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Embodying Deep Throat: Mark Felt and the Collective Memory of Watergate

Matt Carlson

On May 31, 2005, a long-running journalistic secret came to an end when Vanity Fair revealed Deep Throat, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's famous Watergate unnamed source, to be W. Mark Felt, the associate director of the FBI under President Nixon. While the announcement bought to a close 30 years of speculation and accusations concerning Deep Throat's identity, it created new complications in promoting Watergate as a marker of journalistic success. With stroke-afflicted Felt unable to speak on his own behalf, other speakers came forward to question Felt's character and his motives for surreptitiously working with journalists. In struggling to interpret the past, journalists and critics competed publicly to define acceptable news practices in the present. This paper uses the conceptual framework offered by collective memory to examine public discourse around Felt's revelation to demonstrate how discussions of Deep Throat expanded into a larger competition to define what the correct role of journalism should be.

Keywords: Journalism; Collective memory; Watergate; Deep Throat; Mark Felt

During the morning hours of May 31, 2005, word quickly spread that journalism's most guarded secret had come to an end. W. Mark Felt, former associate director of the FBI under President Richard Nixon, was revealed through his family and a spokesperson to be Deep Throat—the unnamed source made famous by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in their 1972 *Washington Post* reporting on the Watergate scandal. While the revelation bought to a close over 30 years of speculation and accusations concerning Deep Throat's identity, it introduced new complications for journalists promoting the Watergate coverage as a professional marker of success. The Watergate narrative has long been situated within the collective memory of journalism as a triumph of dogged reporting holding power accountable and a model for future generations of reporters. However, Felt's arrival

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into the Watergate narrative opened up the collective memory of Watergate to alteration, whether over Felt's actions and motives specifically or the overall accuracy of the Watergate narrative as retold by journalists generally. It produced a moment of interpretive instability in which different speakers attempted to reattach meaning to Watergate from their positions in the present. It also became an important rallying point for the journalistic community at a time of increasing scrutiny surrounding the use of anonymous sources.

This was not merely the conclusion of an obsolete journalistic mystery and an addition to the historical record. Rather, the struggle to fit Felt into the collective memory of Watergate became a broader contest to define appropriate modes of journalistic practice in covering powerful institutions and individuals. Journalists defended the centrality of journalism in the cultural memory of Watergate while promoting the enduring desirability of relying on anonymous whistle-blowers. This resulted in public discourse aiming to retain the usefulness of Watergate as a collective marker of journalistic success, a model for emulation in the present, and a justification for increased legal protections of journalistic confidentiality. In contrast to these claims, others, led by a vocal cadre of ex-Nixon staffers, worked to destabilize the journalistic-centric narrative of Watergate, rehabilitate Nixon, and challenge the acceptability of whistle-blowers working with reporters.

Through an examination of public discourse emerging in the wake of Felt's revelation, this paper seeks to provide a better understanding of instances in which collective memory becomes the target of fierce interpretive competition. When accepted, collective memory legitimates particular cultural formations by providing a narrative that explains why things are as they are and why this should be. Yet, when contested, collective memory fragments into competing visions of the past, which, in turn, supports rival notions of suitable practices in the present. While the revelation of Deep Throat's identity had long been anticipated, the rupture of the Watergate narrative caused by Felt unsettled journalistic retellings of its role in exposing the scandal. The resulting disturbance is a reminder that collective memory is not fixed, but dynamic and prone to contestation and alteration. And because collective memory remains integral to legitimating the shape and role of social institutions, and journalism in particular, the negotiation of this inherent instability is not inconsequential.

Deep Throat as Icon: Collective Memory and Journalism

Watergate's continued salience in discussions of journalism reveals the utility offered by collective memory as a conceptual frame for thinking through how the past is made to have meaning in the present (for overviews, see Halbwachs, 1992; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Zelizer, 1995). Collective memory, as distinct from individualized memories or authoritative history, involves both a shared emphasis on particular past events and a shared way of interpreting these events among a group. Collective memories provide narratives that order the past while contributing to a shared identity for groups in the present. Given its importance, the ability to speak authoritatively about the past is always limited to a small group of speakers. However,

control over collective memory is seldom assured or static. As Edy (2006) notes, "no one social actor can control the development of stories about the past" (p. 15). Memory is subject to conflict between actors, particularly because the ability to cultivate collective memories is both a marker of power and a strategy for its maintenance as past actions are used to legitimate present orders. Beyond facilitating group cohesion through the story of a common origin, collective memories offer guidance for present and future actions, dictate norms and expectations, and provide a measure from which to mark progress or deviance.

