

Leak: Why Mark Felt Became Deep Throat

By Max Holland. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012, 285 pp.

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Forty years after the Watergate break-in, the full story of the legendary source known as “Deep Throat” remains shrouded in mystery. By the time his family pushed him to go public and capitalize on his role in 2005, W. Mark Felt was 92 years old and suffering from dementia, unable to remember what actually happened while he helped run the FBI. *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward’s subsequent account of his relationship with Felt did little to alter the prevailing mythology that Deep Throat was an honest whistleblower who risked his career to stop the crimes of the Nixon White House.

But in an impressively researched and smartly reasoned page-turner of a book, Max Holland offers up a persuasive revisionist history that tarnishes Woodward’s halo and that of the source who leaked to him. According to Holland, Felt—nicknamed “The White Rat” for his “thick mane of white hair and tendency to squeal whenever he thought it might help his own agenda” (p. 21)—wasn’t motivated by idealism but by self-serving careerist ambition. As the FBI’s deputy director under J. Edgar Hoover, Felt wanted the top job for himself after his boss’ death. Instead, President Nixon appointed a political loyalist

to do his bidding. So Felt carefully orchestrated leaks to try to oust his rival by making him appear incompetent and unable to control the FBI, hoping Nixon would then put Felt in charge to control the damage. It was a dangerous double game, Holland writes, in which Felt feigned loyalty to his new boss while simultaneously undermining him within the FBI and White House. Indeed, Felt skillfully blamed bureaucratic rivals for leaks that he himself planted in the press, and he slyly drove the new FBI director to aggressively pursue the Watergate investigation knowing it would infuriate Nixon. Ironically, the author says, Nixon’s ultimate resignation in disgrace “was an entirely unanticipated result” of Felt’s more limited goal of climbing to the top of the FBI pyramid (p. 11).

Holland portrays Woodward as an inexperienced and bumbling dupe, credulous and incurious, unable or unwilling to grasp Felt’s malevolent motives. “Woodward believed that he and Felt were on the same side,” Holland writes, “allies in the struggle to expose the facts and larger truth. For Felt, however, their relationship was simply a means to the end of becoming FBI director. If that end was best served by salting the information he gave

LEAK



Why Mark Felt Became
DEEP THROAT

MAX HOLLAND

Woodward with details that had only a casual relationship with the facts, so be it” (p. 94).

In fact, Holland argues that the deceitful Felt didn’t hesitate to spread disinformation about his rivals if he thought it would advance his career, even as he carefully concealed evidence of White House wrongdoing that might jeopardize his rise. In the end, the author says, Felt used and discarded Woodward, who in turn used and discarded Felt.

Holland’s conclusions are based on more than conjecture. He conducted dozens of interviews with Watergate figures and plumbed numerous archives—including overlooked oral history interviews with retired FBI agents—to uncover fascinating new details about the subterranean conflict within the Nixon-

era FBI. Among his more surprising discoveries: that Felt was forced out of his job when another Hoover protégé who also wanted to be director impersonated a *New York Times* reporter in a telephone call that falsely blamed Felt for his rival’s leak to the press. Clearly, Watergate-era viciousness permeated the FBI no less than the White House.

Holland brilliantly reconstructs, and deconstructs, the Watergate chronology to connect missing dots and figure out the hidden agendas of reporters and their sources. His book reveals the often-unappetizing way the news sausage is manufactured in Washington. It is an ideal primer for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, and will be nectar for scholars, journalists, and Watergate buffs.

Still, Holland’s brief for the prosecution sometimes overstates the evidence. For example, he presumes that false information that Felt provided to the press was because of deliberate deceit rather than what must occasionally have been an honest mistake. Similarly, as Felt’s campaign to become FBI director faltered, Holland concludes, “Felt was probably on the verge of a nervous breakdown” (p. 150). But the author presents no real substantiation for that assertion.

Ultimately, Felt overreached in his machinations, which were discovered by the Nixon White House and cost Felt whatever chance he might have had of becoming FBI director. But by then, Holland argues, it was too late: Felt had already set in motion the chain of events that would lead to Nixon’s downfall. Perhaps. But a plausible argument can be made that Watergate’s endgame

would have been the same no matter what Felt did. After all, Woodward's editor at the *Post*, Barry Sussman, said Felt was just a "bit player" who "barely figured" in the newspaper's coverage of the story (p. 226). And the successful prosecution of Watergate wrongdoing hardly rested on Felt's shoulders alone.

Why did Felt stay anonymous for so many decades? According to Holland, going public would have exposed Felt's self-serving treachery to his tight-knit FBI fraternity. "Heroes," a top FBI official noted pointedly, "don't lurk in the shadows for 33 years" (p. 5). Felt chose silence, in other words, in the hope that his FBI peers would die off and leave the heroic legacy of Deep Throat undisturbed.

For the most part, that strategy seems to have worked. After all, Holland's research notwithstanding, the mythology of Deep Throat endures. Felt died in 2008 and only Bob Woodward knows for sure what really happened between them. As Ben Franklin famously observed, "Two can keep a secret if one of them is dead."

Fortunately, Max Holland's original, thought-provoking book provides a corrective to what he calls the romantic "fairy tale" (p. 195) that a courageous whistleblower was all that was needed for a journalistic David to slay a presidential Goliath.

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