

## Outing Deep Throat

*By Max Holland*

In an editorial written a few days after W. Mark Felt was unmasked, *The Washington Post's* Ruth Marcus perceptively opined that Felt had given every indication of preferring to take his secret to his grave. "I am glad, I suppose, to finally know the secret of Deep Throat," Marcus wrote on June 5, 2005. "I am less confident that Mark Felt wanted me to know."

Marcus suggested that Felt's family euchred him into revealing what he had labored so hard to keep secret:

To comprehend how thoroughly Felt believed that it wouldn't fit for him to be both Mark Felt and Deep Throat, consider how insistently he kept his secret hidden from his own family. The more you read of *Vanity Fair's* account of the outing, the sorrier you feel for a failing old man prodded and even tricked by his relatives into telling all—to get "closure," as his daughter put it, perhaps finally to profit from what the family, if not Felt, viewed as his heroism.

In point of fact, decades before Felt's family sought profit from the secret, Bob Woodward irrevocably compromised Felt's clandestine role by revealing Deep Throat's existence in 1974, and benefited greatly from doing so. Two years later, Woodward compounded that betrayal by unilaterally deciding that he would identify Deep Throat by name at a time of Woodward's own choosing, i.e., after Felt's death. The first person, in other words, to disrespect Felt's consistent behavior and exploit Deep Throat was the reporter entrusted with the secret.

The end to Washington's favorite guessing game in 2005 meant that history and perspective could finally displace a fixation. And with the benefit of hindsight comes the clarity to ask some long-neglected questions about Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's protection of the most fabled confidential source in journalism history.

When a newspaper reporter negotiates an understanding with a source, does that agreement extend to only the newspaper medium? If the reporter wants a change of terms, is he or she honor-bound to obtain the source's express permission? Or are silence and the absence of protest sufficient? And finally, what is the effect of the passage of time? Does it give license to a reporter to re-interpret an understanding unilaterally?

At several pivotal moments, Woodward amended the terms of his “deep background” agreement with Mark Felt to suit his, Bernstein’s and *The Washington Post’s* best interests, but not necessarily Felt’s. Woodward’s situational adherence to his arrangement with Felt does not rise to the level of Janet Malcolm’s controversial remark about journalists. But it might be best not to hold up the famed journalist’s treatment of Deep Throat as an exemplar to budding reporters.

It certainly makes for an interesting case study though.

### The Arrangement: Deep Background

The terms under which Felt agreed to help Woodward were spelled out very shortly after the June 17 break-in. As described in Bernstein and Woodward’s 1974 book, *All the President’s Men*, Woodward was supposed to contact Deep Throat only about important stories, as Felt refused to be a routine source. Felt’s identity or his position were never to be disclosed to anyone. Woodward also agreed that Felt would never be quoted, even as an anonymous source. The journalistic term of art for their arrangement was “deep background,” which can signify a complicated variety of things. In this instance, it meant Felt’s information could be used, but would not be attributed to its true source, nor was that source ever supposed to be quoted or identified in the newspaper.

The importance of keeping Deep Throat secret was such that Woodward kept his own editors in the dark as to Deep Throat’s identity, though apparently Woodward shared information about Felt’s access, seniority, and nominal location at the Justice Department with (at least) executive editor Ben Bradlee, according to Bradlee’s 1995 memoir. In a 1973 interview, Howard Simons, the *Post’s* managing editor, explained why he and Bradlee had decided not to insist on knowing the identity of Deep Throat, although they often asked for the names of other sources. “Because you [Woodward] really didn’t want to tell us,” said Simons, whose playful sense of humor was responsible for giving Felt his immortal codename.

Apart from sharing Deep Throat’s name with his sidekick Bernstein in the fall of 1972, Woodward clearly violated his deep background arrangement with Felt only twice in the pages of *The Washington Post*. These instances are revealing, as they illustrate Woodward’s willingness to exploit his ultimate source, and contravene the ground rules, when the situation seemed to warrant it—although they pale when compared to what would happen later.