While scholars have increasingly paid attention to the integrative role collective memory plays in many social formations and institutions, several studies have employed the concept in understanding journalism (see Carlson, 2007; Edy, 1999, 2006; Edy & Daradanova, 2006; Kitch, 2005; Zelizer, 1992). This research has applied collective memory to journalism in two overlapping ways. First, studies have shown how journalists participate in the creation, dissemination, resurrection, and suppression of collective memories in their capacity as cultural producers responsible for the mass circulation of texts seeking to authoritatively define events (Edy, 2006; Edy & Daradanova, 2006; Zelizer, 2008). This view emphasizes how journalists act as storytellers who constantly recall the past to make sense of the present.

Beyond serving as storytellers about public events, journalists also tell stories about themselves. In the face of porous boundaries that leave open such core questions as who qualifies as a journalist and what journalism should do (Bourdieu, 2005; Deuze, 2003; Singer, 2003; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986; Winch, 1997), collective memory provides one strategy journalists use to constitute themselves as a group while attending to their authority to act as society's chroniclers of life's events (Zelizer, 1992). As a "community of memory" (Irwin-Zerecka, 1994, p. 47) or "mnemonic community" (Zerubavel, 2003, p. 4), journalists construct narratives about their past to support their legitimacy and relevancy in the present. Yet this memory work does not go uncontested. While journalists seek to define their own social role and retain the ability to dictate norms for their work, the cultural power of news gives rise to challenges at many points. As journalism comes under fire in the present, the need to cultivate the past in a manner that supports journalistic authority takes on added importance.

Watergate, in particular, has pervaded the collective memory of journalism since the 1970s. Even for journalists who were not involved or who entered into news work after Nixon's resignation, journalistic retellings of Watergate have been foundational to journalism's self-identity. Schudson (1992) and Zelizer (1993) examine how, in the political and cultural complexity bound up in the Watergate scandal, Woodward and Bernstein's reporting has come to occupy a starring role in the narrative of the scandal's unfolding "that often bore little resemblance to the event as it unfolded" (Zelizer, 1993, p. 228). Over time, Watergate became less about the actual news practices involved and more an event signifying quality journalistic practice and promoting investigative reporting as journalism's defining mode. By privileging the reportage of Woodward and Bernstein above judicial and congressional actions, the story of Watergate increasingly omitted how different institutions functioned

together in complex ways over the course of two years to result in Nixon's resignation and dozens of indictments. Instead, journalists have long represented Watergate in a way that has reinforced the viability of journalism's continued social role. For journalism, "the Watergate myth is sustaining. It survives to a large extent impervious to critique. It offers journalism a charter, an inspiration, a reason for being large enough to justify the constitutional protections that journalism enjoys" (Schudson, 1992, p. 124).

Within the Watergate story, the existence of Deep Throat remained unknown until he appeared in Woodward and Bernstein's bestselling book *All the President's Men* (1974) as an unnamed source providing insider information on a not-for-attribution arrangement deemed "deep background." The mystery of Deep Throat was further solidified through Hal Holbrook's shadowy portrayal in the popular film adaptation in 1976. Deep Throat became an iconic anonymous source not only through his presence in journalistic retellings of Watergate but also through popular culture references. Speculation as to Deep Throat's identity remained popular for decades within political, journalistic, and academic circles. As recent as 2002, 30 years after Deep Throat and Woodward's first clandestine conversations about the scandal, University of Illinois students became news by producing a list of seven suspects—none of whom was Mark Felt (Chamberlain, 2002).

Prior to Felt's revelation, journalists had long praised Deep Throat while preserving his phantasmal aura. In holding to their promise of anonymity for over 30 years, Woodward and Bernstein dictated the terms in which Deep Throat could be comprehended. The persistence of Deep Throat's anonymity allowed others to construct a narrative around him as an ideal without being hampered by the complexity of human motivations accompanying any specific individual. This dynamic continued until one day in 2005 when Deep Throat finally had a name.

Deep Throat Becomes Mark Felt, Mark Felt Becomes Deep Throat

The unveiling of Mark Felt as Deep Throat took place through a *Vanity Fair* article written by John O'Connor, a San Francisco lawyer who learned of Felt's secret identity though Felt's family and acted as a liaison between the family and the magazine (O'Connor, 2005). Shortly after the story became public on May 31, 2005, Woodward and Bernstein confirmed the claim through the *Washington Post* website. With the linking of Mark Felt, a person, to Deep Throat, an iconic symbol, journalists were forced to incorporate, in the corporal sense of the term, Felt into the larger Watergate narrative. The match of Felt and Deep Throat meant the source's actions could be debated, contested, and criticized anew.

