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Disclosure by Magazine Catches Post by Surprise

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

For 30 years, The Washington Post kept secret the identity of Deep Throat, waiting for the right moment to disclose the name of the person who helped the paper develop the biggest story in its history. Yesterday, the paper was scooped on Deep Throat's identity by a monthly magazine.

The revelation by the magazine, Vanity Fair, caught The Post by surprise and threw the paper into turmoil. The initial reaction was not to comment. But at 5:29 p.m., the newspaper confirmed on its Web site that W. Mark Felt was Deep Throat.

"It really landed on us," said Benjamin C. Bradlee, The Post's executive editor during the Watergate era. "I had no idea it was coming."

The surprise stemmed partly from the fact that The Post had pledged to Mr. Felt to keep his identity secret until he died. Moreover, Vanity Fair, which has a policy of fact-checking articles before they are printed, had not contacted the Watergate reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, deliberately, it turns out.

Tom Wilkinson, an assistant managing editor at the newspaper, said the reaction at the Post was surprise. "I think also there's not been a lot of time to digest it, nor do we know enough about the machinations," he said.

Once his family acknowledged yesterday on television that Mr. Felt was Deep Throat, those at the paper said they had little choice but to let go of their secret.

As Mr. Bernstein put it: "Once we could determine that indeed it was the wish of his family, and they were legitimately saying that their father and grandfather was Deep Throat, and with his consent, it seemed to us we had a new obligation — which was to be straightforward."

Michael Getler, The Post's ombudsman, said: "Certainly it's strange in one sense: The Post got scooped on a story with which it's intimately familiar. On the other hand, if this was a family-generated decision, it seems at least from what's publicly visible that there is really no way to avoid that."

The hours between The Post's "no comment" and its acknowledgment were frantic. Leonard Downie Jr., the executive editor, who had been attending a management retreat, raced back to the newsroom. Mr. Woodward, an assistant managing editor, was also out of town.

"We really had to let the dust settle," Mr. Bradlee said. "I felt bound by my word to Woodward not to reveal the name."

At 12:15 p.m., Editor & Publisher, a trade magazine, quoted Mr. Bernstein on its Web site as repeating what he and Mr. Woodward have said for years: that they would reveal Deep Throat's identity only after the source died.

"I think people are jumping up and down about this, but we have nothing to say other than what we have said, which is when the individual dies, we will disclose his identity," Mr. Bernstein told the magazine. "Other sources have released us from pledges, but nothing has happened that could change that in these circumstances."

Few clues were coming from The Post's top echelons about how the paper would react. During the afternoon, two messages went out to the staff. One simply contained a link to the Vanity Fair article. The other, sent at 3:28 p.m. from Chris Richards, a copy aide in the Style section, read: "If you snagged the 'All the President's Men' file from the fourth-floor photo archive today, can you phone me."

One editor said there was no question that The Post would not be the first to break the news on Deep Throat's identity. He said that the paper had an ethical obligation to protect Deep Throat and The Post would not break that pledge unless the source died or gave his explicit con-

Jim Rutenberg and Edward Wyatt contributed reporting for this article.

sent, neither of which had happened.

Meanwhile, Vanity Fair had made no such pledge and like any competitive news organization, was eager to break the news. But it took the magazine more than two years to nail it down.

In early 2003, Graydon Carter, the editor of Vanity Fair, got a cold call from a man named John D. O'Connor, a San Francisco lawyer, asking him if he was interested in having "Deep Throat" reveal his identity in the pages of his magazine.

Thus began the slow unraveling of the Post's proprietary grip on the mystery.

Mr. Carter, in an editor's note that accompanies the article unmasking Deep Throat, said that after the phone call, he turned the story over to David Friend, "who began a two-year journey with O'Connor and his client," Mr. Felt.

"As we got close to publication, we faced a conundrum," Mr. Carter wrote. "If we called Woodward, assistant managing editor of the Post, to verify the identity of Deep Throat, he could rush into print his own article about the source's identity, well in advance of our own. Checking the story with his former partner Carl Bernstein (a Vanity Fair contributing editor) posed a similar problem."

So, Mr. Carter wrote, "we didn't call either of them _ realizing that for 33 years they have consistently refused to divulge their source's name anyway _ and we chose, instead, to verify the facts surrounding this amazing tale of intrigue and courage as best we could, using alternative and overlapping sources.

A newspaper loses the chance to reveal the secret it had kept for more than 30 years.

"The Vanity Fair article said Mr. Felt's family wanted to collaborate with Mr. Woodward on an article, wondering at one point why Mr. Woodward should "get all the glory" for what they saw as their father's courage.

Vanity Fair said Mr. Woodward scheduled two visits with the family to talk about a collaborative effort but he had to cancel them and then never rescheduled. Mr. Woodward has declined comment. But it was known in New York publishing circles that Mr. Woodward, a prolific author, was planning to write his own book about Deep Throat.

Yesterday at The Post, there was some confusion about where the paper's obligations lay. The Vanity Fair article portrayed Mr. Woodward as being especially concerned about whether Mr. Felt was of sound mind when he told his family he wanted to reveal his identity and whether his family was pushing him to do so.

The announcement appeared on the Web site in the form of a news article, but with a variety of headlines. It said that Mr. Woodward confirmed Deep Throat's identity, but without a quote from him. It then said The Post confirmed the identity. Later, it went back to saying Mr. Woodward confirmed it.

Around 6:30 p.m., Mr. Woodward emerged from his office with Mr. Bernstein, and Mr. Bradlee nearby, creating a tableau of the old days when they brought down a president. The scene left many in The Post's fifth-floor newsroom simply to stare as a photographer took pictures.

The emergence of the ultimate anonymous source comes at a time when newsrooms are struggling with questions about when to use anonymous sources.

"We've had all this stuff about anonymous sources and God knows yes, we all known anonymous sources are overused," said Lou Cannon, a former Post reporter.