

Featured

America clears its throat

By Paul Harris, Axis of Logic

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As revelations confirming the identity of Deep Throat came to light, it was like the United States finally swallowed. The enigmatic mystery person who led Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (hereafter referred to as Woodstein) to crucial information about wrongdoing in the top levels of government, was a part of American mythology for thirty years. For some, the disclosure of his name was a moment of pride; for others, it was like the country had just horked up a big gob of phlegm. For far too many, they know Deep Throat only as an early porn movie, and have no idea that Watergate is anything other than the place Monica Lewinsky lived.

Mark Felt was the number two guy in the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the early 1970s, and it was he who funnelled key information to the young Woodstein. These were a couple of fairly green reporters but with a tenaciousness nicely captured in the film 'All the President's Men', they helped lead a journalistic and legal charge that finally brought down a president. It is doubtful that Woodstein considered anything beyond a search for truth, for 'the story'; it is unlikely they were gunning for the president; they even may have had regret about the damage the whole mess did to Americans' belief in the sanctity of their government. But their job was to ferret out the truth.

Richard Nixon (Tricky Dick) was, and is, the only man ever to resign the presidency of the United States, although much of the world during the past thirty years wishes he had started a trend. Nixon was never charged criminally, owing to a pardon granted by his successor right after he left the White House, but he was surely facing charges and a likely impeachment. Forty individuals who were either members of the committee to re-elect the president (known by the appropriate acronym 'Creep') or government officials, including the Attorney General, were convicted on criminal charges. In a separate matter, vice president Spiro Agnew was also convicted of illegal activity (tax evasion).

This was a rotten government. At the time, the public seemed to be grudgingly grateful for Woodstein and Deep Throat and the rooting out of corruption that would allow them to get the republic back on the track of decency, back to the mythical world of American justice with which the people had deluded themselves. Such a liberating catharsis will not come to this country again.

In the end, the Watergate story makes interesting reading and for those of us old enough to remember the events as they unfolded day after day, Mark Felt's admission is a bit of an anti-climactic coda to our own histories. But let's look at what the story meant then, and what it means now. And let's consider how the changes in its meaning reveal an America today that is very different from what it was the night they drove old Dickie down.

Nixon was elected in 1968 by a wide margin over Hubert Humphrey, vice president to Lyndon Johnson. Although Nixon was never what anyone could seriously describe as a

likeable character, Humphrey bore the weight of all the body bags generated by Johnson's dirty little war in Vietnam, and Nixon won quite handily. He was re-elected in 1972 in a massive landslide, partly because the Vietnam war was obviously coming to an end; the US had finally accepted what most of the world had known for several years – that they were being ignominiously defeated by a ragtag group of peasant soldiers. But, as well, Nixon stood out for several initiatives that made him seem almost like a statesman: fresh relations with the USSR, overtures and even a visit to 'Red' China, and so on.

But something happened during that second Nixon campaign (well, third, if you count his loss to John Kennedy in 1960). The Democratic candidate was George McGovern, a likeable, respectable, and probably decent man; but far too much of a lightweight to defeat an incumbent president who had not obviously messed up. Despite that McGovern presented no credible threat to take the White House, elements in the Republican party took the trouble of bugging McGovern's election headquarters. And a few buffoons, ultimately found to be on the party's payroll, bungled a break-in of the headquarters in the Watergate hotel complex in early 1972.

It was the story of this break-in, a seemingly minor bit of stupidity, that first attracted Woodstein. And the further they dug, the higher up the Republican food chain they found themselves. Eventually, it looked as though the trail was leading to the White House itself.

And it did. Mark Felt, known to the world for thirty years as Deep Throat, helped Woodstein get there. On August 8, 1974, after relentless pressure from the media and the courts, Nixon resigned and handed the White House keys to Gerald Ford.

Woodstein went on to write a couple of books about their experiences, made into a popular movie, and they went on to long journalistic careers, mainly fuelled by this one story. Were they heroes? Not really, just a couple of guys doing their jobs. But it must surely be recognized that they were under a tremendous amount of pressure – after all, their work appeared to be leading to accusations against the most powerful man in the world. All the resources the White House and the Republican party could muster were coming down heavily on them. But to them, the story was the thing; that's what journalism was all about.

Mark Felt was apparently suspected a few times of being Deep Throat, including by Nixon himself, but he went on to finish his FBI career and for thirty years he kept his mouth shut about it. So did Woodstein: they had said all along they would never reveal the name of Deep Throat so long as he was alive. Ultimately, Felt decided on his own to speak out and now there are pundits across the political spectrum debating whether he's a hero or a traitor.

