



# "I'm the Guy They Called Deep Throat"

BY JOHN D. O'CONNOR

In a *V.F.* exclusive, W. Mark Felt, 91 years old and formerly second-in-command at the F.B.I., says that he is the confidential Watergate source who assisted *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein—and helped bring down President Richard Nixon

On a sunny California morning in August 1999, Joan Felt, a busy college Spanish professor and single mother, was completing chores before leaving for class. She stopped when she heard an unexpected knock at the front door. Upon answering it, she was met by a courteous, 50-ish man, who introduced himself as a journalist from *The Washington Post*. He asked if he could see her father, W. Mark Felt, who lived with her in her suburban Santa Rosa home. The man said his name was Bob Woodward.

Woodward's name did not register with Joan, and she assumed he was no different from a number of other reporters, who had called that week. This was, after all, the 25th anniversary of the resignation of President Richard Nixon, disgraced in the scandal known as Watergate, and hounded from office in 1974. The journalists had all been asking whether her father—the number-two man in the F.B.I. during the Watergate years—was "Deep Throat," the legendary inside informant who, on the condition of anonymity, had systematically passed along clues about White House misdeeds to two young reporters. Joan figured that similar phone calls were probably being placed to a handful of other Deep Throat candidates.

These names, over the years, had become part of a parlor game among historians: Who in the top echelons of government had mustered the courage to leak secrets to the press? Who had sought to expose the Nixon administration's conspiracy to obstruct justice through its massive campaign of political espionage and its subsequent cover-up? Who, indeed, had helped bring about the most serious constitutional crisis since the 1868 impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson—and, in the process, changed the fate of the nation?

Joan was suddenly curious. Unlike the others, this reporter had come by in person. What's more, he claimed to be a friend of her father's. Joan excused herself and spoke to her dad. He was 86 at the time, alert though clearly diminished by the years. Joan told him about the stranger at the door and was surprised when he readily agreed to see "Bob."

She ushered him in, excused herself, and the two men talked for half an hour, Joan recalls. Then she invited them to join her for a drive to the market nearby. "Bob sat in the backseat," she says. "I asked him about his life, his job. He said he'd been out here on the West Coast covering [Arizona senator] John McCain's [presidential] campaign and was in Sacramento or Fresno"—four hours away—"and thought he'd stop by. He looked about my age. I thought, Gee, [he's] attractive. Pleasant too. Too bad this guy isn't single."

Woodward and Felt waited in the car while Joan popped into the grocery store. On the way home, Joan remembers, Woodward asked her, "Would it be all right to take your dad to lunch and have a drink?" She agreed. And so, once back at the house, Woodward left to get his car.

Joan, always looking after her dad's health, realized she should probably caution Woodward to limit her father to one or two drinks. Yet when she opened the front door, she could find neither the reporter nor his car. Puzzled, she decided to drive around the neighborhood, only to discover him outside the Felts' subdivision, walking into a parking lot of a junior high school some eight blocks from the house. He was just about to enter a chauffeured limousine. Joan, however, was too polite to ask Woodward why he had chosen to park there. Or why, for that matter, he had come in a limo.

That night her father was ebullient about the lunch, recounting how "Bob" and he had downed martinis. Joan found it all a bit odd. Her father had been dodging reporters all week, but had seemed totally comfortable with this one. And why had Woodward taken such precautions? Joan trusted her instincts. Though she still hadn't made the connection between Woodward, *The Washington Post*, and the Watergate scandal, she was convinced that this was a less than serendipitous visit.

Sure enough, in the years to follow, Mark Felt and his daughter, along with Joan's brother, Mark junior, and her son Nick, would continue to communicate with Woodward by phone (and in several e-mail exchanges) as Felt progressed into his 90s. Felt suffered a mild stroke in 2001. His mental faculties began to deteriorate a bit. But he kept his spirit and sense of humor. And always, say Joan, aged 61, and Mark junior, 58, Woodward remained gracious and friendly, occasionally inquiring about Felt's health. "As you may recall," Woodward e-mailed Joan in August of 2004, "my father [is] also approaching 91. [He] seems happy—the goal for all of us. Best to everyone, Bob."

Three years after Woodward's visit, my wife, Jan, and I happened to be hosting a rather lively dinner for my daughter Christy, a college junior, and seven of her friends from Stanford. The atmosphere had the levity and intensity of a reunion, as several of the students had just

returned from sabbaticals in South America. Jan served her typical Italian-style feast with large platters of pasta, grilled chicken, and vegetables, and plenty of beer and wine. Our house, in Marin County, overlooks the San Rafael Hills, and the setting that spring evening was perfect for trading stories about faraway trips.