The situation was made even more complex by Felt's decreased ability to communicate. Felt, at 91, had suffered a stroke several years earlier and was living in Santa Rosa, California, with his daughter and grandson. Beyond a few words to reporters outside his home, Felt lacked the capacity to speak for himself or to provide answers to questions regarding his motivations. This inability to provide direct answers ensured that ambiguity would surround the reasons for his actions. As a

result, Felt emerged as "a blank canvas on which to paint its thoughts about a man whose existence in the flesh raised issues of the most metaphysical" (Roddy, 2005, p. J1). Felt continued on with limited lucidity until his death on December 18, 2008, at age 95.

With Felt effectively silenced, others competed to define his motives, interpret his actions, and place them in a broader context for journalism and its relationship with the government. How Felt was positioned mattered for his entrance into the Watergate narrative, which contributed to contestation around his role. From the outset of the story, critics emerged to question Felt's character, his motivations for surreptitiously working with journalists, and—most problematically for journalism—the received press role in uncovering the Watergate scandal. In response, journalists and others supported the continued usefulness of Deep Throat/Felt—and, by extension, Woodward and Bernstein—as praiseworthy symbols for journalism.

The discourse around Mark Felt was not without consequence for contemporary journalistic practice. Rather, competing assessments of Felt connected to the general tensions of a particular moment for journalism marked by news controversies involving the use of unnamed sources. Just two weeks earlier, *Newsweek* faced criticism for a story relying on a single unnamed military source that accused interrogators of purposively abusing the detainees' Korans at the Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, military base. Facing public pressure, the magazine eventually retracted its story when the source withdrew his claims. Eight months earlier, a similar episode occurred following a report on the Wednesday edition of *60 Minutes* examining George W. Bush's military service record. The story relied on documents provided by an unnamed source. Challenges to the documents' authenticity from conservative bloggers blossomed into a controversy that resulted in the early retirement of Dan Rather, and the forced exit of several CBS News executives. Aside from these black eyes for journalism, the Felt revelation occurred while Judith Miller of the *New York Times* and Matt Cooper of *Time* magazine were battling to avoid federal grand jury subpoenas for their knowledge of which administration officials leaked Valerie Plame's identity as a CIA covert employee. Because no federal level shield law existed, the two reporters were compelled to turn over their confidential sources after their appeal to the Supreme Court was refused on June 27, 2005—less than a month after Felt's disclosure. Cooper's employer eventually turned over the desired documents, but Miller was sent to jail on July 6—the very day that Woodward's book about Mark Felt, *The Secret Man* (Woodward, 2005b), was published. Miller served several months in prison for her refusal to testify. After her release, Miller retired from the *Times* amidst criticisms of her overly close relationships with administration sources during the period before the Iraq War. These incidents show the troubled state of unnamed sources for journalism. The entanglement of their usefulness and vulnerability imposed difficult questions for journalism at a time when it was already struggling with a public increasingly wary of its performance (Pew Research Center, 2005).

The sudden revelation of Felt added depth to ongoing debates over the use of unnamed sources. Journalists seeking to reinvigorate their role took hold of the Felt

revelation to promote unnamed sources as essential to a preferred vision of journalism as a watchdog holding government actors accountable (see Bennett & Serrin, 2005). As part of this effort, Felt mattered not for his past actions but as a symbol for what journalism should be. As a result, much of the news discourse about Felt conflated the concept of the anonymous "whistle-blower"—an insider coming forward to disclose some information of public interest purposively being kept from public view—with the general notion of an unnamed source—a news source whose identity is known by a journalist but not disclosed to the public for some reason. This perspective elided the common dynamic of the anonymity-for-access exchange in favor of a normative formation reserved for extraordinary circumstances (see Hess, 1996, pp. 70–71, for a typology of leaks). Deep Throat became a symbol of the need for unnamed sources, even if his provision of background information to help the reporters' investigation differs from a common form of anonymity driven by a need for access.

Within hours of Felt's revelation, reconsiderations of Deep Throat and the journalistic role in uncovering the Watergate scandal became the subject of competing interpretations. Through public texts, commentators competed to define what meaning Watergate would have for journalism, politics, and U.S. culture. This paper examines this contest through a qualitative textual analysis of mediated discourse surrounding Felt's revelation and interpretations of Watergate's meaning. A comprehensive search of stories about Deep Throat in newspapers, magazines, the journalism trade press, network news, cable news, and public radio was conducted using the Factiva Database for the period starting May 31, 2005 through January 1, 2006. Secondary searches were conducted using the Lexis/Nexis Academic and NewsBank databases to be as thorough as possible. Only database copies of stories and transcripts were used. While, ideally, the original documents and broadcasts are preferable, databases allow the researcher to cast a broader net to locate materials. After eliminating duplicate articles and unrelated stories, 515 total documents were analyzed to identify persistent patterns of language use and interpretations pertaining to Felt. In the sections that follow, this paper explores two salient points of contestation in this discourse: the dichotomizing of Felt as virtuous or faulty and the conflict over the appropriateness of whistle-blowers working through the news.

