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Watergate and the Two Lives of Mark Felt

Roles as FBI Official, 'Deep Throat' Clashed

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The Watergate scandal had reached a peak, and President Richard M. Nixon was furious about press leaks. His suspicions focused on the number two man at the FBI, W. Mark Felt, a 31-year bureau veteran. He ordered his aides to "confront" the presumed traitor.

Another man may have panicked. Over the previous six months, Felt had been meeting secretly with Bob Woodward of The Washington Post, helping him and fellow Post reporter Carl Bernstein with a series of sensational scoops about the abuse of presidential power. But the former World War II spymaster had an exquisite sense of how to play the bureaucratic game.

In a Feb. 21, 1973, FBI memo, Felt denounced the Post stories as an amalgam of "fiction and half truths," combined with some genuine information from "sources either in the FBI or the Department of Justice." To deflect attention from himself, he ordered an investigation into the latest leak.

"Expedite," he instructed.

Recently identified as the secret Watergate source known as "Deep Throat," Felt is the last and most mysterious of a colorful cast of characters who have captured the national imagination. Now 91, and in shaky health, the former FBI man joins a pantheon of Watergate figures ranging from H.R. "Bob" Haldeman and G. Gordon Liddy to John J. Sirica and Archibald Cox.

Unlike many of the heroes and villains of the Watergate saga, Felt defies easy pigeonholing. Admirers, beginning with his family, have presented him as a courageous whistle-blower. Detractors depict him as driven by overreaching personal ambition. Neither description captures the bravura, almost reckless, performance of a man leading two very different lives.

By day, Felt was the loyal, super-efficient government executive, ordering leak investigations and writing obsequious notes to acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray. By night, in 2 a.m. meetings with Woodward in an underground parking garage, he fulminated against the dirty tricks of the Nixon White House and worried about threats to the U.S. Constitution.

A review of tens of thousands of pages of declassified White House and FBI documents, and interviews with more than two dozen people who had dealings with Felt, reveal an exceptionally complicated personality. It is impossible to disentangle Felt's sense of outrage over what was happening to the country from his own desire to scramble to the top of "the FBI Pyramid," a phrase he later used as the title of a little-noticed autobiography.

As a protege and ardent supporter of J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI's legendary first director, Felt was determined to perpetuate Hoover's vision of the bureau as an almost autonomous institution, feared by criminals and politicians alike. In nighttime conversations with Woodward, and later in his own book, he made clear that he resented attempts by Nixon and his acolytes to turn the world's premier law enforcement agency into "an adjunct of the White House."


In some ways, Felt comes across as that archetypal Washington figure, the master manipulator more concerned with bureaucratic turf than constitutional principle. At the same time that he was blowing the whistle on Nixon for illegal

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break-ins, he was authorizing similar "black-bag jobs" against left-wing radicals, according to evidence presented at his 1980 conspiracy trial.

Declassified documents and White House tapes show that Nixon aides initially saw Felt as "our boy," but became suspicious after hearing through the bureaucratic grapevine that he was leaking information to Woodward and other reporters. Nixon ordered his aides to "set traps" for Felt, but held back from moving against him for fear that the FBI man would "go out and unload everything."

Felt is as "cool as a cucumber," marveled White House counsel John W. Dean III, in a Feb. 27, 1973, conversation with the president in the Oval Office. Felt was eventually forced to resign from the FBI in June 1973 on suspicion of leaking a story about illegal wiretaps to the New York Times.

A combination of patriot and turncoat, Hoover loyalist and truth teller, Felt never achieved his long-cherished dream of becoming FBI director. But for a crucial year in his life and the country's life, he was at the vortex of the greatest political scandal in modern American history.

It all began with the death of J. Edgar Hoover.

A Funeral

"I have strong ideas about this damn funeral," Nixon told his aides on the morning of May 2, 1972, on hearing of Hoover's death at the age of 77. "I want it to be big."