Nick Jones, a friend of Christy's whom I had known for three years, listened as I related a story about my father, an attorney who had begun his career in Rio during World War II by serving as an undercover F.B.I. agent. When talk turned to the allure and intrigue of Rio in the 40s, Nick mentioned that his grandfather, also a lawyer, had joined the bureau around that time and had gone on to become a career agent. "What's his name?," I asked.

"You may have heard of him," he said. "He was a pretty senior guy in the F.B.I. ... Mark Felt."

I was blown away. Here was an enterprising kid who was working his way through school. He reminded me of myself in a way: an energetic overachiever whose father, like Nick's grandfather, had served as an intelligence agent. (Nick and I were both good high-school athletes. I went to Notre Dame, the University of Michigan Law School, class of '72, then joined the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Francisco, ultimately landing at a highly respected Bay Area law firm.) I had taken Nick under my wing, encouraging him to consider studying to become a lawyer. And yet I had no idea that his grandfather was the same guy—long rumored as the infamous Deep Throat—whom I'd heard about for years from my days as a federal prosecutor. Felt had even worked with my early mentor, William Ruckelshaus, most famous for his role in the so-called Saturday Night Massacre, of 1973. (When Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox subpoenaed nine Nixon tape recordings that he had secretly made in the Oval Office, the president insisted that Cox be fired. Rather than dismiss Cox, Nixon's attorney general, Elliot Richardson, and his deputy, Ruckelshaus, resigned in protest, becoming national heroes.)

Deep Throat, in fact, had been the hero who started it all—along with the two reporters he assisted, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (both of whom would go on to make their journalistic reputations, and riches, through their Watergate revelations). And my daughter's friend, I suspected, was the famous source's grandson. "Mark Felt!," I exclaimed. "You're kidding me. Your granddad is Deep Throat! Did you know that?"

Nick answered calmly, and maybe with an air of uncertainty, "You know, Big John, I've heard that for a long time. Just recently we've started to think maybe it's him."

We let the subject drop that night, turning to other matters. But a few days later Nick phoned and asked me, in my role as an attorney, to come over and meet his grandfather. Nick and his mother wanted to discuss the wisdom of Felt's coming forward. Felt, Nick said, had recently admitted his secret identity, privately, to intimates, after years of hiding the truth even from his family. But Felt was adamant about remaining silent on the subject—until his death—thinking his past disclosures somehow dishonorable.

Joan and Nick, however, considered him a true patriot. They were beginning to realize that it might make sense to enlist someone from the outside to help him tell his story, his way, *before* he passed away, unheralded and forgotten.

I agreed to see Mark Felt later that week.

The identity of Deep Throat is modern journalism's greatest unsolved mystery. It has been said that he may be the most famous anonymous person in U.S. history. But, regardless of his notoriety, American society today owes a considerable debt to the government official who decided, at great personal risk, to help Woodward and Bernstein as they pursued the hidden truths of Watergate.

First, some background. In the early-morning hours of June 17, 1972, five "burglars" were caught breaking into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate complex, along the Potomac River. Two members of the team were found to have address books with scribbles "W. House" and "W.H." They were operating, as it turned out, on the orders of E. Howard Hunt, a onetime C.I.A. agent who had recently worked in the White House, and G. Gordon Liddy, an ex-F.B.I. agent who was on the payroll of the Committee to Re-elect the President (CRP, pronounced Creep, which was organizing Nixon's run against Senator George McGovern, the South Dakota Democrat).

Funds for the break-in, laundered through a Mexican bank account, had actually come from the coffers of CRP, headed by John Mitchell, who had been attorney general during Nixon's first term. Following the break-in, suspicions were raised throughout Washington: What were five men with Republican connections doing with gloves, cameras, large amounts of cash, and bugging equipment in the Democrats' top campaign office?

The case remained in the headlines thanks to the dogged reporting of an unlikely team of journalists, both in their late 20s: Carl Bernstein, a scruffy college dropout and six-year veteran of the *Post* (now a writer, lecturer, and *Vanity Fair* contributor), and Bob Woodward, an ex-navy officer and Yale man (now a celebrated author and *Post* assistant managing editor). The heat was also kept on because of a continuing F.B.I. investigation, headed by the bureau's acting associate director, Mark Felt, whose teams interviewed 86 administration and CRP staffers. These sessions, however, were quickly undermined. The White House and CRP had ordered that their lawyers be present at every meeting. Felt believed that the C.I.A. deliberately gave the F.B.I. false leads. And most of the bureau's "write-ups" of the interviews were being secretly passed on to Nixon counsel John Dean—by none other than Felt's new boss, L. Patrick Gray. (Gray, the acting F.B.I. director, had taken over after J. Edgar Hoover's death, six weeks before the break-in.) Throughout this period, the Nixon camp denied any White House or CRP involvement in the Watergate affair. And after a three-month "investigation" there was no evidence to implicate any White House staffers.