Deep Throat as Felt: Questioning the Motives of a Mythic Figure

With Mark Felt unable to be interviewed, commentaries on his disclosure relied on others to recall the Watergate story, interpret what Felt did, and judge its merit. Within this discourse, journalists and commentators regularly reduced the contest to define Felt's actions to the dichotomy of "hero or villain." This division was a particularly salient frame for cable television news discussions of Felt. It was posed on CNN (*Anderson Cooper 360*, 5/31, and 6/1; *Crossfire,* 6/2; and *Inside Politics,* 6/1), MSNBC (*Hardball*, 5/31 and *Scarborough Country* 6/1) and the Fox News Channel (*Special Report with Brit Hume*, 5/31, and 6/1). On *Scarborough Country*, host Joe Scarborough posed the question as, "is Felt a hero or a rat?" (6/1). On *Fox News*

Sunday (6/5), the question was asked whether he should be "praised or condemned?" The hero question also occurred on each of the three network evening news broadcasts. The *CBS Evening News* asked if Felt was "a hero or FBI turncoat?" (6/1) while the *NBC Nightly News* (6/1) and *ABC World News Tonight* (6/1) each offered similar frames.

Print publications also framed their discussions of Felt around the question of motives and his heroic status (or lack thereof). For example, *Time* magazine asked: "Was Deep Throat a villain or a hero, driven by base motives or noble ones?" (McGeary, 2005, p. 28). Newspapers assessing Felt's heroic status used a number of different formulations. For example, the *Boston Globe* inquired of Felt: "Was the most famous leaker of recent times a selfless good guy looking out for his country or a craven self-promoter?" (Easton, 2005, p. A6). An *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* editorial phrased it as "Secret Patriot, or a self-serving stole?" and sided with the former ("It's still Nixon's," 2005, p. 12). An editorial in the *Raleigh News & Observer* posed it as "a snitch or a patriot" ("Now we know," 2005, p. A10).

The prevailing trend in print and on television to present dichotomous assessments of Felt favored discussions of Felt's motives as a measure of his worth over other possible interpretive frames. This move encouraged mediated discussions of Felt that stressed opposing viewpoints through counterpoising supporters and detractors rather than engaging in broader attempts to understand the Nixon era, the institutional and journalistic constraints that made the Watergate scandal difficult to unravel, or the complexities surrounding unnamed sources. Instead, different speakers struggling to signify how Felt should be viewed within the history of Watergate promoted a simplified set of poles that eschewed nuance.

All of Nixon's Men

With Deep Throat now connected to the person of Felt, critics seized on both known biographical details and imagined motives of Felt as impacting—or even negating—the mythic image of Deep Throat. This opposition between personal motivations and heroic value developed around both Felt's action of providing information to Woodward in 1972 and for revealing his identity publicly in 2005. According to this argument, the more muddled motivations became, the less applicable a meritorious reception. These criticisms challenged the role accorded Felt in uncovering Watergate as inaccurately portrayed and, therefore, not supportive of the symbolic weight assigned to him by journalists.

The most vocal negative interpreters of Felt's actions were former Nixon administration officials. These men—all of them male—had an immediate stake in downplaying the heroism of Felt's actions in order to preserve their own reputations as well as Nixon's. Particular vehemence toward Felt came from Pat Buchanan, Charles Colson, and G. Gordon Liddy through television and print outlets during the initial days of the story. Lesser disapproval or skepticism emerged from John Dean, Henry Kissinger, and David Gergen. These former Nixon officials quickly became

prominent sources on network and cable news during the first and second day of the story.

Buchanan was particularly vocal from the start. On May 31, only a few hours after Woodward and Bernstein confirmed Felt's identity as Deep Throat, Buchanan told the *NBC Nightly News*: "I think Deep Throat is a snake." On the following day (6/1), Buchanan appeared on NBC's *Today* (with Colson), the *NBC Nightly News*, the *CBS Evening News*, and MSNBC's *Scarborough Country*. Colson, who labeled Felt's revelation "a sad legacy" (*NBC Nightly News*, 5/31), appeared on the June 1 broadcasts of CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360*, Fox News Channel's *The O'Reilly Factor* and NPR's *All Things Considered*. Their presence on these shows was further magnified by having their quotes reproduced in newspaper stories the next day. The amplification of Nixon loyalists through frequent appearances served at the outset to focus debate around questions of source motives. Rather than locating value in the information itself, this frame required it to matter why an unnamed source provided information. The intention of the leaker, and not the content of the leak, was emphasized.