The first occasion occurred in late October 1972, when Woodward and Bernstein’s reputations, if not their jobs, seemed at risk. They were desperate to correct a grievous error in their first effort to tie H.R. “Bob” Haldeman, the president’s chief of staff, directly to a slush fund at the Committee to Re-elect the President. White House press secretary Ron Ziegler was jumping all over their mistake, using it to impugn all of the Watergate coverage. Woodward and Bernstein thought they might have to tender their resignations if they could not recover. Along with other remedial steps, Woodward signaled for a meeting with Deep Throat.

Felt subjected Woodward to a merciless scolding, but also told him what the reporter absolutely needed to know. The essential facts were correct: Haldeman did have authority over the secret fund, and their mistake had been a technical one. Five days after the initial article—without Felt’s approval, and despite his earlier refusal to be a source on anything having to do with Haldeman—Woodward and Bernstein quoted Deep Throat anonymously in the 14th paragraph of a story that began on the front page. The article served to correct the earlier account while simultaneously defending its gist. “One [federal] source went so far as to say ‘this is a Haldeman operation,’ and [that] Haldeman had ‘insulated’ himself,” read the October 30 article.

“I had very bad feelings about quoting Felt so directly,” Woodward would later recall in *The Secret Man*. “It really was contrary to the rules we had established of deep background. But I was frantic to get a story in the paper correcting our mistake. I didn’t try to contact Felt for some time . . .” Indeed, the two men did not have another clandestine rendezvous for three months. Coincidentally or not, during this same period—November, December, and January—the *Post*’s coverage of Watergate dried up. “We couldn’t get a smell of a story,” Ben Bradlee later recalled.

The second anonymous quote appeared more than a year after the first, in November 1973. By this time, the role of pushing the story forward had passed decisively from the press to the political/legal process, and real scoops, of the 1972 kind, were much fewer and harder to come by. Yet Felt would prove to be good for one parting exclusive.

At this juncture, the Congress, a special prosecutor, and the White House were in the midst of a titanic struggle over Nixon’s secret tape recordings. On the off chance that Deep Throat knew something that would propel the *Post* to the front of the media pack again, Woodward asked for a garage meeting, the first one between the two men in many months. Sure enough, it turned out Felt had a irresistible kernel of information that almost no one else knew. One of the recordings showed signs of having been deliberately erased, confided Felt. The information was appropriated immediately. In the November 8 story, Felt, identified as “one” of “five [White House] sources,” was quoted as saying that reported problems with the tapes “are of a suspicious nature,” and “could lead someone to include [sic] that the tapes have been tampered with.” It was Deep Throat’s last great leak to Woodward.

Thirteen days later, the entire nation learned about an erasure, lasting 18½ minutes, that just coincidentally obliterated what had been said during a crucial meeting between Nixon and Haldeman three days after the break-in. It bears mentioning that the November 8 article was the main reason why many Watergate sleuths later ruled Felt out as Deep Throat. He could not reasonably be described as a White House source in November 1973, or, for that matter, at any time.

### Protecting Felt (Not)

It was an accomplishment to keep Felt cloaked in secrecy while churning out newspaper scoops, but once Woodward and Bernstein shifted their focus to finishing a

book about Watergate they had contracted to write in 1972, they faced an entirely new problem, one of their own making. Because the Watergate scandal showed no sign of ending soon, they decided they “had no alternative” but to shift the book’s narrative line from the scandal itself, to the story of covering the scandal as *Post* reporters.

It was a fabulous idea, but how could they tell the story without the most integral part? Some anonymous sources who had been helpful during their newspaper coverage, such as Hugh W. Sloan, Jr., the former treasurer of the Republican National Committee, readily agreed to be identified for the book when asked. But when Woodward broached that possibility with Mark Felt, his truculent answer was absolutely not. Felt clearly indicated he considered the 1972 agreement “inviolable” and still binding.

Felt’s wrathful answer put Woodward and Bernstein under enormous pressure to disguise Deep Throat, dilute his role, and otherwise be as deceptive as possible in their book. They never included some revealing statements that Felt had made, such as “on [L. Patrick] Gray’s desk” or “It’s all in the files,” and carefully redacted drafts of the manuscript to remove other references that might point too clearly to their secret source in the FBI. Still, the book unilaterally disregarded specific terms in Woodward’s agreement with Felt, if only because it quoted him at considerable length. But in a larger sense, too, by exposing Deep Throat’s mere existence, Woodward and Bernstein were breaching the letter and spirit of the ground rules laid down in the summer of 1972.

