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A Revealing Look Back at Deep Throat

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The Secret Man: The Story of Watergate's Deep Throat

By Bob Woodward. Simon & Schuster, 249 pages, \$23

So Deep Throat was W. Mark Felt, the FBI's second in command in 1972, when burglars working for President Richard Nixon's re-election campaign were caught breaking into the offices of the Democratic National Committee in Washington's Watergate complex. Felt's pseudonym, coined by an editor at The Washington Post, derived from the famous porn film of that era and the journalism phrase "deep background," meaning information that can be used but for which no source can be publicly identified.

Bob Woodward already knew Felt when Woodward became a Post reporter in 1971. Woodward had met the older man a year earlier in a White House waiting room when Woodward, then a young Navy officer about to leave the service, was delivering documents. Woodward struck up a conversation and pursued the acquaintance, which paid off even before the Watergate break-in. Assigned to cover the shooting of Alabama Gov. George Wallace by a deranged gunman who had stalked several presidential candidates, Woodward called Felt. Woodward's front page story in the next day's Post stated that "federal sources here in Washington" said more than 200 FBI agents already were on the case.

Woodward admits in his new book, "The Secret Man," that "I was not doing an adequate job of concealing where the information was coming from," and says, "Felt chastised me mildly" for the error. Woodward explains that he wrote this book in 2002, in anticipation of Felt's death, but when Felt's family lawyer surprised Woodward by revealing the 91-year-old Felt's identity in an article that Vanity Fair magazine released May 31, Woodward rushed this book into publication.

"The Secret Man" is a thoughtful, revealing retrospective on a relationship that was far more awkward and troubled than the myth of Deep Throat ever suggested. Perhaps the most important revelation is that Felt, standing alone as Deep Throat, actually was a far-from-dominant source for the Post's Watergate reporting. As Carl Bernstein, Woodward's journalistic partner from 1972 to 1974, emphasizes in an afterword in "The Secret Man," "It was the convergence of all the sources, not just a single one . . . that enabled us to penetrate the secrecy of the Nixon presidency."

Three decades later, many Americans may not appreciate that Watergate involved not just one burglary, but "a sweeping pattern of illegal, undercover activities" Nixon had authorized against all manner of perceived enemies and critics. Ironically, Felt's reluctant willingness to help Woodward unravel that trail of misdeeds stemmed in large part from the FBI's own unhappiness with the Nixon administration's behavior.

Every serious student of Watergate has long known that Deep Throat could only be a high-ranking or well-placed FBI official, for no one else had full access to the raw investigative

information that was passed to Woodward. Director J. Edgar Hoover had died just one month before the Watergate break-in, but the final two years of Hoover's long reign had witnessed unusual internal fireworks, with mercurial FBI intelligence chief William C. Sullivan independently assisting Nixon aides who sought expanded surveillance programs that Hoover opposed.

Anyone accustomed to viewing Hoover as only a fascistic ogre may be surprised, but in the Nixon context, Hoover's maxim "Don't Embarrass the Bureau" meant he indeed opposed reckless practices that would trample on civil liberties. That angered Sullivan and his administration allies, which in turn put Hoover loyalists like Felt on aggressive guard against Nixon's efforts to bend the FBI to his political will.

This political and bureaucratic context explains Felt's use of Woodward and the Post as the White House resisted FBI inquiries that would connect the inept burglars to Nixon's top aides. As Woodward puts it, "Nixon was trying to subvert not only the law but the Bureau," and to FBI men like Felt, that was the greatest offense of all.

Felt's grudging assistance to Woodward amounted to considerably less than popular legend presumes. Their much-heralded, late-night meetings in an empty parking garage occurred only half-a-dozen times, and sometimes Felt's information "was wrong on a number of things," Woodward writes. Their secret-agent-man tradecraft for arranging those meetings sounds memorable, yet at least once they met not in the garage but in a suburban bar where Felt might easily have been recognized.

Inside the Post, Woodward referred to Felt as "my friend," not Deep Throat, and using the initials "M.F." in his notes was "hardly first-rate tradecraft to protect his identity," Woodward confesses. Even worse, in one late 1972 story on the involvement of Nixon's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, in Watergate, Woodward committed the same error he had made in his coverage of the Wallace shooting. "One source went so far as to say 'this is a Haldeman operation,' and Haldeman had 'insulated himself,'" Woodward told Post readers.