Adhering to this frame, much of the Felt criticism dissected his motives, both in acting as a source for the *Washington Post* and for coming forward with his identity 30 years later. Critics emphasized the ambiguity of Felt's motives, which conservative columnist Robert Novak identified as "reasons that were not necessarily noble or patriotic" (Novak, 2005, p. 3). In particular, Felt was passed over for FBI director after the death of Hoover some six weeks before the Watergate break-in. The appointment instead went to a non-FBI Nixon loyalist, L. Patrick Gray. Felt was accused of being upset at getting passed over and retaliating through providing anonymous information to the *Washington Post*. *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Mary Laney countered heroic classifications of Felt: "That's not whistle-blowing heroism. That's a man who wants revenge, but wants to make certain he saves his own job while he gets his pound of flesh from another" (Laney, 2005, p. 47). These critics presented two claims: first, Felt's actions were attributable to revenge; and, second, a motive of revenge discounted the ability for an individual to be considered heroic. Both of these conditions had to be accepted for the argument against lauding Felt to be valid.

Another area of criticism focused on Felt's motives for revealing his identity as Deep Throat in 2005, 33 years after the break-in and 32 years after his retirement from the FBI. Felt was accused of acting purely out of financial interest. An editorial in the conservative *New York Post* raised this issue and labeled Felt "disloyal" ("The men," 2005, p. 34). On the *O'Reilly Factor*, legal analyst Andrew Napolitano warned that Felt could be indicted on bribery charges if he received any money from Woodward (Fox News Channel, 6/2). The previous night, Fox News Channel's John Gibson also questioned Felt's monetary incentive (*The Big Story with John Gibson*, 6/1), as did syndicated conservative columnist William F. Buckley (2005).

While the above criticism mostly emerged from conservatives, Felt also received specific criticism, often from the left, for his role in conducting illegal searches of homes belonging to acquaintances of the Weather Underground in the early 1970s. These activities—referred to as "black bag operations"—resulted in Felt's indictment

and trial for violating the Fourth Amendment. An unapologetic Felt was convicted in 1981 but avoided prison through a pardon from President Reagan. The involvement of Felt in illegal search activities complicated heroic assessments of his character. Felt came up through the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover, a notorious autocrat and ruthless protector of the Bureau. In assessing Felt, critics dismissed lavishing praise due to Felt's record. *Slate*'s Jack Shafer wrote, "He wasn't an idealist or a whistle-blower or a patriot. He was just another vigilant protector of Washington turf, a player who didn't want his side to lose" (2005). Similarly, *Boston Globe* columnist Eileen McNamara dismissed Felt as "self-serving" (2005, p. B1) and the *Washington Post*'s Colbert King (2005) presented Felt's legacy as a key player in a corrupt bureaucracy instead of a crusader for justice. Outside of ex-Nixon officials with their direct stakes in the collective memory of Watergate, these non-idealized views of Felt situated his ironic involvement in unauthorized break-ins within a larger regime of corrupt government practices.

Portrayals of Felt as territorial, spurned, or a systematic violator of the U.S. Constitution made it difficult for journalists to connect Felt with the mythic image of Deep Throat promulgated since the 1970s. By promoting the question of motives as paramount, critics focused attention on individual actions at the expense of weighing the overall outcome of those actions and their public good. This perspective did not go unchallenged.

Reconciling the Man and the Myth

For Watergate to retain its mythic utility for journalism, the existing Watergate narrative needed to withstand attacks on Felt's actions and motivations. Situating Felt as a hero was crucial to maintaining the symbolic power of Deep Throat and the overall narrative of Watergate as a key moment of journalistic success and a reminder of journalism's continued value to society. To this end, those with stakes in preserving positive perceptions of Felt often explicitly presented him as a hero who performed an honorable act by becoming an unnamed source. The chief advocates alleging Felt's heroism were his lawyer John O'Connor, who authored the *Vanity Fair* article, and Felt's daughter and grandson. In addition, Woodward and Bernstein, along with the *Washington Post*, worked against stigmatizing Felt to protect their reputation and their role in Watergate. Outside the immediate stakeholders, Watergate's enduring symbolic importance impelled journalists to buttress the cultural standing of Deep Throat and, by extension, the journalistic role in the story.

