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Deep Background

The Best-Kept Secret in Washington Nearly Stayed That Way

By Paul Farhi

Vanity Fair's big scoop almost didn't happen. It started with a cold call two years ago from John D. O'Connor, a prominent lawyer in the San Francisco Bay area, to the magazine's editor, Graydon Carter. O'Connor, according to David Friend, an editor at the magazine, said he had a client "who is Deep Throat, and he wants to come out in the pages of Vanity Fair."

And so began the drama that led to Vanity Fair's revelation yesterday that former FBI official W. Mark Felt was journalist Bob Woodward's famed anonymous source on the Watergate scandal. Woodward's subsequent confirmation filled in what former Post executive editor Ben Bradlee yesterday called "the last act, the last unknown fact" about the events that led to the downfall of President Richard Nixon.

Guessing at the identity of Deep Throat has been a Washington parlor game and journalistic sub-industry for almost 33 years. Many have tried to unmask the man who was perhaps the most famous whistleblower ever. A few have actually gotten it right.

The problem for Vanity Fair, Friend said, was that O'Connor wanted the magazine to pay Felt and Felt's family for the story -- a condition the magazine would not agree to.

O'Connor -- who had become acquainted with the Felt family through Felt's grandson, a Stanford classmate of O'Connor's daughter -- decided instead to publish Felt's account as a book. But after a year of trying to find a publisher, Friend said, O'Connor was back at Vanity Fair's doorstep.

Therein began a long and secretive process to render Felt's story into print. Although O'Connor was the lead writer, the magazine supplemented his work with research and fact-checking. It corroborated Felt's account by getting his daughter, his son, his daughter-in-law and a former companion to confirm that he had previously revealed his identity as Deep Throat.

About 15 Vanity Fair editors and staff people were eventually assigned to the story, which was code-named WIG (a corruption of "Watergate"). All of those involved signed confidentiality agreements that bound them not to reveal Felt's identity if the piece didn't meet publication standards.

The concern about leaks was such that Joan Felt, Mark Felt's daughter and a key source on the story, began referring to her father as "Joe Camel" -- an alias for a man with one of the most famous nicknames of the past 30 years. As the magazine moved toward publication, the editors used a dummy cover line to shield their story as it went to the printer: "The Car Door Slams."

Friend said neither Woodward nor his Watergate reporting partner Carl Bernstein -- a Vanity Fair contributing editor -- knew about the story until Friend e-mailed them a copy of it yesterday morning. "We felt that if we let Bob or Carl know, The Washington Post would be out before us," said Friend, who was the lead editor. In fact, The Post was scooped, after keeping Felt's secret for more than three decades.

Post Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr. said yesterday that Woodward "did the honorable thing by sticking by his confidentiality agreement" with Felt. "He had agreed not to reveal his identity until [Deep Throat] released him from his pledge or the source died, and he did that."

Although Woodward had checked in with the Felt family periodically, and is writing a book about his relationship with Deep Throat, Downie said Woodward was never told by Felt or his family that he was going public. "Bob was really kind of helpless" because Felt never indicated that their agreement was over, said Downie, who rushed back to Washington from a corporate meeting on the Eastern Shore when the story broke yesterday.

Woodward and The Post decided to confirm Vanity Fair's story yesterday because "Felt's family and lawyer made their decision for him, and we had no choice," Downie said.

The mystery and celebrity of Deep Throat grew for three reasons: His revelations were critical in keeping Woodward and Bernstein focused on the Watergate story; his shadowy portrayal by actor Hal Holbrook in the Oscar-winning "All the President's Men" in 1976; and the fact that his identity was so closely held for so many years. Bradlee said that until recently, he, Bernstein, Woodward and Woodward's wife, Elsa, were the only people other than Felt who could confirm Felt's secret.

Bradlee said neither Katharine Graham, the late chairman and chief executive of The Washington Post Co., nor her son and successor, Donald Graham, asked him for Deep Throat's identity. "I don't think I would have told them if they had," he said. "It's classy that they didn't ask."

Vanity Fair's story hinted at but did not answer a key journalistic question: Was Felt, who is 91 and in ill health from a stroke, of sound enough mind to have confirmed his identity to O'Connor, or to have told Woodward that their agreement had ended?

The Vanity Fair story muddies the issue somewhat. O'Connor notes in the story that Felt told him, "I'm the guy they called Deep Throat," but the context is lacking. For one thing, O'Connor played a dual role: He was providing the Felt family with legal advice while also writing a magazine story, which meant that Felt's revelation may have been information provided under attorney-client privilege and therefore not subject to unilateral disclosure.

What's more, as O'Connor makes clear in his story, the Felt family was seeking to profit from Felt's secret identity and therefore had an incentive to pressure a clearly conflicted Felt into going public.

Up until yesterday, two of the best investigations into Deep Throat's identity have come from former Washington Post journalists, both of whom worked for the paper during the Watergate years, 1972 to 1974.

James Mann, now an author-in-residence at the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, published his speculation in the Atlantic magazine in 1992, around the 20th anniversary of the Watergate break-in. Mann didn't know who Deep Throat was, but he narrowed the field to an FBI official -- in part, because Woodward himself had mentioned this fact in conversation, according to Mann.

But Mann added his own corroborating analysis: "For a senior FBI official like Deep Throat, talking to Woodward and The Post about Watergate was a way to fend off White House interference with the [FBI's] investigation. The contacts with the press guaranteed that information developed by the FBI's Watergate investigative team would not be suppressed or altered by Nixon Administration officials. And, more broadly, the leaks furthered the cause of an independent FBI unfettered by political control."

Deep Throat, wrote Mann, "could well have been Mark Felt, who admitted that he harbored ambitions to be the FBI director [but was thwarted when Nixon appointed L. Patrick Gray]. . . . Felt was known in Washington as a person willing to talk to the press." Mann's speculation about Felt was subsequently championed by Slate's Tim Noah, in a series of columns dating back to mid-1999.

Problem was, despite personal and professional reasons to leak to Woodward, Felt has long denied that he was Deep Throat. He denied it when Noah asked him directly in 1999, just as he denied it in his 1979 memoir, "The FBI Pyramid." Wrote Felt: "I never leaked information to Woodward and Bernstein or to anyone else!"

Tantalizing clues have emerged over the years. In his book, "The Bureau: The Secret History of the FBI," Ronald Kessler, a former Post reporter, recounted a

meeting between Woodward and Felt in the summer of 1999. Woodward had shown up unexpectedly at the home of Felt and his daughter, Joan, in Santa Rosa, Calif., parking his limousine several blocks away in an apparent effort not to be seen and thus raise questions about his relationship with Felt. Kessler's anecdote also leads off Vanity Fair's story.

Over the years, other writers have misfired in identifying Deep Throat: Nixon's White House counsel, John Dean, has made several guesses since 1975, all of them wrong. The University of Illinois, in a journalism project involving faculty and students, named Nixon deputy White House counsel Fred Fielding in 2003. Leonard Garment, a special counsel to Nixon during the Watergate years and author of the 2000 book "In Search of Deep Throat," speculated in his book that the source was John Sears, a former deputy special counsel to Nixon. "I would have to apologize to John Sears for any embarrassment I caused him," said Garment, reached by phone yesterday at his home in Manhattan. Garment, who said he had not read the Vanity Fair story, added that Felt was considered a "prime candidate by many people" and that he himself had not spoken to Felt. "When all is said and done, it will be a relief to everyone to have this settled," Garment said.

Staff writer Mark Leibovich contributed to this report.