A lying-in-state on Capitol Hill. A presidential eulogy. A Marine band. Taps. Nixon made sure that Hoover received all the honors that America could bestow on a fallen hero. In his mind, this was not just a funeral for Hoover, it was a heaven-sent opportunity to reassert presidential authority over an agency that was "out of control."

Nixon praised Hoover in public. But in private, he referred to the FBI director as "a morally depraved son of a bitch," declassified White House tapes show.

The man chosen by Nixon for "cleaning house" at the FBI was a former World War II submarine commander named L. Patrick Gray III, a longtime political loyalist who had held a succession of positions at the Justice Department. Nixon's one concern about Gray was that he was "a little naïve."

Gray was soon reporting back about the internal power struggles that were taking place within the FBI. The upper ranks of the bureau were a hive of gossip and intrigue, in his opinion. "Those people over there are like little old ladies in tennis shoes and they've got some of the most vicious vendettas going on," Gray told Nixon in amazement.

The one senior FBI man trusted implicitly by Gray was his deputy, Felt. Smooth and debonair, with an extraordinary command of detail, Felt had been involved in counterespionage operations in World War II, and had run the FBI field office in Kansas City, a hotbed of political corruption. Hoover had plucked Felt out of the bureau's internal inspection division in 1971 and made him his heir apparent.

Declassified FBI and White House documents show that Felt praised Gray for his "magnificent" performance at a meet-and-greet session with the FBI's executive committee. He later sent Gray surveys of laudatory comments from FBI field offices such as "morale outstanding, never higher," and "99 per cent of agents highly disposed toward innovative changes made by Mr Gray."

Felt's private view of Gray was very different. In his autobiography, he makes no secret of his disappointment about not getting the top job, which, he thought, should have gone to a career FBI man. He refers to his boss as "three-day Gray," because of his "constant absence from his command post in Washington," visiting FBI offices around the country or spending long weekends at his home in Connecticut.

Like most senior FBI officials, Felt strongly opposed Gray's decision to recruit female agents to what had been an exclusively male preserve.

Gray's frequent absences meant that his deputy was effectively running the bureau when police apprehended five burglars in the Democratic Party's national campaign office at the Watergate complex at 2:30 a.m. on June 17, 1972.

Early White House Support

"Mark Felt wants to cooperate because he's ambitious," Haldeman told Nixon four days after the Watergate break-in on what later became known as "the smoking gun tape," because it demonstrated presidential involvement in a White House cover-up.

One reason that the White House had confidence in Felt, according to Dean, was his sensitive handling of a potentially embarrassing case early in the Nixon presidency. As reported by Curt Gentry in a 1992 biography of Hoover, the FBI chief had heard of "a ring of homosexualists at the highest levels of the White House." Hoover told Nixon he was sending over Felt, one of his "most discreet executives," to investigate.

The alleged "homosexualists" included Haldeman and fellow White House aide John D. Ehrlichman. After interviewing the suspects, Felt found no evidence to support the allegations and recommended that the case be closed. The investigation provided Felt with valuable contacts at the highest levels of the administration and with first-hand insights into how the White House was organized.

Nixon and Haldeman hoped to put a lid on the Watergate investigation by suggesting a CIA link to the burglary, putting it off-limits to the FBI. Contrary to their expectations, Felt persuaded Gray not to go along with the plan.

In the meantime, Felt had begun to talk off the record about the Watergate case to Woodward. He had first met Woodward, then a U.S. Navy courier, outside the White House Situation Room in 1970. After Woodward joined The Post in 1971, Felt became a valued source.

On June 19, two days after the break-in, Felt helped steer Woodward to his first big scoop in the Watergate investigation. After Woodward telephoned him at the FBI, a nervous-sounding Felt confirmed that a former White House consultant named E. Howard Hunt was a "prime suspect" in the case.