The Watergate probe appeared to be at an impasse, the break-in having been explained away as a private extortion scheme that didn't extend beyond the suspects in custody. McGovern couldn't gain campaign traction with the issue, and the president was re-elected in November 1972 by an overwhelming majority.

But during that fateful summer and fall, at least one government official was determined not to let Watergate fade away. That man was Woodward's well-placed source. In an effort to keep the Watergate affair in the news, Deep Throat had been consistently confirming or denying confidential information for the reporter, which he and Bernstein would weave into their frequent stories, often on the *Post's* front page.

Ever cautious, Woodward and Deep Throat devised cloak-and-dagger methods to avoid tails and eavesdroppers during their numerous rendezvous. If Woodward needed to initiate a meeting, he would position an empty flowerpot (which contained a red construction flag) to the rear of his apartment balcony. If Deep Throat was the instigator, the hands of a clock would mysteriously appear on page 20 of Woodward's copy of *The New York Times*, which was delivered before seven each morning. Then they would connect at the appointed hour in an underground parking garage. (Woodward would always take two cabs and then walk a short distance to their meetings.) The garage afforded Deep Throat a darkened venue for hushed conversation, a clear view of any potential intruders, and a quick escape route.

Whoever Deep Throat might have been, he was certainly a public official in private turmoil. As the two *Post* reporters would explain in their 1974 behind-the-scenes book about Watergate, *All the President's Men*, Deep Throat lived in solitary dread, under the constant threat of being summarily fired or even indicted, with no colleagues in whom he could confide. He was justifiably suspicious that phones had been wiretapped, rooms bugged, and papers rifled. He was completely isolated, having placed his career and his institution in jeopardy. Eventually, Deep Throat would even warn Woodward and Bernstein that he had reason to believe "everyone's life is in danger"—meaning Woodward's, Bernstein's, and, presumably, his own.

In the months that followed, the *Post's* exposés continued unabated in the face of mounting White House pressure and protest. Deep Throat, having become more enraged with the administration, grew more bold. Instead of merely corroborating facts that the two reporters obtained from other sources, he began providing leads and outlining an administration-sanctioned conspiracy. (In the film version of the book, Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman would portray Woodward and Bernstein, while Hal Holbrook assumed the Deep Throat role.)

Soon public outcry grew. Other media outlets began to investigate in earnest. The Senate convened riveting televised hearings in 1973, and when key players such as John Dean cut immunity deals, the entire plot unraveled. President Nixon, it turned out, had tape-recorded many of the meetings where strategies had been hashed out—and the cover-up discussed (in violation of obstruction-of-justice laws). On August 8, 1974, with the House of Representatives clearly moving toward impeachment, the president announced his resignation, and more than 30 government and campaign officials in and around the Nixon White House would ultimately plead guilty to or be convicted of crimes. In brief, Watergate had reaffirmed that no person, not even the president of the United States, is above the law.

Due in no small part to the secrets revealed by the *Post*, sometimes in consort with Deep Throat, the courts and the Congress have been loath to grant a sitting president free rein, and are generally wary of administrations that might try to impede access to White House documents in the name of "executive privilege." Watergate helped set in motion what would become known as the "independent counsel" law (for investigating top federal officials) and helped make whistle-blowing (on wrongdoings in business and government) a legally sanctioned, if still risky and courageous, act. Watergate invigorated an independent press, virtually spawning a generation of investigative journalists.

And yet, ever since the political maelstrom of Nixon's second term, Deep Throat has declined to reveal himself. He has kept quiet through seven presidencies and despite an anticipated fortune that might have come his way from a tell-all book, film, or television special. Woodward has said that Deep Throat wished to remain anonymous until death, and he pledged to keep his source's confidence, as he has for more than a generation. (Officially, Deep Throat's identity has been known only to Woodward, Bernstein, their former editor Ben Bradlee—and to Deep Throat himself.)

