Deep Throat’s Legacy to Journalism

Less than a month ago, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the Washington Postreporters who helped topple President Nixon, made a surprise visit to Mark Felt, the man known as Deep Throat.

It was a fitting denouement among men who played a historic role in the Watergate scandal, and in changing journalism. It was also the first time that Bernstein had ever met Felt, who died yesterday at 95.

The relationship among the three men was complicated. It was Felt, the No. 2 man in the FBI during the 1972 Watergate break-in, who became a key source for the two young reporters. Many speculate on Felt's motives, but no one ever will know exactly because Felt was 91 and showing signs of dementia [when his identity was revealed](http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2005/07/deepthroat200507).

Woodward met Felt by chance when he was a young man in his late-20s in the Navy. He nurtured a filial-like relationship, seeking out Felt for career advice. When the Watergate story broke, Woodward called Felt, promising him what's known in journalistic parlance as "confidentiality." It meant that Woodward would use Felt's information but never reveal Felt as his source.

And he never did.

In the modern history of journalism, there is little dispute that Deep Throat is by far the most famous known anonymous news source. Nor is there any dispute that the Post's reliance on Deep Throat played a role in popularizing the still–controversial use of anonymous sources.

But it also showed what can happen when journalists keep their word.

Ironically, when Woodward referred to Felt inside the Post newsroom, he told his editors, "My friend told me on deep background" when relaying information. In his notes, Woodward identified his source as "M.F." for my friend, even though those are also Felt's initials.

It was then-Managing Editor Howard Simons who dubbed the secret source Deep Throat based on a notorious pornographic movie in 1972 with the same name. The nickname stuck. Among several unanswered questions is a basic one: Would Felt have become such a cultural icon if his moniker were "My Friend?"

The nick name Deep Throat appeared for the first time in Playboy magazine in May 1974, when an excerpt of the book All the President's Men ran. Felt was one of many anonymous sources the pair used but he drew the lion's share of attention because of the sexy name.

It was only when the book came out that Felt learned how Woodward and Bernstein privately referred to him. He was embarrassed and furious, and thought Woodward had betrayed him. He was equally unhappy when the book became a hugely successful movie in 1976.

His anger unnerved Woodward, but neither he nor Bernstein ever waivered in keeping their promise. Over the decades, both reporters were repeatedly asked when they spoke publicly: "Who is Deep Throat?" They never even gave a hint.

Through the decades it became a parlor game to figure out who was the source high up in the Justice Department who betrayed the Nixon administration. Articles and books were written fingering people. A University of Illinois class spent four years investigating Deep Throat's identity. The class held a press conference at the Watergate in 2003 to announce their suspect. But they were wrong.

Each time an author was certain of Deep Throat's identity, Woodward and Bernstein said nothing. Neither did Felt. In fact, Felt denied he was Deep Throat in his 1979 memoir, The FBI Pyramid. He wrote that he had only met with Woodward once during the Watergate investigation.

Actually, Woodward secretly had contact with him 18 times during the years from the break-in until Nixon's 1974 resignation.

Most famous were the late-night meetings in an Arlington, Va., garage portrayed in the movie. There were 6 garage meetings, 7 phone calls, one rendezvous at Felt's house in Fairfax, Va., one meeting at a Maryland tavern, one on-the-record visit to Felt's FBI office and two other meetings, according to [Woodward's papers](http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/press/releases/2007/deepthroat.html) that were sold to the University of Texas along with Bernstein's for $5 million in 2003.

The Deep Throat mystery lasted 33 years — a record for such a high-profile secret in a gossipy town like Washington, D.C. It lasted that long because Woodward and Bernstein kept their promise of confidentiality. Ben Bradlee, the editor of The Washington Post during Watergate, told me he didn't learn Felt's identity until 1976.

"Ben and I made a decision that on some of them [sources] we wouldn't ask," Simons told the pair in 1973 when they interviewed him for their book. "For instance, Deep Throat. You know, we've never wanted to know."

Woodward was shocked. Why not?

"Because you really didn't want to tell us," Simons said. "Sure. At one point we could have said to you, 'OK. We must know."

But they didn't.

While it may be hard to believe, over three decades only five people knew Felt's identity — Woodward, Bernstein, Felt, Bradlee and Woodward's wife, Elsa Walsh, whom Woodward told in the early 1980s.

Finally, Felt and his family decided to reveal the identity on May 31, 2005, in Vanity Fair magazine, hoping to profit from their secret. It did lead to a book and a movie contract for Felt.

Although Woodward and Bernstein were following typical journalistic protocol by keeping Felt's name quiet, it was a decision that would influence the rest of their careers. Future confidential sources knew that if they spilled secrets to either man, the secrets would be kept.

Even more important to journalists is the notion that every source deserves a reporter's protection, regardless of whether that person is a hero or a heel. As long as the source tells the truth and sticks to the bargain that's implicit in confidential relationships, a journalist will go to jail rather than reveal the name.

By keeping their promise to Felt, Woodward and Bernstein, in turn, helped many other journalists who followed. It paved the way for other sources to trust journalists who keep their word.

"This is an absolute contract," Woodward said in 2005 at Harvard University. "This really is an unbreakable contract unless somebody is dishonest with you." And Felt never was.

Shepard is the author ofWoodward and Bernstein: Life in the Shadow of Watergate (2007)and the Ombudsman for National Public Radio.