodward’s secret source. “It

never really crossed my mind to leave out the details of Deep Throat’s role,” Woodward later wrote.<sup>[15]</sup> “It was important, and in all respects for me, the most personal and human.” Merely disclosing Deep Throat’s existence contravened the “deep background” rules that supposedly governed the Woodward-Felt relationship. In addition, Woodward and Bernstein now quoted Felt at length, and tied him to specific disclosures and precise articles. The only fig leaves left to Felt were that his real name remained secret, and the “Executive Branch” agency he worked for was (ostensibly) unidentified.

The details in *All the President’s Men* made Mark Felt the prime suspect in what swiftly became Washington’s favorite parlor game. When *The Washingtonian* magazine and *The Wall Street Journal* wrote about the phenomenon in June 1974, both singled out Felt as the most logical suspect, forcing him to make his first notable denial: “. . . it was not I and it is not I.”<sup>[16]</sup> Several months later, the *Los Angeles Times* raised the issue again when it reported that the FBI was engaged in a “highly unusual” investigation of Felt for leaking Watergate-related information (though not directly to Woodstein). But again, the cold vehemence of Felt’s denial—he termed the FBI’s investigation “ridiculous,” “insulting,” and “astounding”—caused the story to go nowhere.<sup>[17]</sup>

If someone had recalled Laurence Stern’s article from June 1973, however, and put two and two together, it is hard to believe Felt’s denials would have carried much weight in 1974, or that he would have been able to sustain them indefinitely. Uncertainty about where in the “Executive Branch” Deep Throat worked was virtually the only shred Felt had left from the cloak of secrecy he had attempted to wrap himself in.<sup>[18]</sup> If this last remnant had been taken from him, Felt would have had nowhere to hide. Virtually all the other named suspects would have been off the table.<sup>[19]</sup>

More importantly, if Stern’s article had helped put an early end to the national guessing game, it might have revealed the genuine issue at stake: *why* Felt leaked. The Watergate story has always been comprised of two halves: the crime/cover-up itself, and how the crime/cover-up became public. For the purpose of understanding how things happen in Washington, the latter may be more illuminating than the former. But how the scandal surfaced was never adequately explained because of the decades-long mystery over Deep Throat’s identity, and it still hasn’t been.

A future issue of *Washington Decoded* will return to the fascinating juxtaposition first raised by Laurence Stern. His article not only conveyed a clue that should have unraveled the Deep Throat mystery 34 years ago—it also contained the kernel of the answer as to why Deep Throat leaked.

[1] Richard Harwood, “[Laurence Stern, Prize-Winning Post Editor, Dies at 50](#),” *WP*, 12 August 1979.

[2] Initially, it appeared unlikely that the president’s own conduct would ever rise to the level of an impeachable offense that was provable. The existence of the secret White House tapes was not yet public knowledge.

[3] Richard Helms with William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency* (New York: Random House, 2003), 7. Once the Watergate cover-up was exposed, Helms also came to believe that it was possible that the White House had orchestrated the leaks.

[4] *Ibid.*, 271.

[5] Laurence Stern, "[Helms Becomes Latest Victim of Watergate](#)," *WP*, 16 May 1973.

[6] Laurence Stern, "[Bureau Hurt By Watergate](#)," *WP*, 17 June 1973. Among other things, FBI agents had tapped the phones, opened the mail, and broken into the offices of US senators who were investigating the involvement of cabinet officers from the Harding administration in the Teapot Dome scandal.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Bob Woodward, *The Secret Man: The Story of Watergate's Deep Throat* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 104.

[10] Woodward had told Bernstein who Deep Throat was in the fall of 1972. *Post* editors knew of Deep Throat's existence but not his identity, although Woodward had disclosed to executive editor Ben Bradlee information about Felt's access, seniority, and nominal location in the Justice Department.

[11] Timothy Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus* (New York: Random House, 1973), 292.

[12] David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 634-641, 667-668.

[13] It also seems pertinent that Stern's article went on to quote none other than Mark Felt, whose retirement from the bureau had been announced on May 22. Stern did not name Felt as a source, identifying him instead as a "recently retired senior official with more than a quarter century in the bureau." But there is no doubt it was the former associate director. Felt had just left the FBI after 31 years, and the criticism of Pat Gray uttered by Stern's veiled source was virtually identical to what Felt would say about Gray a few years later in his memoir. Stern, "[Bureau Hurt By Watergate](#)," 17 June 1973; W. Mark Felt, *The FBI Pyramid From the Inside* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979). 221.

[14] Bob Woodward e-mail to Holland, 26 June 2008.

[15] Woodward, *Secret Man*, 113. Although Deep Throat was not unveiled until the 1974 publication of *All the President's Men*, the existence of a "wary informant" who met with Woodward in a garage was first revealed in a May 1973 *New York* magazine article about

the *Post's* Watergate coverage. Aaron Latham, “How *The Washington Post* Gave Nixon Hell,” *New York*, 14 May 1973.

[16] Jack Limpert, “Deep Throat: If It Isn’t Tricia It Must Be . . .,” *The Washingtonian*, June 1974; Dennis Farney, “If You Drink Scotch, Smoke & Read, Maybe You’re ‘Deep Throat’,” *Wall Street Journal*, 25 June 1974; Jack Limpert, “Deeper Into Deep Throat,” *The Washingtonian*, August 1974.

[17] Ronald J. Ostrow, “[FBI Investigating Its Former No. 2 Official](#),” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 November 1974. Felt was being investigated for leaking Watergate-related information to John Crewdson of *The New York Times*.

[18] In addition to the indiscretion with Stern, Woodward and Bernstein had been overly expansive during their interview in January 1973 with author Tim Crouse. Woodward had told Crouse that “somebody at the Justice Department” was the source for a 30 October 1972 [Post story](#) that alleged the “whole damn [Watergate] thing [was] a Haldeman operation.” When *All the President’s Men* was published in June 1974, an astute reporter could have noticed that a quote directly attributed to Deep Throat in *All the President’s Men* (and vaguely attributed to a “federal source” when the quote originally appeared in the *Post*) had also been linked to an official in the Justice Department—which, of course, encompassed the FBI. Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President’s Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), 198; Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus*, 296; Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, “[Magazine Says Nixon Aide Admits Disruption Effort](#),” *WP*, 30 October 1972.

[19] Within the first month, the list of named suspects already included such unlikely figures as Robert Finch, a former presidential advisor known for his moderate views, and Harry Dent, a former White House political operative.