As the Watergate scandal heated up, Felt stopped taking telephone calls from Woodward, and insisted on conspiratorial meetings. If the reporter wanted to request a meeting, he would move a flowerpot to the back of his sixth-floor balcony.

At the same time Felt was meeting with Woodward, he was having to deal with complaints from the White House that the bureau was "leaking like a sieve." He did not want to reveal any information about the investigation that would compromise himself as the likely source.

One way that Felt covered his tracks was to demand leak investigations into Post stories that appeared to rely on FBI interviews. On Sept. 11, for example, after a Woodward and Bernstein story about illegal wiretaps, he wrote a memo forcefully reminding "all agents of the need to be most circumspect in talking about this case with anyone outside the Bureau."

Felt was walking a tightrope. A single misstep would result in his own destruction.

Under Scrutiny

"We know what's leaked and we know who leaked it," Haldeman told Nixon in a soft, almost painful, whisper on the afternoon of Oct. 19, 1972, that was picked up by hidden microphones. They were sitting in Nixon's hideaway in the Executive Office Building, across the alley from the White House.

"Somebody in the FBI?" Nixon murmured back.

"Yes, sir."

"Somebody next to Gray?"

"Mark Felt."

Nixon was shocked. "Now why the hell would he do that?"

Haldeman thought about this, as the conversation whirled around in a circle.

"I think he wants to be in the top spot."

Haldeman speculated that Felt was trying to engineer a victory for Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern, in which case Felt would have a good chance of succeeding Gray. Nixon had a different explanation. Perhaps there was a Kennedy connection.

"Is he Catholic?"

"Jewish."

"Christ, [they] put a Jew in there," exploded Nixon, who had long suspected that a cabal of liberal Jewish bureaucrats was out to undermine his administration.

"That could explain it, too."

Contrary to Haldeman's assertion, there is no evidence Felt is Jewish.

Nixon was feeling more than usually paranoid. Nine days previously, The Post had run a blockbuster article by Woodward and Bernstein outlining "a massive campaign of political spying and sabotage" by the Nixon reelection effort. The article had been inspired, at least in part, by a four-hour conversation between Woodward and Felt in the underground parking garage on Oct. 8.

The tip about Felt had come to the White House via a roundabout route. According to comments by Haldeman and other Nixon aides captured on White House tapes, the original source was Sandy Smith of Time magazine, widely considered to be the best-informed reporter covering the FBI. A Time lawyer had passed the information to Assistant Attorney General Henry Peterson, who in turn passed it on to the White House, according to the tapes.

Smith, who has Alzheimer's disease, has consistently declined to talk about his Watergate sources.

The White House tapes do not directly name the lawyer who purportedly tipped off Peterson, but they provide some strong hints. The person who best fits the description provided by Haldeman and other White House aides is Washington attorney William G. Hundley, now a partner with the firm of Akin Gump. Hundley had been retained by Time to represent Smith. He was also Peterson's best friend and frequent golfing companion.

In an interview last week, Hundley denied tipping off Peterson about Felt. He said he was "very surprised" to learn this month that Felt was Deep Throat.

On the very day that Haldeman was voicing his suspicions about Felt to Nixon, Woodward was preparing to write an explosive story naming Haldeman as one of the controllers of a secret fund used to finance political espionage. The White House seized on errors in an Oct. 25 Post story as proof that the paper's reporting on Watergate was fatally flawed. Felt was furious. When he next met Woodward in the parking garage, he scolded him for sloppy reporting.

"When you move on somebody like Haldeman, you've got to be sure you're on solid ground," Felt complained. "What a royal screw-up."

Feeling the Heat

Felt was under huge pressure to deflect White House suspicions about FBI leaks away from himself. Fortunately for Felt, the Post reporters had been talking to other sources in the bureau, including Angelo J. Lano, the Washington field office agent directly responsible for the Watergate investigation. Woodward and Bernstein were angry with Lano for allegedly providing them with bad information on the Haldeman story. They decided to get even with him by reporting him to a superior, in violation of the confidentiality understanding.

