

USA Entertaining, but not a turning point Dawn 9/6/05

WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

IT all began with a chance encounter in the White House. At that moment in 1970, neither naval courier Bob Woodward nor senior FBI official W. Mark Felt could possibly have had any reason to suspect, or even to imagine, that both of them would play a pivotal role in cutting short the presidency of the man under whose roof, so to speak, they first ran into each other.

Woodward, then in his mid-twenties, went on to become a reporter. The considerably older Felt was promoted to the position of deputy FBI chief. The buck didn't stop there, but his career did stall. Felt hoped to succeed his mentor, the infamous J. Edgar Hoover, as FBI supremo after the latter died in May 1972. But President Richard M. Nixon had other plans.

Hoover, who had effectively founded the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was untouchable. He reputedly kept files on every president, and would not have hesitated to use them if he deemed it necessary — in “self-defence”, of course. He particularly loathed the Kennedys and by all accounts the antipathy was mutual, but neither John nor Robert dared to mess with the FBI, because Hoover kept records of the brothers' sexual dalliances.

Nixon and Hoover were natural ideological allies: each of them had played a leading role in the anti-communist witch-hunts of the 1950s, and they exhibited a shared contempt for pinkos, peaceniks and all other “subversives”.

On finding out that phone books found on some of the Watergate burglars contained the numbers of low-level officials associated with the Committee to Re-elect the President (known by the singularly appropriate acronym CREEP), it was only natural for Woodward to seek confirmation, and further information, from Felt. The latter hesitated at first, and then decided to comply.

At Felt's instigation, the two of them evolved a bizarre series of rituals for getting in touch. If Woodward urgently needed to meet Felt, he would place a red flag stuck in a flowerpot in a certain spot on the balcony of his

could be acknowledged as a hero in his lifetime. They have also been reasonably candid in admitting that they hoped to profit financially from the disclosure in order to help pay family debts.

They sought Woodward's assistance, but he was reluctant to play along, saying he couldn't be sure whether Felt really wanted to do this or had been coerced by his offspring. All along he also made clear he wasn't formally confirming that Felt was indeed Deep Throat.

A separate publishing deal was the family's next option, but in the end it settled for a detailed article in the July issue of *Vanity Fair*. The extremely readable piece, credited to family lawyer John D. O'Connor, earned the writer about \$10,000 and denied *The Washington Post* the scoop it believed would eventually come its way. Woodward and Bernstein grappled with their consciences for a few hours before deciding to corroborate the *Vanity Fair* account.

Nixon's downfall was a magic moment in modern American history, and Woodward and Bernstein — and, by proxy, Felt — deserve their share of the credit. It was not, however, the turning point it's often made out to be. Watergate was not an aberration in US political culture: the unusual aspect of it was that the perpetrators were named and shamed. But, as crimes go, it was minuscule compared to, say, Vietnam.

In last Thursday's edition, the *Post* carried a fascinating account by Woodward — an extract, apparently, from a book he had already written and intended to publish after Felt died. Now it is being rushed into print and will reportedly go on sale next month. Meanwhile, sales of *All the President's Men*, Woodward and Bernstein's initial account of the Watergate saga, have perked up, and DVDs of the book's Hollywoodized version — starring Robert Redford, Dustin Hoffman, Jason Robards and Hal Holbrook as, respectively, Woodward, Bernstein, Bradlee and Deep Throat — are also doing well.

In the wake of Felt's outing, most media comments and analyses have focused on the value and morality of anonymous disclosure.

Hoover was also dead set against gays — an attitude that shines some light on his psychotic mindset, given that he himself was a repressed homosexual who got kicks from cross-dressing in private.

Notwithstanding their political compatibility, Nixon wanted to curtail the FBI's independence and to put his own stamp on the organization, which wasn't a serious possibility for as long as there was any breath left in Hoover. But once the monster died, the president moved swiftly by placing his own man at the bureau's helm: L. Patrick Gray. It's a different matter that the White House abandoned Gray shortly afterwards, deciding to let him "twist slowly, slowly in the wind" at his confirmation hearings on Capitol Hill.