Woodward’s justification, as expressed in *The Secret Man*, was that *Post* stories had made “numerous references in print to FBI files.” Moreover, Felt had been quoted anonymously as a source in October 1972 and had not expressly objected. “I . . . thought it gave me some leeway,” Woodward wrote. It “never really crossed my mind to leave out the details of Deep Throat’s role. It was important . . . .”

And thus, out of necessity, the [myth](#) of the source who supposedly “only . . . confirm[ed] information and . . . add[ed] some perspective” was born in *All the President’s Men*.

While there was ample reason to believe that the book would be a best-seller, no one anticipated the fixation that would instantly develop over Deep Throat once *All the President’s Men* was published in April 1974. (Prior to the book’s publication, only Bernstein shared Woodward’s secret as to Deep Throat’s name, and only a few *Post* reporters and four editors even knew there was a secret, high-level source by that codename). Public interest in Deep Throat’s identity exploded, and it was more than matched by professional curiosity. As Alicia Shepard recounted in her 2005 biography of the duo, “*The Wall Street Journal* kicked off the game with a front-page, middle-column story, prime real estate for one of the country’s largest newspapers. The June 25, 1973, headline read: IF YOU DRINK SCOTCH, SMOKE & READ, MAYBE YOU’RE ‘DEEP THROAT’.”

The fact that Woodward had actually disrespected the terms of his understanding with Felt went virtually unnoticed amidst all the hubbub and orgy of self-congratulations in the press. Rather, Woodward and Bernstein were hailed for their fidelity, specifically, for

standing by their pledge not to reveal Deep Throat's identity—as if that were the only stipulation in the deep background agreement.

As the book shot to the top of the national best-seller lists, Woodward called Felt, apparently for the first time since Felt had reminded him that their agreement was inviolate. The reporter was “dying to know” what Felt thought about *All the President's Men*, which was now adding wealth to Woodward's fame. When he heard Woodward's familiar voice, Felt instantly banged the receiver down and left Woodward listening to a dial tone. Undoubtedly Felt was furious about something other than the fact that he had been dubbed with a pornographic moniker by disrespectful newsmen. The exposure shredded every aspect of his understanding with Woodward save one. And assuming Felt read the book, he probably found little solace in the misdirection and disinformation the authors had inserted in the text to confound anyone who might try to divine the Deep Throat's identity.

In April 1976, the film version of the book was released, and a best-seller became a blockbuster that exalted and romanticized the press—a “paean to investigative journalism,” as the historian William E. Leuchtenburg described the movie. Hal Holbrook's portrayal of Deep Throat (Holbrook was always in the shadows, half-hidden) and his memorable admonition to “follow the money” (something Felt apparently never said), only added to the hyperbole, and perpetuated a national parlor game that would last until 2005.

### A Public Promise

Virtually the same month the film was released, Woodward and Bernstein's second book, *The Final Days*, was published. While no author could wish for a more serendipitous pairing (the film would be a *TIME* cover story), the conjunction of a second book and a film adaptation of the first one created a tsunami of publicity, not all of it good. There was a new bout of frenzied speculation about Deep Throat's identity, including the allegation that Deep Throat, as such, had not in fact existed. Questions about the *Post's* credibility were not in the newspaper's interest, so in the spring of 1976 Ben Bradlee finally did what he had desisted from doing in 1972: he asked to know Deep Throat's name, thereby becoming the second person to know (after Bernstein).

Subsequently, Woodward adopted a different tack in response to the new round of relentless questions about Deep Throat's identity. In 2005, Woodward explained this decision by writing, “I don't remember exactly why or when but sometime back in the 1970s I answered that I thought it should be revealed only after his death, unless in his lifetime he changed his mind and agreed to have it disclosed, an unlikely occurrence I believed.”

In truth, it is easy to pin-point precisely when the new tack was adopted: during an April 1976 interview with *TIME* magazine (the one that featured the film version of *All the President's Men* on its cover). As usual, Woodward introduced an element of

misdirection to keep would-be detectives confused. Woodward made it seem that Deep Throat was still in the U.S. government at that very moment.