The Felt family, along with O'Connor, actively and explicitly situated Felt as a hero both to maintain his reputation and also out of financial interest. O'Connor frequently invoked the word "hero" in discussions of Felt. On the day the story broke (5/31), O'Connor called Felt "a great hero" on the *NBC Nightly News* and told *ABC World News Tonight* that "he was protecting our system of justice." O'Connor also labeled Felt a "hero" on *Nightline* (ABC, 5/31). On PBS's *NewsHour* (5/31), O'Connor described Felt as "a true American Hero." Felt's daughter was quoted as calling the revelation of Felt "a great moment in ... American history" (*Lou Dobbs Tonight*,

CNN, 5/31). In a *New York Times* story titled "Felt Is Praised as a Hero and Condemned as a Traitor," Felt's grandson Nick Jones saluted his actions: "What he did was the right thing to do. Heroic. He's an honorable guy" (Seelye, 2005, p. A18). In *Time*, Jones was quoted as saying, "He is a great American hero who went well above and beyond the call of duty at much risk to himself to save his country from horrible injustice" (McGeary, 2005, p. 28). In these quotes, the explicit invocation of hero status by the Felt family worked in opposition to the above efforts to weaken or discredit Felt.

Aside from O'Connor and the Felt family, both Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein supported Felt's heroic status. On CNN's *Larry King Live* (6/2), Bernstein highlighted Felt's contribution: "The country was served because here was a man who told the truth." Woodward referred to Felt as "a man of immense courage" in an interview with Tom Brokaw (*Dateline*, NBC, 7/6). Woodward and Bernstein remained closely linked to Deep Throat, despite their copious use of other sources. Former *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee was also quoted often and appeared on network and cable news programs, including the *NBC Nightly News* (6/1), ABC's *Nightline* (6/1), and MSNBC's *Hardball* (6/3).

Outside of Woodward and Bernstein, the *Washington Post* devoted a great deal of space to the Felt revelation. Having housed Woodward and Bernstein throughout their Watergate coverage, the image and credibility of the *Post* was closely intertwined with the image of Watergate. Its authority as an elite newspaper remained bound up in its Watergate reporting legacy. This was reflected in the space it allotted to covering Felt—31 articles in the week following Felt's revelation (June 1 to June 7). This included nine articles on the first day (6/1) and eight on the second (6/2). Many of the articles revisited the *Post*'s Watergate reporting, including a 5,000 word front page story by Bob Woodward recounting his relationship with Felt (Woodward, 2005a). That piece was carried by other newspapers and formed the core of Woodward's bestselling book *The Secret Man* (2005b). Several of the *Post* columnists weighed in on Felt, including David Broder, Art Buchwald, Jim Hoagland, Colbert King, and ombudsman Michael Getler. By comparison, the *New York Times* ran 16 stories during the first week. Having been scooped on the story by *Vanity Fair*, the *Post* reacted with a barrage of coverage, much of it retelling the Watergate story, and therefore, reasserting the authority of the *Post* as an essential element in arguably the century's top political story.

Beyond direct stakeholders, numerous newspaper editorials and columns conferred hero status on Felt. A Cleveland *Plain Dealer* editorial called Felt, "the best of American heroes" ("Felt, finally," 2005, p. B8) and the *Seattle Times* said he "served the greater good of his country" ("The ultimate source," 2005, p. B6). To be clear, the *Arizona Republic* labeled Felt "hero, not villain" ("Moral minority," 2005, p. B8), while the *Kansas City Star* vouched that Felt made the "right decision" to go through Woodward ("Brave decision," 2005, p. B6). The *Rochester Democrat and Courier* lauded Felt as "a genuine hero, worthy of a place in the whistle-blower's hall of fame" ("A mystery solved," 2005, p. A8). The *San Antonio Express-News* dismissed ulterior motivations of Felt: "Felt was a patriot, placing the nation ahead of its government

when their interests conflicted" ("Mark Felt," 2005, p. B6). Felt was actively and explicitly protected as a heroic figure against competing assessments from Nixon loyalists and others. Often journalists turned to less restricted forms of opinion writing to make the case for Felt rather than work through non-opinion news pieces. This allowed for the direct protection of Felt in place of working through news sources to present a view of Felt. Journalists across the country deemed the story worthy of such discussions.

In the contestation over hero status, both working and former journalists often directly dismissed or rebutted the remarks made by Nixon loyalists. On NBC's *Today* (6/1), former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw dismissed Buchanan's criticism of Felt: "I think Pat said yesterday that Mark Felt was a traitor. A traitor to what, the truth? Here's a man who didn't make this stuff up." Also on *Today* (6/2), Woodward rejected Buchanan's claims: "Pat is a propagandist." On the *NBC Nightly News* (6/1), Bill Bradlee chastised G. Gordon Liddy for disparaging Felt: "he hasn't been out of jail all that long." A *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist referred to the Nixon loyalists as "Richard Nixon's old gang of felons, villains and assorted scum" (Steinburg, 2005, p. 22). Another columnist at the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* noted that Felt "has to suffer the denunciations of unrepentant jailbirds who would still put loyalty to an individual above loyalty to the country's greater good" (Arnold, 2005, p. 16). Remarks by former Nixon officials did not go uncontested. Rather, they were confronted and dismissed either through attacking the actual claims of speakers or their motives and stakes in diminishing Felt. This protection of Felt allowed him to be the centerpiece of an argument incorporating whistle-blowing, as a particular form of anonymity, into journalistic practice.