Predictably, Republican thugs are pointing fingers at him. G. Gordon Liddy even managed to get significant ink and airtime telling the world that Felt lacks ethics. This, from the man who led the bungled Watergate break-in. Others who ultimately did jail time following the Watergate experience and the subsequent judicial investigations are equally damning.

It is unclear why anyone in the media has bothered to ask the opinions of the criminals convicted for wrongdoing in this story. But that is one of the things that is different in America in 2005 – mainstream media appears to have lost all measure of common sense and decency, any vestige of ethics, any pretence at journalistic integrity. Woodstein, or

anyone like them, hasn't appeared in the mainstream media since Watergate. That isn't because there has been no scandalous behaviour on the part of government; on the contrary, American politics over the past thirty years has been on a straight nosedive into the sewer. The media just doesn't cover it anymore.

One side note to this story, though, is that the Washington Post has found itself back in the limelight where it can posture as though it still has credibility as a news source. Even Bob Woodward has been able to get in front of the cameras, almost like one of those 'where are they now?' interviews.

Thirty years ago, Americans would generally have considered that Woodstein were the good guys. Americans thought their politicians should be held to account for their behaviour; and while they were reluctant to accept that their president was a bum, they did at least understand that democracy required the kind of investigation that took place. Today, the president is once again unassailable. Over the past thirty years, presidents have ceased to display any semblance of obeying the law, of acting with decency and honesty, of serving the democracy they were elected to represent; with the notable exception of Jimmy Carter, the only truly decent man to ever hold that job. Instead, they have become the stooges of corporate interests to a greater degree than at any time in America's past, all with the compliance of the media. You can lie about invading a foreign country but you can't lie about a blow job,-- that could cost you the presidency and it appears to be the only thing that could.

In the 1970s, the media helped bring down a president. But, much more importantly, it helped to reinvigorate a sense of democracy in America. It was seen by the people that they could still hold some sway and that the top dogs could not act with impunity. Today, a majority of Americans believe there should be restrictions on the media, that they should not be able to investigate freely, that they should be under some measure of government restriction about what they can report. What makes this so bizarre, is that mainstream media has not practiced investigative journalism for almost thirty years. Unless it is involved with some terribly meaningful story, like the O.J. Simpson or Michael Jackson trials, the media is clearly the lickspittle of government and corporations. Exactly what restrictions do the American public believe are needed?

The reawakening of the American spirit of democracy and citizenship that arose during the '60s and early '70s is dead. Never known for deep thinking, the American public appears to have given up on thinking altogether. Today, they would call for Woodstein to be lynched, for Felt to be tried as a traitor. Right and wrong no longer appear to have any meaning for Americans: it doesn't matter that their president lies with virtually every word he speaks, that he has destroyed years of goodwill among the various nations of the world, that he has destroyed America's economy, that he is needlessly killing people in some remote part of the world including some of his country's best and brightest. What matters is that the media is not allowed to tell anyone that he's an idiot. They're not even allowed to report the daft things he says and does, just in case some American is smart enough figure out on their own that he's an idiot, that he's dangerous, that he is likely a fraud.

Government has been no less rotten since 1974, just more careful for a while and finally more brazen. With the willing cooperation of the mainstream media, with a population who

exercises with vigour its right to remain ignorant, government no longer even pretends to be of, by and for the people. It's not clear if Americans themselves have given up on democracy and decency in government, if they have all decided that they want an opportunity to get a piece of the action themselves, or if they are genuinely stupid. But in any case, Americans no longer have the desire or the drive to ensure that their government is not simply a bunch of thugs in expensive suits.

Investigative journalism about American politics is still very much alive. It just isn't done in the United States, and the work that is done abroad rarely sees the light of day in America. Mainstream media has become the soporific of corporate government and no longer helps the public to learn the truth. Mind you, it is fair to acknowledge that the public doesn't seem to care about that: reality shows are far more interesting than reality.

It's a better question to ask what happened to America during the past thirty years rather than to debate whether Mark Felt was a hero. Of course he wasn't; the man was convicted himself for authorizing illegal wire taps although he was pardoned by President Reagan and never went to jail. But in the case of Watergate, he did what any self-respecting American should have expected him to do. He blew the whistle, he stood up to the White House when it was run by a crook. Loyalty to one's country requires loyalty to the people, not to the rulers.

Critics today are saying Felt should have taken his concerns to a Grand Jury rather than to Woodstein, that would have been the proper avenue. But Felt knows very well how the legal system works, and he knows his evidence would have disappeared and he might have been 'disappeared' himself. The folks who run governments are not nice people. If Felt wanted to help restore honesty and integrity to the White House, he had to come at it surreptitiously.

Today, mainstream media has withered to the point that the talking heads and scribes are debating Felt's place in history. It would never occur to them to wonder why none of them grew up to be Woodstein.

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