In *All the President's Men*, the authors described their source as a man of passion and contradiction: "Aware of his own weaknesses, he readily conceded his flaws. He was, incongruously, an incurable gossip, careful to label rumor for what it was, but fascinated by it. ... He could be rowdy, drink too much, overreach. He was not good at concealing his feelings, hardly ideal for a man in his position." Even though he was a Washington creature he was "worn out" by years of bureaucratic battles, a man disenchanted with the "switchblade mentality" of the Nixon White House and its tactics of politicizing governmental agencies. Deep Throat was someone in an "extremely sensitive" position, possessing "an aggregate of hard information flowing in and out of many stations," while at the same time quite wary of his role as a confidential source. "Deep Throat," noted Woodward in a lecture in 2003, "lied to his family, to his friends, and colleagues, denying that he had helped us."

And as the years went on, Joan Felt had really begun to wonder whether her father might just be this courageous but tortured man.

Born in Twin Falls, Idaho, in 1913, Mark Felt came of age at a time when the F.B.I. agent was an archetypal patriot—a crime-fighter in a land that had been torn by war, the Depression, and Mob violence. Raised in modest circumstances, the outgoing, take-charge Felt worked his way through the University of Idaho (where he was head of his fraternity) and the George Washington University Law School, married another Idaho grad, Audrey Robinson, then joined the bureau in 1942.

Dapper, charming, and handsome, with a full head of sandy hair that grayed attractively over the years, Felt resembled actor Lloyd Bridges. He was a registered Democrat (who turned Republican during the Reagan years) with a conservative bent and a common man's law-and-order streak. Often relocating his family, he would come to speak at each new school that Joan Felt attended—wearing a shoulder holster, hidden under his pinstripes. In the bureau, he was popular with supervisors and underlings alike, and enjoyed both scotch and bourbon, though he was ever mindful of Hoover's edicts about his agents' sobriety. Felt helped curb the Kansas City Mob as that city's special agent in charge, using tactics both aggressive and innovative, then was named second-in-command of the bureau's training division in 1962. Felt mastered the art of succinct, just-the-facts-ma'am memo writing, which appealed to the meticulous Hoover, who made him one of his closest protégés. In 1971, in a move to rein in his power-seeking head of domestic intelligence, William C. Sullivan, Hoover promoted Felt to a newly created position overseeing Sullivan, vaulting Felt to prominence.

While Felt rose through the ranks, his daughter, Joan, became decidedly anti-Establishment. As Joan's lifestyle changed, her father quietly but strongly disapproved, telling her that she and her peers reminded him of radical Weather Underground members—a faction he happened to be in the process of hunting down. Joan cut off contact with her parents for a time (she has been reconciled with her dad for more than 25 years now), retreating to a commune where, with a movie camera rolling, she gave birth to her first son, Ludi (Nick's brother, now called Will), a scene used in the 1974 documentary *The Birth of Ludi*. On one occasion her parents arrived at Joan's farm for a visit, only to find her and a friend sitting naked in the sun, breast-feeding their babies.

Joan's brother, Mark junior, a commercial pilot and retired air-force lieutenant colonel, says that at that stage their father was utterly absorbed in his work. "By the time he'd got to Washington," Mark recalls, "he worked six days a week, got home, had dinner, and went to bed. He believed in the F.B.I. more than anything else he believed in in his life." For a time, Mark says, his dad also served as an unpaid technical adviser to the popular 60s TV program *The F.B.I.*, occasionally going onto the set with Efrem Zimbalist Jr., who played an agent with responsibilities similar to Felt's. "He was a cool character," says the younger Felt, "willing to take risks and go outside of the rule book to get the job done."

In his little-known 1979 memoir, *The F.B.I. Pyramid*, co-written with Ralph de Toledano, Felt comes across as a down-to-earth counterpart to the imperious Hoover—a man Felt deeply respected. Hoover, in Felt's view, was "charismatic, feisty, charming, petty, giant, grandiose, brilliant, egotistical, industrious, formidable, compassionate, domineering"; he possessed a "puritanical" streak, the bearing of an "inflexible martinet," and obsessive habits. ("Hoover insisted on the same seats in the plane, the same rooms in the same hotels. [He had an] immaculate appearance ... as if he had shaved, showered, and put on a freshly pressed suit for [every] occasion.") Felt, a more sociable figure, was still a man in the Hoover mold: disciplined, fiercely loyal to the men under his command, and resistant to any force that tried to compromise the bureau. Felt came to see himself, in fact, as something of a conscience of the F.B.I.