When we wrote *All the President's Men*, [Deep Throat] declined to be named . . . He has a career in government. He thinks that while he might be a hero to some, he would be a rat or a snitcher in some eyes . . . Some day he'll come forth. If he were to die, I would feel obliged to reveal his identity. Some day he'll write a really fascinating book. Carl and I would like to work on it with him.

Woodward's new approach amounted to a second, major re-interpretation of the original deep background agreement, and there is no evidence he sought Felt's permission. Yet the public promise worked as intended. It dampened and contained the endless conjecture, though the speculation was never extinguished.

In the meantime, the secret-keepers benefited from the aura of intrigue created by the guessing game. Besides giving Woodward and Bernstein something to dine on for 31 years, it kept them in the public eye long after they might have otherwise faded. Most importantly, Watergate lent them enormous cachet as journalists. "You'll protect sources," was the common, if unintentionally ironic, refrain. Yet it was not all easy either, particularly when Woodward was occasionally confronted with the choice of either lying to colleagues to keep Felt's identity secret, or making no comment whatsoever, which might be taken as confirmation that Felt was Deep Throat.

Periodically, Woodward fantasized about persuading Felt to let him tell the whole story, on the grounds that the FBI official would be viewed as a national hero. Woodward's suggestion in *TIME* that Deep Throat might some day write a book could be considered part of a subtle campaign of persuasion. But when Felt did publish his own memoir in 1979, the aptly-titled *The FBI Pyramid from the Inside*, it was without any help from Woodward. This memoir, of course, was strewn with Felt's numerous, strenuous denials that he was Deep Throat, or that he had ever leaked any internal information to any reporter ever.

In November 1980, Woodward contacted Deep Throat for the first time in two years. Felt was probably at the lowest point of his life. He had just been found guilty of conspiring in 1972-73 to violate the civil rights of citizens who had relatives in the violent Weather Underground organization, and he was facing up to 10 years in prison (though no one expected him to get that much), a possible \$10,000 fine, certain disbarment, huge legal bills, and to top it off his wife, Audrey, was ill.

If there was ever a moment to cash in on having been Deep Throat, this seemed to be the time. Yet when Woodward broached the possibility, according to *The Secret Man*, Felt's response remained the same as it had been in 1973: an unyielding, resounding "NO," along with a reminder to Woodward about his commitment "not to further exploit [their] relationship."

### Blind-Sided by the Felts

In May 2005, *Vanity Fair* magazine finally closed down the Deep Throat cottage industry, or at least the one in existence since 1974. Initially, Woodward and Bernstein sought to treat the *Vanity Fair* article as just another of those periodic flare-ups that had to be, and could be, quenched. Their response to the article was smoothly noncommittal, followed by a reiteration of their public promise.

But during a hurriedly-called and intense meeting at the *Post*, Leonard Downie, Jr., Bradlee's successor, overrode Woodward's objections and declared the obvious. "Bob, it's over," said Downie. The executive editor was unwilling to let the newspaper be party to a non-denial denial, marking the first time in decades that the *Post's* interests prevailed over those of its most famous reporter.

Woodward, as he finally confirmed the news, explained that, "We kept that secret because we keep our word." But that word hardly resembled the pledge given by a young reporter in the summer of 1972 to his secret source. The only word Woodward had really kept here was his own, 1976 promise not to disclose Deep Throat's identity until after Felt's death.

At *The Washington Post*—indeed, in most of journalism—it is difficult to find anyone willing to suggest that Woodward's treatment of Mark Felt was well short of impeccable. One of the few objections raised comes from Harry M. Rosenfeld, who also happens to be one of the *Post* editors who oversaw Woodward and Bernstein's Watergate coverage from 1972 to 1974. Rosenfeld left the *Post* in 1978 to become editor of the *Albany Times Union*, a Hearst paper, and is now the paper's editor-at-large.

Rosenfeld has never wavered from a simple, absolutist position. "Confidential sources are extremely important to doing hard-hitting, investigative stories that people in power don't want you to do," he told the *Times Union* in June 2005, after the *Vanity Fair* article had been publicized. "The press has to fight to maintain its stature as people who will investigate people of power. . . . That's why I've been such a fanatic of keeping confidential sources confidential."

Come to think of it, that seems to be the promise Mark Felt wanted kept too.