

# BOOK REVIEW

## Unknotting the Tangled Threads of Watergate Lore

LEAK: WHY MARK FELT BECAME DEEP THROAT. By Max Holland.  
Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2012. Pp. xiii, 285. \$29.95.

Reviewed by M. E. (Spike) Bowman\*

In the opening sentence of *Leak: Why Mark Felt Became Deep Throat*, Max Holland makes clear why he wrote the book. He posits that after forty years, almost everything about the Watergate scandal is known – except for William Mark Felt’s motivation for leaking information to Bob Woodward of *The Washington Post*.<sup>1</sup> Leaking to the media was far from uncommon in the FBI at the time of Watergate, and there were several “favorites” to whom the leaks normally went. Why Felt selected an unknown and very junior reporter on the Metro Section of *The Washington Post* is a curiosity that has not been widely explored.

Despite having this overriding purpose for writing the book, Holland does more than present what is certainly a more nuanced explanation for the leaks by the whistleblower “Deep Throat.” The research that goes into this relatively short book (200 pages of text, plus exhaustive footnotes) not only collects in one place the facts surrounding the investigation of Watergate, but also assesses many of the myths that have developed around that rather remarkable period of history.

### I. EXPLAINING MARK FELT’S MOTIVATIONS

Holland examines three principal reasons advanced by others for the motives of Deep Throat, and he credibly dismisses each one. Some have argued that Deep Throat was a selfless, high-ranking official intent on exposing the lawlessness of the Nixon White House.<sup>2</sup> Holland, however, points out that Felt himself participated in the lawlessness of the era, having authorized illegal entries into the homes of those associated with the Weather Underground.<sup>3</sup> Another motive advanced is that Felt was trying to protect the FBI from the White House, which

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1. MAX HOLLAND, *LEAK: WHY MARK FELT BECAME DEEP THROAT* 1 (2012).

2. *Id.* (stating that Carl Bernstein and Woodward suggested this motive in *All the President’s Men* (1974)).

3. HOLLAND, *supra* note 1, at 2.

was undermining the FBI's investigation of Watergate.<sup>4</sup> As Holland points out, however, Felt later acknowledged that nothing could have stopped the FBI from conducting its investigation.<sup>5</sup> The third motive ascribed to Felt was "pure pique" for not having been named Director of the FBI upon the death of J. Edgar Hoover.<sup>6</sup>

This third explanation comes a bit closer to the truth, according to Holland. Felt did want, very badly, to be named Director of the FBI, but Holland convincingly portrays Felt as having acted with too much subtlety to have been responding in blind malice. Holland looks at virtually all that has been written about Watergate and the investigation. He documents, almost to a fault, nearly every fact he writes. Holland demonstrates that Felt was, indeed, duplicitous, but he also shows that Felt's duplicity was omni-directional. Felt's leaks were accompanied by a masterful network of lies to virtually everyone, with the rather singular purpose of undermining President Richard M. Nixon's selection of L. Patrick Gray, III, to be the next Director of the FBI. Felt's goal was to convince the President that an experienced agent was needed at the helm of the FBI.<sup>7</sup> Felt likely believed that leaking to an unknown reporter like Woodward would make it seem unlikely that the leak was coming from a senior FBI officer because Woodward was not one of the favored reporters to whom information was routinely fed.

## II. CHALLENGING POPULAR BELIEFS ABOUT WATERGATE

Holland also exposes many of the myths that have developed around Watergate. Perhaps the most poignant is one romanticized by the Hollywood film *All the President's Men*.<sup>8</sup> Holland alleges that, contrary to popular belief, Watergate was not a situation in which wrongdoing was exposed mostly through the enterprise of reporters. Rather, Holland very convincingly demonstrates that most of the facts surrounding Watergate were uncovered by the FBI investigation and were then leaked to a variety of recipients.<sup>9</sup> Holland remains disturbed by the myth, which endures and shapes the public's understanding of Watergate.<sup>10</sup>

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4. *Id.* at 1-2 (explaining that Woodward later changed his account of Felt's motive; see BOB WOODWARD, *THE SECRET MAN: THE STORY OF WATERGATE'S DEEP THROAT* 104-105, 215 (2005)).

5. HOLLAND, *supra* note 1, at 3.

6. *Id.* at 2. According to Holland, this is a generally held, long-standing explanation of Felt's motive. Holland points out that the first publication to advance this theory was John Limpert, *Deep Throat: If It Isn't Tricia It Must Be . . .* WASHINGTONIAN, June 1974, at 17. HOLLAND, *supra* note 1, at 2, 202 n.3.

7. With adept use of sources, Holland demonstrates that, unknown to Felt, President Nixon suspected Felt of being a leaker and would never have picked him to be Director of the FBI.

8. ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN (Warner Bros. 1976).

9. Holland focuses entirely on Felt as the source of leaked information that formed the core of Woodward and Bernstein's articles. He leaves it to readers to judge whether they had other sources as well.