Well before Hoover's death, relations between the Nixon camp and the F.B.I. deteriorated. In 1971, Felt was called to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The president, Felt was told, had begun "climbing the walls" because someone (a government insider, Nixon believed) was leaking details to *The New York Times* about the administration's strategy for upcoming arms talks with the Soviets. Nixon's aides wanted the bureau to find the culprits, either through wiretaps or by insisting that suspects submit to lie-detector tests. Such leaks led the White House to begin employing ex-C.I.A. types to do their own, homespun spying, creating its nefarious "Plumbers" unit, to which the Watergate cadre belonged.

Felt arrived at the White House to confront an odd gathering. Egil "Bud" Krogh Jr., deputy assistant for domestic affairs, presided, and attendees included ex-spy E. Howard Hunt and Robert Mardian, an assistant attorney general—"a balding little man," Felt recalled, "dressed in what looked like work clothes and dirty tennis shoes ... shuffling about the room, arranging the chairs and I [first] took him to be a member of the cleaning staff." (Mardian had been summoned to the West Wing from a weekend tennis game.) According to Felt, once the meeting began, Felt expressed resistance to the idea of wiretapping suspected leakers without a court order.

After the session, which ended with no clear resolution, Krogh's group began to have reason to suspect a single Pentagon employee. Nixon, nonetheless, demanded that "four or five hundred people in State, Defense, and so forth [also be polygraphed] so that we can immediately scare the bastards." Two days later, as Felt wrote in his book, he was relieved when Krogh told him that the administration had decided to let "the Agency," not the F.B.I., "handle the polygraph interviews. ... Obviously, John Ehrlichman [Krogh's boss, Nixon's top domestic-policy adviser, and the head of the Plumbers unit] had decided to 'punish' the Bureau for what he saw as its lack of cooperation and its refusal to get involved in the work which the 'Plumbers' later undertook."

In 1972, tensions between the institutions deepened when Hoover and Felt resisted White House pressure to have the F.B.I. forensics lab declare a particularly damning memo a forgery—as a way of exonerating the administration in a corruption scandal. Believing that trumped-up forgery findings were improper, and trying to sustain the reputation of the F.B.I. lab, Felt claimed to have refused entreaties by John Dean. (The episode took on elements of the absurd when Hunt, wearing an ill-fitting red wig, showed up in Denver in an effort to extract information from Dita Beard, the communications lobbyist who had supposedly written the memo.)

Clearly, Felt harbored increasing contempt for this curious crew at the White House, whom he saw as intent on utilizing the Justice Department for their political ends. What's more, Hoover, who had died that May, was no longer around to protect Felt or the bureau's Old Guard, the F.B.I. chief having been replaced by an interim successor, L. Patrick Gray, a Republican lawyer who hoped to permanently land Hoover's job. Gray, with his eyes on that prize, chose to leave an increasingly frustrated Felt in charge of the F.B.I.'s day-to-day operations. Then came the break-in, and a pitched battle began. "We seemed to be continually at odds with the White House about almost everything," Felt wrote, regarding the dark days of 1972. He soon came to believe that he was fighting an all-out war for the soul of the bureau.

As the F.B.I. pushed on with its Watergate investigation, the White House threw up more and more barriers. When Felt and his team believed they could "trace the source of the money that had been in the possession of the Watergate 'burglars'" to a bank in Mexico City, Gray, according to Felt, "flatly ordered [Felt] to call off any interviews" in Mexico because they "might upset" a C.I.A. operation there. Felt and his key deputies sought a meeting with Gray. "Look," Felt recalled telling his boss, "the reputation of the FBI is at stake. ... Unless we get a request in writing [from the C.I.A.] to forgo the [Mexico] interview, we're going ahead anyway!"

"That's not all," Felt supposedly added. "We must do something about the complete lack of cooperation from John Dean and the Committee to Reelect the President. It's obvious they're holding back—delaying and leading us astray in every way they know. We expect this sort of thing when we are investigating organized crime. ... The whole thing is going to explode right in the President's face."

At a subsequent meeting, according to Felt, Gray asked whether the investigation could be confined to "these seven subjects," referring to the five burglars, plus Hunt and Liddy. Felt responded, "We will be going much higher than these seven. These men are the pawns. We want the ones who moved the pawns." Agreeing with his team, Gray chose to stay the course and continue the probe.

Felt's book gives no indication that during this same period he decided to go outside the bounds of government to expose the corruption within Nixon's team—or to overcome the impediments they were placing on his ability to do his job. There are only scant clues that he might have decided to pass along secrets to *The Washington Post*; in fact, Felt makes a point of categorically denying he is Deep Throat. But, in truth, the White House had begun asking for Felt's head, even though Gray adamantly defended his deputy. Felt would write:

Gray confided to me, "You know, Mark, [Attorney General] Dick Kleindienst told me that I might have to get rid of you. He says White House staff members are convinced that you are the FBI source of leaks to Woodward and Bernstein." ...