(Woodward and Bernstein provide a detailed account of this incident in "All the President's Men," without naming the agent involved. Lano's version of the incident is contained in declassified FBI files.)

In a four-page memo to Attorney General Richard D. Kleindienst, Felt came to Lano's defense, depicting him as the victim of a "vicious fabrication." He accused Woodward and Bernstein of taking Lano's comments about Haldeman "completely out of context."

Felt was feeling the heat on other fronts as well, on matters that had nothing to do with Watergate. The FBI was busy waging war against a radical group known as the Weather Underground, which had asserted responsibility for a series of bomb attacks against federal buildings. In late 1972 and early 1973, Felt approved nine black-bag jobs at homes of Weather Underground sympathizers in the New York area.

During his trial in 1980, Felt was unable to satisfactorily explain whose authority he was acting on, beyond a general instruction from Gray to hunt down the Weather Underground, "no holds barred." Convicted on a conspiracy charge, he was fined \$8,500, only to be pardoned by President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

Prosecutors later described how agents dressed in old clothes or disguised as telephone repairmen gained access to apartments by picking the locks or paying bribes to landlords. Once inside the apartments, they rummaged through desks and closets, photographing old address books, love letters and pages from diaries, in an ultimately fruitless search for clues to the hiding places of Weather Underground fugitives.

"It's hard for me to see Felt as a hero," said Jennifer Dohrn, sister of fugitive Bernardine Dohrn and one of the targets of the New York break-ins. "At the same time he was whistle-blowing against Nixon, he was authorizing FBI agents to break into my apartment. It was outrageous."

Putting Felt to the Test

Gray brushed aside the White House's suspicions of Felt. He could not believe that his loyal, supremely competent deputy was capable of such betrayal. As an old Navy man, he was inclined to take subordinates at their word. Felt flatly denied leaking "anything to anybody" when Gray finally confronted him with the allegations in January 1973.

Nixon's anger over FBI leaks reached a boiling point in a Feb. 16, 1973, meeting with Gray. The president told the acting FBI director that he needed to stop being "Mr. Nice Guy" and clean out "the whole damn place." The Germans had the right idea during World War II, Nixon told Gray, according to a declassified White House tape. If they went through a town, and one of their soldiers was hit by a sniper, "they'd line up the whole goddamned town and say, until you talk you're all getting shot. I really think that's what has to be done." At the very least, Felt should be made to take a lie detector test.

Gray, who is preparing his own account of his relationship with Felt, declined a request for an interview through his family. But Ed Gray said that his father ignored the president's demand: "He wasn't going to polygraph his own people. It was all about mutual trust, and a presumption of regularity."

Gray's refusal to administer a lie-detector test to Felt did not prevent Felt from ordering one for at least one subordinate suspected of leaking to the press, FBI records show. "He was a very, very tough guy," recalled Bob Gast, a supervisor in the espionage and intelligence division. "God forbid if you made any mistakes."

A complicating factor, according to Gray's former chief of staff, David Kinley, was that Gray was awaiting his Senate confirmation hearing as director of the FBI. He could not risk Felt going public with all the dirt about the FBI at such a politically sensitive time.

"By January 1973, we knew that Felt was leaking information about the internal workings of the FBI in an attempt to undermine Gray," Kinley said. "By that time, however, it was too late to do very much about it."

The confirmation hearings were a disaster. Gray acknowledged early on that he had been sharing FBI interviews of Watergate suspects with the White House. The final blow to his nomination came after he acknowledged destroying files that had come out of Hunt's safe in the Executive Office Building. He resigned on April 27.

The night before Gray's resignation, Felt telephoned Woodward at The Post to tell him what had happened. As Felt relayed the story, Ehrlichman and Dean had urged Gray to ensure the files "never see the light of day."