10. See HOLLAND, *supra* note 1, at 88. This view that *The Washington Post's* reporting misled its readers is heavily criticized by Barry Sussman, who was *The Washington Post* editor in charge of the

Additionally, while Felt acknowledged being Deep Throat, Holland demonstrates that he was not the source of all the really important information leaked during the Watergate investigation. It is not even clear that Felt was the only source providing Woodward and Bernstein with leaked information.<sup>11</sup> Most of the participants in the Watergate drama, including the FBI investigators, were initially of the opinion that there was a single leaker – and that belief served to confuse everyone. Holland suggests that one reason Felt leaked information was because he seriously wanted to undermine Gray. Felt thought that leaking information would give the FBI a reason to accelerate the investigation, the results of which he was convinced would show Gray to be an inept administrator. Holland's thesis is that Felt believed that if Nixon lost confidence in Gray he would be removed and Felt would have a chance to become the Director. Ironically, Nixon had already lost confidence in Gray and would never have selected Felt to be the Director because Nixon suspected him of leaking information.<sup>12</sup>

Holland also notes that it has been reported that Deep Throat was not always correct. Although not explicitly stated, one gets the impression that Felt was sufficiently underhanded that he presumed that others acted similarly, and actions that he “supposed” and “reported” as true “facts” may not have been true. For example, Holland suggests that Felt may have reported that Gray was blackmailing Nixon into appointing him Director of the FBI.

Holland notes that Felt was believed, by several people, to be a source of the leak. It is intimated that others in the FBI may also have known this. More dramatically, Nixon appears to have believed Felt to be the leaker, but was reluctant to fire him because he knew too much. Nixon reportedly told Gray that Felt was leaking information, but when confronted by Gray, Felt lied so convincingly that Gray believed him to be a loyal servant. It was only when Felt claimed to be Deep Throat that Gray came to realize how accomplished a liar Felt was.

Later, when William D. Ruckelshaus was interim FBI director, he received a phone call from someone identifying himself as John M. Crewdson, a reporter who had broken the story of Nixon-era wiretaps on reporters. The caller identified Felt as Deep Throat, but when Ruckelshaus confronted Felt, he again vehemently and convincingly denied the accusation.<sup>13</sup> Years later, when asked

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Watergate investigation. Sussman claims that *The Washington Post* reporting was solid and of high quality. See Barry Sussman, Commentary, *Did Mark Felt Even Know He Was Deep Throat?*, NIEMAN WATCHDOG (2012), <http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=background.view&backgroundid=624>.

11. Woodward and Bernstein's original Watergate notes are now on deposit at the University of Texas. News reports based on the notes indicate there were at least two, and possibly three, sources of leaked information. See *Watergate: Myth vs. Reality*, IN NIXON'S WEB, <http://www.lpatrickgrayiii.com/watergate.html>.

12. See HOLLAND, *supra* note 1, at 27-42.

13. Not long after this, Felt retired from the FBI. Holland reports that Felt retired rather than face a probable leak investigation and the polygraph test that was sure to follow.

about this phone call, Crewdson denied that he had ever made such a call and proclaimed that he would never reveal a source.

There were others who thought the leaker had to be in the White House, which served to further confuse the issues. John W. Dean, III, for example, suspected a White House leak because he thought that certain disclosures were known only by those working at the White House – but Felt did know the information.<sup>14</sup> Despite having been both suspected of being a leaker, and identified as a high level leaker, Felt was able to hang on for quite a long time – in part because he retained the support of Gray and because he knew where all the bodies were buried.

#### CONCLUSION

In all, this is a very interesting book because Holland takes virtually all that is known about the Watergate era and puts together a very plausible thesis about the frame of mind of Mark Felt, a central figure. In this attempt, Holland is convincing. He does not set out to correct the historical record, although in some matters he does so. He does not delve into the reporting, *per se*, although he does comment that Woodward and Bernstein were too junior to have perceived Felt's purposes in leaking to them.

Holland's writing is heavily documented – sometimes there are so many sources that it is impossible to know, precisely, where the material in quotes comes from. Additionally, Holland disconcertingly tends to footnote entire paragraphs with multiple sources. Holland also has a tendency to attribute mental attitudes and opinions to individuals he writes about, without clear indication of whether the statement is his opinion, or if he is actually citing a source. Again, the multiple citations sometimes make it difficult to assess the degree to which the sources support the proposition being asserted.

Holland's book is valuable, but some readers will be disappointed that the author does not do more to explore the writings, background, and sources of Woodward and Bernstein. There are indications that Deep Throat was a composite. Felt was likely the most important source they had for their series on Watergate, but it does seem that Holland is incorrect in assuming that only Felt's motivation remained to be exposed. Nonetheless, Holland presents a revealing picture of an FBI that, under Hoover, was itself duplicitous and, in some cases, lawless. Mark Felt was a product of that environment.

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14. The information at issue had to do with erasures of the tapes that recorded conversations in the Oval Office.