I said, "Pat, I haven't leaked anything to anybody. They are wrong!" ...

"I believe you," Gray answered, "but the White House doesn't. Kleindienst has told me on three or four occasions to get rid of you but I refused. He didn't say this came from higher up but I am convinced that it did."

It is clear from the Watergate tapes that Felt was indeed one of the targets of Nixon's wrath. In October 1972, Nixon insisted he would "fire the whole Goddamn Bureau," and singled out Felt, whom he thought to be part of a plot to undermine him through frequent press leaks. "Is he a Catholic?" he asked his trusted adviser H. R. Haldeman, who replied that Felt was Jewish. (Felt, of Irish descent, is not Jewish and claims no religious affiliation.) Nixon, who sometimes suggested that a Jewish conspiracy might be at the root of his problems, seemed surprised. "Christ," he said, "[the bureau] put a Jew in there? ... It could be the Jewish thing. I don't know. It's always a possibility."

It was Gray, however, not Felt, who became the fall guy. At Gray's confirmation hearings, in February 1973, he was abandoned by his onetime allies in the West Wing and was left to "twist slowly, slowly in the wind," in the words of Nixon aide John Ehrlichman. With Gray now gone, Felt had lost his last sponsor and protector. Next up was interim F.B.I. director Ruckelshaus, who ultimately resigned as assistant attorney general in Nixon's Saturday Night Massacre. Felt left the bureau that same year and went on the lecture circuit.

Then, in 1978, Felt was indicted on charges of having authorized illegal F.B.I. break-ins earlier in the decade, in which agents without warrants entered the residences of associates and family members of suspected bombers believed to be involved with the Weather Underground. The career agent was arraigned as hundreds of F.B.I. colleagues, outside the courthouse, demonstrated on his behalf. Felt, over the strong objections of his lawyers that the jury had been improperly instructed, claimed that he was following established law-enforcement procedures for break-ins when national security was at stake. Even so, Felt was convicted two years later. Then, in a stroke of good fortune while his case was on appeal, Ronald Reagan was elected president and, in 1981, gave Felt a full pardon.

Felt and his wife had always looked forward to a retirement where they could live comfortably and bask proudly in his accomplishments. But as he endured years of courtroom travails, they both felt betrayed by the country he had served. Audrey, always an intense person, suffered profound stress, anxiety, and nervous exhaustion, which both of them bitterly blamed on his legal troubles. Long after her early passing, in 1984, Felt continued to cite the strain of his prosecution as a major factor in the death of his wife.

A week after our festive dinner in 2002, Nick Jones introduced me to his mother, Joan Felt—dynamic and open-minded, high-strung and overworked, proud and protective of her father, slim and attractive (she had been an actress for a time)—and to his grandfather. Felt, then 88, was a chipper, easygoing man with a hearty laugh and an enviable shock of white hair. His eyes sparkled and his handshake was firm. Though he required the assistance of a metal walker on his daily rounds, having sustained a stroke the year before, he was nonetheless engaged and engaging.

I soon realized the urgency behind Nick's request. A few weeks before—possibly in anticipation of the 30th anniversary of the Watergate break-in—a reporter for the *Globe* tabloid, Dawna Kaufmann, had called Joan to ask whether her father was actually Deep Throat. Joan talked briefly about Woodward's mysterious visit three years before. Kaufmann then wrote a piece headlined DEEP THROAT EXPOSED! In her story she quoted a young man by the name of Chase Culeman-Beckman. He had claimed, in a 1999 *Hartford Courant* article, that while attending summer camp in 1988 a young friend of his named Jacob Bernstein—the son of Carl Bernstein and writer Nora Ephron—had divulged a secret, mentioning that his father had told him that a man named Mark Felt was the infamous Deep Throat. Ephron and Bernstein, divorced by 1999, both asserted that Felt was the favorite suspect of Ephron's, and that Bernstein had never disclosed Deep

Throat's identity. According to Bernstein's response at the time, their son was simply repeating his mother's guess. (When approached by reporters speculating about Deep Throat's identity, Woodward and Bernstein have consistently refused to divulge it.)

Soon after the *Globe* article appeared, Joan Felt received a frantic phone call from Yvette La Garde. During the late 1980s, following his wife's death, Felt and La Garde had become close friends and frequent social companions. "Why is he announcing it now?" a worried La Garde asked Joan. "I thought he wouldn't be revealed until he was dead."

Joan pounced. "Announcing what?" she wanted to know.