For a few brief hours, Felt allowed himself to think that he had a shot at the number one position. Both Kleindienst and Gray recommended that he be named acting director. But Nixon was adamantly opposed to the idea, and turned instead to William D. Ruckelshaus, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency.

In his autobiography, Felt notes proudly that he stood at "the top of the FBI pyramid" for 2 hours 50 minutes, the length of the interregnum between the resignation of Gray and the appointment of Ruckelshaus.

Felt and Ruckelshaus soon clashed. In his autobiography, Felt makes clear that he saw himself as the guardian of Hoover's FBI, and was "jarred by the sight of Ruckelshaus lolling in an easy chair with his feet on what I still felt was J. Edgar Hoover's desk." For his part, Ruckelshaus accused Felt of leaking information about illegal wiretaps to the New York Times.

Felt indignantly denied the charge. He in turn suspected Ruckelshaus of "playing politics" and buckling to White House demands, according to his autobiography. Ruckelshaus, now a venture capital consultant in Seattle, declines to detail the evidence against Felt, but says it was "certainly strong enough to convince me."

"I told him that I was very angry with him and suggested that he sleep on it overnight, and decide what he wanted to do," Ruckelshaus recalled. Felt resigned from the FBI the next day.

A Final Mystery

Retirement was painful for Felt. An inveterate gossip, he loved being at the center of things. After he retired, he continued to call former subordinates with tips and speculation about the latest Watergate developments, FBI records show.

Felt also kept in touch with his reporter friends. According to Woodward's account in "All the President's Men," he met with Deep Throat one last time in November 1973, five months after Felt's retirement. By now, Washington was abuzz with talk of secret White House tape recordings that could either exonerate Nixon or force him out of office. Felt told Woodward that "one or more of the tapes contained deliberate erasures."

As the search for Deep Throat turned into a Washington parlor game in the decades after Nixon's resignation, the November 1973 scoop deflected suspicions away from Felt. Several Deep Throat sleuths excluded Felt from consideration on the grounds that he could not have been informed about the erasures on the tapes, as he was long retired.

Even Nixon was fooled, according to his British biographer, Jonathan Aitken. Reassured that Felt could not have been the master leaker, he turned his attention to other candidates, including White House staff members.

In "All the President's Men," Woodward and Bernstein leave the impression that the final meeting with Deep Throat was set up in the same manner as the meetings before Felt's retirement. "In the first week of November," they write, "Woodward moved the flower pot and traveled to the underground garage."

This version of events assumes that Felt kept Woodward's apartment under daily observation long after he left the FBI, at a time when they were living on opposite sides of the Potomac.

Woodward, who has written a book about his relationship with Felt, to be published in early July, declined to explain this curiosity except to say that everything he wrote in "All the President's Men" is "accurate."

A possible explanation is suggested by Scott Armstrong, a former Senate staffer who worked with Woodward on two books, including one about Nixon's final days as president. Armstrong says it is quite likely that Felt continued to have access to inside information months after he left the FBI. But he believes that Woodward employed a literary sleight of hand to protect the identity of his source.

Armstrong says that Woodward likely did move a flowerpot around on his balcony in early November 1973. There is no reason to doubt his assertion that he traveled to an underground parking garage around the same time. But neither event was related to his meeting with Felt.

To reach the retired FBI man, Woodward probably just picked up the phone or dropped by to see him, Armstrong said.

An ironic coda to Felt's double life as loyal FBI employee and master leaker came in November 1980, when he sat across a D.C. courtroom from Nixon.

The former president had come to testify at Felt's illegal break-in trial. Interrupted by shouts of "liar" and "war criminal" from spectators, who were swiftly bundled out of the courtroom, Nixon made clear that he believed that Felt had acted properly in approving the break-ins.

A few days later, Felt received a copy of Nixon's latest book, "The Real War." On an inside page, he found the following inscription: "To Mark Felt. With appreciation for his years of service to the nation. Richard Nixon."

Research editor Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report.

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