Ultimately, the frame of 'hero or villain' based on Felt's motives led to blind spots on both sides. When Felt's detractors held that Felt had ulterior motives for supplying background information to Woodward that negated his heroic value, journalists and others rightly countered by dismissing the question of motivations as irrelevant given the outcome of the reporting in leading to the deserved resignation of Nixon (however, directly or indirectly, this ending derived from Deep Throat). At the same time, the general question of motives cannot be so easily dismissed as irrelevant when considering ongoing problems surrounding the use of unnamed sources. The journalistic portrayal of Deep Throat as a whistle-blower limited the scope of unnamed sources to only a subset comprising altruistic actors resisting unethical organizational behavior. This reduction ignored the more common variety of unnamed sources as insiders providing information on topics far less vital than executive-level conspiracy. In many instances of blind sourcing, motives *do* matter when the veil of anonymity hides a source from public scrutiny. Audiences understandably and appropriately want to know why a source reveals information or makes a particular judgment along with the quality of these disclosures. In turn, journalists should provide this information to the extent it is possible to retain confidentiality—if it is even warranted in the first place. Nonetheless, it is the dexterity of collective memory that allows journalists to construct one situation—the connection of Deep Throat *qua* whistle-blower to the deserved resignation of

Nixon—as synecdochic of other situations that are less clear fits, therefore pushing aside the thorny question of motives for seeking anonymity.

Connecting the Past to the Present

The fighting over Felt spilled out from the confines of the Watergate era as various speakers extended their discussions to encompass the knotty issues surrounding the use of unnamed sources at the time of the revelation in 2005. This linkage between past and present prompts a reiteration of a central tenet underlying memory studies: by drawing on collective memory of the past for authority, actors prescribe and proscribe legitimates norms, expectations, and actions in the present. In the case of Felt, discussions of his actions as commendable or flawed gave rise to two conflicting normative visions of the appropriate relationship between government officials and journalists.

Memory work critical of Felt—along with the larger received narrative of Watergate as a victory for journalism—spawned the articulation of a normative organizational perspective privileging internal processes while dissuading individuals from secretly revealing information by becoming unnamed sources. Critics questioning Felt's motives expressed a generalized endorsement of loyalty and internal procedural fidelity on the part of government officials. This perspective juxtaposed loyalty as an established norm dictating proper actions with an interpretation of Felt's actions as profoundly disloyal. Again, it was largely Nixon administration officials who framed Felt's turning to the press in a larger normative conception of the duty of government officials. For example, when Chuck Colson told the *CBS Evening News* (5/31): "You don't go sneaking around in dark alleys at night, passing tips to reporters," he was aiming at top government officials generally. For Colson and others, circumventing official channels by informing journalists was nothing less than an act of betrayal. Other Nixon staffers admitted that a government official should address malfeasance, but only by working through pre-established channels in order to prevent a larger breakdown. Former Nixon chief of staff Alexander Haig told the Fox News Channel: "you have an obligation to resign and take necessary steps within your power to deal with the problem" (*Special Report with Brit Hume*, 6/1). Similarly, David Gergen suggested that an insider approach would have been better: "I think you need to use your powers within government to see if you can solve it" (*NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, CNN, 5/31). These speakers promoted a particular model of behavior for officials that excluded working externally with journalists. Taken further, such arguments suggested the wholesale removal of the journalistic gaze from the internal workings of the government. Ironically, this did not preclude officials from seeking anonymity as a tool for spreading non-attributed information as a press management tactic. In other words, this argument shunned unauthorized revelatory unnamed sourcing practices while sustaining the utilization of strategic leaks to journalists. Journalists were portrayed as useful for spreading messages, but useless in correcting internal problems.

By contrast, members of the journalistic community often continued to condense the domain of unnamed sources to only an idealized subset of whistle-blowers acting in the public interest. Ignoring problems incumbent in the actual use of unnamed sources, journalists argued that their ability to hold the government accountable relied on officials coming forward with hidden information. Explicit ties between anonymity and democracy were common, including by a Cleveland *Plain Dealer* columnist who wrote that unnamed sources "are one means by which a democracy remains of the people, by the people and for the people" (Sullivan, 2005, p. B9). The Felt revelation led to praise for the general use of unnamed sources while discounting controversial applications of anonymity as isolated and deviant. For example, David Halberstam acknowledged the frequent misuse of anonymity at the same time as he advocated for their necessity: "Sure, anonymous sources can be abused. But every once in a while they are simply mandatory . . . for a democracy to work" (Rainey, 2005, p. A14). Halberstam's argument prioritized the need for unnamed sources over examples of their misapplication. Anonymity, having been criticized so stridently in controversies at the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and CBS News around the time of the Felt revelation, became revitalized as an enabling mechanism for journalists to provide audiences—inclusively construed as the "public"—with internal information beneficial to self-governance. By drawing on the collective memory of Watergate, journalists presented arguments supporting anonymity as well as their own cultural and political relevancy while closing off a much needed public and professional reckoning of how unnamed sources were often being deployed in less than ideal situations.

