

THE ETHICS

Felt Is Praised as a Hero and Condemned as a Traitor

BY KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

W. Mark Felt's disclosure that he was Deep Throat has sparked a debate about whether he should be praised as a hero for leaking information to The Washington Post or condemned as a traitor for going outside the legal system.

His family has sought to portray him as a hero, and by prodding him to disclose his identity as a secret source for The Post in the Watergate scandal, has taken steps to shape his legacy in a positive light.

A grandson of Mr. Felt, Nick Jones, said Wednesday as he left his house in Santa Rosa, Calif.: "What he did was the right thing to do. Heroic. He's an honorable guy. He's always been guided by a real strong conscience. We stand behind him and what he did."

But Mr. Felt's role as a newspaper informer raises questions about the obligations of officials at institutions like the F.B.I. Should those obligations be defined as adhering to the regulations of the bureau and the laws about releasing secret information? Or is there a higher calling when law enforcement officials think that they are being obstructed at the highest levels of government?

Patrick J. Buchanan, who worked in Richard M. Nixon's White House,

told an interviewer that Mr. Felt, who was the No. 2 official at the bureau when he became an anonymous source for The Post, was a snake.

But other people said the situation was less clear-cut, with some experts saying they are withholding judgment until they can learn more about Mr. Felt's motives.

"If this was a vendetta, then that would devalue what he did," said Robert Dallek, the presidential historian. "But people never operate strictly out of one motive or another. He was clearly offended by the constitutional breaches that had occurred, but he was probably fueled by a certain amount of resentment at the politicization of the F.B.I."

"What this revelation brings into focus is the fact that the second in command in the F.B.I. would turn to The Washington Post to uncover the skulduggery at the White House.

"That speaks volumes about the tensions he had with the Nixon White House. He was obviously angry at them. And one can interpret that in different ways. Was it the product of his resentment at not being named director after Hoover? Or was it because he was such a principled man that he was deeply offended at their violations of the Constitution?" John W. Dean, Nixon's White

House counsel and the government's main informer in the Watergate investigation, said he had "mixed emotions" about Mr. Felt's activities.

"I have great empathy for someone who decides they're going to blow everything up," said Mr. Dean, who rocked the nation with testimony that he told Nixon that there was a cancer growing on the presidency.

On the other hand, Mr. Dean said, Mr. Felt was a top national law enforcement officer and ignored the chain of command by going to a newspaper instead of superiors.

"Motive determines how you look at him," Mr. Dean said. "If his motive is sour grapes, that isn't terribly noble," a reference to reports that Mr. Felt was angry that he had not been appointed director of the bureau.

Mr. Dean theorized that Mr. Felt may not have been alone in relaying information or sending signals to Bob Woodward of The Post. Mr. Woodward acknowledged in a statement on Tuesday that Mr. Felt was Deep Throat but also said many others had contributed to reporting. Mr. Dean said, "If there is a small group of F.B.I. agents who were working with him to take down the president, that isn't very noble, either."

Floyd Abrams, the First Amend-

ment lawyer who is defending two reporters, including one from The New York Times, and their use of confidential sources, said Mr. Felt had behaved honorably.

"Sometimes, adherence to pre-existing rules asks too much of people," Mr. Abrams said. "In this case, Mark Felt served the public enormously by breaking ranks and assisting in the exposure of ongoing repeated governmental misconduct. I think he'll be remembered well when the history of this period is written."

Asked if Mr. Felt broke the law, he said: "Without knowing precisely what he said or did, it's hard to say. Taking as gospel Woodward and Bernstein's description of the hints and nudges he gave them along the way, it's very unlikely he broke the law. But he probably did act inconsistently with the rules and regulations that exist to guide and limit the behavior of F.B.I. personnel.

"Like a lot of important sources, he provided information he was not authorized to provide. But he served the country by doing so."

Mr. Dean said Mr. Felt could have conceivably been charged with stealing government information or disclosing confidential material that might have been part of the Watergate inquiry.

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Howard Moore/Deseret Morning News via Associated Press

W. Mark Felt, then working in Salt Lake City, posed in this 1958 photo.