La Garde, apparently sensing that Joan did not know the truth, pulled back, then finally owned up to the secret she had kept for years. Felt, La Garde said, had confided to her that he had indeed been Woodward's source, but had sworn her to silence. Joan then confronted her father, who initially denied it. "I know now that you're Deep Throat," she remembers telling him, explaining La Garde's disclosure. His response: "Since that's the case, well, yes, I am." Then and there, she pleaded with him to announce his role immediately so that he could have some closure, and accolades, while he was still alive. Felt reluctantly agreed, then changed his mind. He seemed determined to take his secret with him to the grave.

But it turned out that Yvette La Garde had also told others. A decade before, she had shared her secret with her eldest son, Mickey, now retired—a fortunate confidant, given his work as an army lieutenant colonel based at NATO military headquarters (requiring a top-secret security clearance). Mickey La Garde says he has remained mum about the revelation ever since: "My mom's condo unit was in Watergate and I'd see Mark," he recalls. "In one of those visits, in 1987 or '88, she confided to [my wife] Dee and I that Mark had, in fact, been the Deep Throat that brought down the Nixon administration. I don't think Mom's ever told anyone else."

Dee La Garde, a C.P.A. and government auditor, corroborates her husband's account. "She confessed it," Dee recalls. "The three of us might have been at the kitchen table in her apartment. There's no question in my mind that she identified him. You're the first person I've discussed this with besides my husband."

The day of her father's grand admission, Joan left for class, and Felt went for a ride with Atama Batisaresare, an assisted-living aide. Felt, as a rule, exhibited a calm demeanor, letting his thoughts wander from one topic to another. On this trip, however, so Batisaresare later told Joan and me, Felt became highly agitated and focused on one subject, which sort of came out of the blue. The caregiver now recalls, in his thick Fijian accent, "He did tell me, 'An F.B.I. man should have loyalty to the department.' He talked about loyalty. He didn't mention he was a Deep Throat. He told me he didn't want to do it, but 'it was my duty to do it, regarding Nixon.'" (Felt would frequently return to this theme. While watching a Watergate TV special that month, he and Joan heard his name come up as a Deep Throat candidate. Joan, trying to elicit a response, deliberately questioned her father in the third person: "Do you think Deep Throat wanted to get rid of Nixon?" Joan says that Felt replied, "No, I wasn't trying to bring him down." He claimed, instead, that he was "only doing his duty.")

On that Sunday in May when I first met Mark Felt, he was particularly concerned about how bureau personnel, then and now, had come to regard Deep Throat. He seemed to be struggling inside with whether he would be seen as a decent man or a turncoat. I stressed that F.B.I. agents and prosecutors now thought Deep Throat a patriot, not a rogue. And I emphasized that one of the reasons he might want to announce his identity would be for the very purpose of telling the story from his point of view.

Still, I could see he was equivocating. "He was amenable at first," his grandson Nick recalls. "Then he was wavering. He was concerned about bringing dishonor to our family. We thought it was totally cool. It was more about honor than about any kind of shame [to] Grandpa. ... To this day, he feels he did the right thing."

At the end of our conversation, Felt seemed inclined to reveal himself, but refused to commit. "I'll think about what you have said, and I'll let you know of my decision," he told me very firmly that day. In the meantime, I told him, I would take on his cause pro bono, helping him find a reputable publisher if he decided to go that route. (I have written this piece, in fact, after witnessing the decline of Felt's health and mental acuity, and after receiving his and Joan's permission to reveal this information, normally protected by provisions of lawyer-client privilege. The Felts were not paid for cooperating with this story.)

Our talks dragged on, however. Felt told Joan that he had other worries. He wondered "what the judge would think" (meaning: were he to expose his past, might he leave himself open to prosecution for his actions?). He seemed genuinely conflicted. Joan took to discussing the issue in a circumspect way, sometimes referring to Deep Throat by yet another code name, Joe Camel. Nevertheless, the more we talked, the more forthright Felt became. On several occasions he confided to me, "I'm the guy they used to call Deep Throat."

He also opened up to his son. In previous years, when Felt's name had come up as a Deep Throat suspect, Felt had always bristled. "His attitude was: I don't think [being Deep Throat] was anything to be *proud* of," Mark junior says. "You [should] not leak information to *anyone*." Now his father was admitting he had done just that. "Making the decision [to go to the press] would have been difficult, painful, and excruciating, and outside the bounds of his life's work. He would not have done it if he didn't feel it was the *only* way to get around the corruption in the White House and Justice Department. He was tortured inside, but never would show it. He was not this Hal Holbrook character. He was not an edgy person. [Even though] it would be the most difficult decision of his life, he wouldn't have pined over it."