The source of course was Deep Throat, and Woodward admits:

"I had very bad feelings about quoting Felt so directly. It really was contrary to the rules we had established of deep background."

But as No. 2 at the FBI, Felt's "words and guidance had immense, at times even staggering, authority," Woodward explains. Felt retired from his FBI post in mid-1973, but his close relationships with remaining officials enabled him to give Woodward important pointers even months later.

Woodward's frank and almost confessional willingness to highlight and criticize his own long-ago shortcomings makes "The Secret Man" a highly impressive autobiographical performance. That achievement should not shield Woodward's story from the crucial caveat that Deep Throat was far less central to Watergate than popular mythology holds. Felt's pseudonym was first popularized in Woodward and Bernstein's 1974 best seller, "All the President's Men," which chronicled their reportorial successes and then became a landmark motion picture featuring Robert Redford as Woodward and Hal Holbrook as Deep Throat.

"The Secret Man" reveals that when Woodward was writing that 1974 volume, he "called Felt and asked, very gingerly . . . would he consider letting me identify him for the book? He exploded. Absolutely not. Was I mad even to make such a request?" It was, Woodward says, "about as emphatic a no as anyone could receive."

Several months later, Woodward adds, "I vividly recall phoning Felt after the book was released." Its publication had immortalized Deep Throat, and, "When he heard my voice, he hung up," Woodward recalls. "I can still hear the bang of his telephone and the sudden dial tone. Hanging up was worse than any words he might have uttered."

After that, "I did not have the courage to phone him again," Woodward writes. "I didn't want to get the hang-up treatment again," and, "I was basically gutless." The estrangement troubled Woodward, especially when Felt was indicted four years later for having authorized illegal FBI break-ins aimed at locating fugitive New Left domestic terrorists.

In 1979, Felt published an autobiography, "The FBI Pyramid: From the Inside," which was largely written, or at least extensively rewritten, by Ralph de Toledano, a conservative ghostwriter chosen by Felt's publisher. The book trumpeted, but of course denied, Nixon's suspicion that Felt had been Deep Throat, yet it also forthrightly emphasized Felt's anger toward the former president. Nixon had sought to make the FBI into "an adjunct of the White House," and bureau loyalists had fought back "tooth and nail." After the Watergate break-in, "from the very beginning it was obvious to the Bureau that a cover-up was in progress but this made us more determined than ever to get under it."

From Felt's perspective, Woodward became an adjunct of the FBI as it fought against White House manipulation. The bureau was grievously wounded when L. Patrick Gray, Nixon's choice as Hoover's successor, unwittingly did the White House's bidding, but the integrity of the Watergate investigation nonetheless prevailed. Nixon's 1974 resignation was a victory for Deep Throat as well as for the Post and the rule of law.

The painful irony of Felt's indictment and subsequent conviction for the FBI's illegal break-ins weighed heavily on Woodward, even after President Ronald Reagan pardoned Felt. But from 1981 until 2000, Woodward and Felt never spoke, and when Woodward paid a surprise visit to the California home where Felt lived with his adult daughter, the greeting was equivocal. "I could sense recognition but it didn't seem personal," Woodward writes, and it quickly became apparent that Felt's memory of their relationship was but a distant shadow.

"I have very little recollection of that period," Felt told his visitor, and Woodward poignantly realized that the Mark Felt "of the 1970s no longer existed." Felt was clearly incapable of releasing Woodward from the promise of confidentiality he had extended 30 years earlier, and even when Vanity Fair first announced its publication of Felt's story, Woodward hesitated to confirm the truth.

Yet within hours, as TV cameras flocked to Felt's door, the announcement became a fait accompli. Watching the footage of a happy and smiling Mark Felt wave to the press, Woodward said, "I was relieved for both of us." That's no surprise.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: (Book cover.)

PHOTO: W. Mark Felt, former associate director of the FBI, in 1978. AP file photo.

PHOTO: Reporters Carl Bernstein, left, and Bob Woodward, whose Watergate stories often relied on the source known as Deep Throat, in the newsroom of The Washington Post on May 7, 1973. AP file photo.