The reason, evidently, was that Nixon's entourage perceived Gray as insufficiently supportive of their efforts to stymie the investigation into a break-in at the Democratic party's national campaign headquarters in Washington's Watergate building. Fortuitously, the break-in occurred about two months after Hoover's demise. Had the canny old bulldog still been around, chances are he would have arranged an impenetrable cover-up. And given Mark Felt's profound esteem for Hoover, it is highly unlikely he would have chosen to divulge any secrets to a rookie *Washington Post* reporter. Felt was miffed not only because he had been denied a promotion he thought he deserved, but also because he resented the FBI's progressive loss of independence — and particularly the obstacles the White House was placing in the path of the Watergate probe.

Felt and Woodward, in the meanwhile, had developed a friendship of sorts, and the FBI apparatchik wasn't averse to occasionally offering tips to the reporter. He had once told him, for instance, about a \$2500 cash bribe the vice-president, Spiro Agnew, had accepted. Woodward couldn't do anything with the information, but later discovered that it was true.

apartment. If Felt desired a meeting, he would draw a clock face with the designated hour on page 20 of Woodward's subscription copy of *The New York Times* before it was delivered at 7am. In either case, they rendezvoused in an underground parking lot, with Woodward making his way there by cabs and on foot, in keeping with Felt's instructions, to avoid being followed.

Felt, now 91, is evidently unable to recall by what means he kept an eye on Woodward's balcony or how he managed to insert his hand-drawn clocks into the *New York Times*. At least some of the cloak-and-dagger stuff, it seems, will remain shrouded in secrecy, even though the main mystery stands solved as of last week, and that too via a confession.

Woodward and his collaborator on the *Post*, Carl Bernstein, had vowed not to divulge Felt's identity for as long as he lived. Among their colleagues, they had shared the secret with only one person: the *Post's* then executive editor Ben Bradlee, and even he had been told only after Nixon resigned. In his reports, Woodward had initially referred to his anonymous source as My Friend — a nomenclature that shares Mark Felt's initials. At a colleague's suggestion, he changed that to Deep Throat, the name borrowed from a pornographic film that was viewed as scandalous in those days.

Thus was a legend born, and over the decades thousands of column inches have been devoted to speculation over the identity of Deep Throat. The better-known suspects have included Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig and George H.W. Bush. Felt, too, was a candidate in some eyes, not least those of the Nixon White House, but there was no conclusive proof.

Until now, Felt had always denied that he was Deep Throat, even going so far as to say that spilling the beans in this manner was a dishonourable thing to do. In recent years, however, his children cottoned on to his Watergate role and persuaded him to come clean, so that he

Generally hailed as a hero, in some cases Felt has also been denounced as a traitor. The latter charge is rubbish: the charge of treachery should be laid at the door of those who broke the law and violated the Constitution.

At the same time, let's not forget there is a lot more Felt could have disclosed but chose not to. He appears not have been bothered by the fact that the FBI had drifted far from its crime-fighting mandate into a political instrument, a largely unaccountable upholder of the status quo. In fact, he was very much a party to the Bureau's ideologically motivated activities. In 1980, Felt was convicted of authorizing break-ins into private homes in a drive against militant anti-war protesters. Within months he was pardoned by President Ronald Reagan.

In the case of Watergate, he did the right thing, albeit not necessarily for particularly respectable reasons. Whistleblowers are an invaluable resource for reporters: for instance, from My Lai to Abu Ghraib, Seymour Hersh has relied to a considerable extent on sources who cannot be named.

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The indignities subsequently heaped upon the US and the world in the name of democracy suggest that the appropriate lesson haven't been learned. Else the imperial (and imperious) presidency would have made way for far greater accountability, would have been no Iran-Contragate, and there certainly would not be the sort of impunity that is so much in evidence today, channelled through Nixon-era leftovers such as Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.