Both of the perspectives discussed in this section demonstrated efforts to utilize the authoritative potentiality of collective memory stirred up by the revelation of Felt and the newfound public attention focused on the Watergate era. Rather than keeping disputes over Felt trapped in the memory of the 1970s, competing visions of news sourcing practices—however protective and plagued by gaps—formed a debate around how sources and journalists should act in the present.

Conclusion: Collective Memory and Journalism

By stressing continuity between past and present, collective memory serves as a powerful force for maintaining and legitimating communities. The influence of the past on understandings of the present is so pervasive as to be often overlooked as unremarkable, which is unsurprising given how shared memory is so closely linked to common sense. Yet memory is also subject to conflict. During moments when the role of memory in justifying actions in the present becomes a point of contestation among competing groups, efforts to construct the past appear dogged and purposeful. Through this memory work, groups publicly strive to shape the shared understanding of an event's significance in ways that benefit claims to social power and authority in the present.

Critical interest is owed to such rifts because the past is not fought over for the sake of the past but for how it is used to legitimize ideas or actions in the present. Because the active shaping of collective memory in public discourse remains the province of

only a few speakers, a central question for inquiry into collective memory is who gets to speak about the past? Are the speakers stakeholders in the event under discussion, socially powerful actors, or cultural producers capable of disseminating public messages? Most importantly, in working from the present to the past, what do their claims legitimize? The conceptual usefulness of collective memory stems from how it aids us in understanding how certain practices and beliefs come to be central to the identities of varying collectivities.

Irwin-Zerecka (1994) notes that accuracy is not a hallmark of collective memory so long as "active remembrance" is "communally shared and deemed important for the community's self-definition" (p. 57). Prior to Felt, journalistic retellings of Watergate privileged the press role in uncovering the scandal over the work of others in a manner that emphasized journalism's self-presentation of holding the government accountable on behalf of the public (Schudson, 1992; Zelizer, 1993). Watergate provided journalism with an important symbol for guiding appropriate standards of action, fending off critics, and justifying journalism's pursuit of legal rights above ordinary citizens—particularly those involving unnamed sources. In all these ways, journalists used their control over the collective memory of Watergate to bolster their claims to cultural authority.

Challenges to journalism's preferred Watergate narrative arose with the linking of Deep Throat to Felt. While Felt was still alive, his enfeebled state robbed him of any meaningful opportunity to offer his own interpretations. Other speakers stepped in to discern his intentions, and he was immediately maligned for careerist and personal motives by a loose interpretive coalition of ex-Nixon officials, conservative pundits, some journalists, and others citing his involvement in directing illegal break-ins, his reputation as a Hoover-loyalist, and the suggestion of bitterness for being passed over for the FBI directorship. Journalists responded defensively by praising Felt and dismissing criticisms of his intentions as irrelevant.

In the end it was not the reputational sniping that mattered, but how such discourse tied into a competition to imagine journalism and its relation to power in particular ways. The struggle over how to remember Mark Felt, and, more broadly, the press role in uncovering Watergate, took place largely between journalists and government officials as each side interpreted Felt's actions with an eye toward shaping conceptions of appropriate behavior. Interpretations of Felt extended beyond considerations of past action to differing normative formations pitting the responsibilities of public officials with insider information of wrongdoing against the utility of journalism in ameliorating such wrongdoing through reporting relying on unnamed sources. Critics of Felt expressed a general mistrust of journalists to the point of denying their ability to improve government functioning through reporting on internal problems. Journalists responded by reducing the realm of unnamed sources to only that of the whistle-blower. This was a defensive move protective of a normative construct of journalism in an era of diminishing public opinion of journalism, a Bush administration resistant to press entreaties, and a series of controversies involving unnamed sources. Rather than inspiring a reexamination of why so many unnamed sources proved problematic or prompting calls to reform news practices, support for Felt closed off any such

discussions to instead reassert Watergate as a touchstone upholding the cultural authority of journalism.

The tension arising from differing interpretations of Felt reminds us that collective memory is not stable and that no group has complete control over memory, especially when the cultural stakes are high. For these reasons, moments of interpretive instability matter because, for any group, how members act is tightly bound up with how they actively remember the past.

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