At one lunch at a scenic restaurant overlooking the Pacific, Joan and Mark sat their father down to lay out the case for full, public disclosure. Felt argued with them, according to his son, warning them not to betray him. "I don't want this out," Felt said. "And if it got in the papers, I'd guess I'd know who put it there." But they persisted. They explained that they wanted their father's legacy to be heroic and

permanent, not anonymous. And beyond their main motive—posterity—they thought that there might eventually be some profit in it. "Bob Woodward's gonna get all the glory for this, but we could make at least enough money to pay some bills, like the debt I've run up for the kids' education," Joan recalls saying. "Let's do it for the family." With that, both children remember, he finally agreed. "He wasn't particularly interested," Mark says, "but he said, 'That's a good reason.'"

Felt had come to an interim decision: he would "cooperate," but only with the assistance of Bob Woodward. Acceding to his wishes, Joan and I spoke to Woodward by phone on a half-dozen occasions over a period of months about whether to make a joint revelation, possibly in the form of a book or an article. Woodward would sometimes begin these conversations with a caveat, saying, more or less, "Just because I'm talking to you, I'm not admitting that he is who you think he is." Then he'd express his chief concerns, which were twofold, as I recall. First, was this something that Joan and I were pushing on Felt, or did he actually want to reveal himself of his own accord? (I interpreted this to mean: was he changing the long-standing agreement the men had kept for three decades?) Second, was Felt actually in a clear mental state? To make his own assessment, Woodward told Joan and me, he wanted to come out and sit down with her father again, not having seen him since their lunch.

"We went through a period where he did call a bit," Joan says of her discussions with Woodward. (Nick says he sometimes answered the phone and spoke with him, too.) "He's always been very gracious. We talked about doing a book with Dad, and I think he was considering. That was my understanding. He didn't say no at first. ... Then he kept kind of putting me off on this book, saying, 'Joan, don't press me.' ... For him the issue was competency: was Dad competent to release him from the agreement the two of them had made not to say anything until after Dad died? At one point I said, 'Bob, just between you and me, off the record, I want you to confirm: was Deep Throat my dad?' He wouldn't do that. I said, 'If he's not, you can at least tell me that. We could put this to rest.' And he said, 'I can't do that.'"

Joan says that during this period Woodward had at least two phone conversations with Felt "without anyone else listening. Dad's memory gradually has deteriorated since the original lunch they had, [but] Dad remembered Bob whenever he called. ... I said, 'Bob, it's unusual for Dad to remember someone as clearly as you.'" She says that Woodward responded, "He has good reason to remember me."

Woodward spoke with Mark junior at his home in Florida, as well. "He called me and discussed whether or not, and when, to visit Dad," he says. "I asked him briefly, 'Are you ever going to put this Deep Throat issue public?' And he said, essentially, that he made promises to my dad or *someone* that he wouldn't reveal this. ... I can't imagine another reason why Woodward would have any interest in Dad or me or Joan if Dad wasn't Deep Throat. His questions were about Dad's present condition. Why would he care so much about Dad's health?"

According to Joan, Woodward scheduled two visits to come and see her father and, so she hoped, to talk about a possible collaborative venture. But he had to cancel both times, she says, then never rescheduled. "That was disappointing," she says. "Maybe [he was] just hoping that I would forget about it."

Today, Joan Felt has only positive things to say about Bob Woodward. "He's so reassuring and top-notch," she insists. They still stay in touch by e-mail, exchanging good wishes, their relationship engendered by a bond her father had forged in troubled times.

Nowadays, Mark Felt watches TV sitting beneath a large oil painting of his late wife, Audrey, and goes for car rides with a new caregiver. Felt is 91 and his memory for details seems to wax and wane. Joan allows him two glasses of wine each evening, and on occasion the two harmonize in a rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." While Felt is a humorous and mellow man, his spine stiffens and his jaw tightens when he talks about the integrity of his dear F.B.I.

I believe that Mark Felt is one of America's greatest secret heroes. Deep in his psyche, it is clear to me, he still has qualms about his actions, but he also knows that historic events compelled him to behave as he did: standing up to an executive branch intent on obstructing his agency's pursuit of the truth. Felt, having long harbored the ambivalent emotions of pride and self-reproach, has lived for more than 30 years in a prison of his own making, a prison built upon his strong moral principles and his unwavering loyalty to country and cause. But now, buoyed by his family's revelations and support, he need feel imprisoned no more.

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