Watergate in historical perspective: Why does today's criminal White House face no similar challenge?

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The family of former top FBI official W. Mark Felt identified him Tuesday as Deep Throat, the government insider who supplied critical information to the *Washington Post* during the Watergate affair. An article authorized by the family and written by their attorney, John O'Connor, was made public by *Vanity Fair* magazine. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the two reporters most identified with the Watergate investigation that led to Richard Nixon's resignation from the presidency in 1974, subsequently confirmed Felt's identity as their principal secret source.

Felt, now 91 and in poor health following a series of strokes, has not spoken publicly on the subject, but he greeted reporters outside his home in Santa Rosa, California after his daughter and grandson issued a statement coinciding with the release of the *Vanity Fair* article. Felt joined the FBI in 1942, working his way up to the number three position in the agency by 1971, a job for which he was selected by J. Edgar Hoover. He left the bureau in 1973 after he was repeatedly passed over for promotion to the top spot.

The initial media response to the identification of Felt has been a flurry of stories quoting former Nixon aides denouncing Felt as a backstabber and traitor. Patrick Buchanan, Nixon's former speechwriter and a three-time ultra-right presidential candidate, called Felt "a dishonorable man." Emphasizing loyalty to the presidency, he added, "I think Mark Felt behaved treacherously."

Charles Colson, a top organizer of Nixon dirty tricks, now a fundamentalist minister and leading figure in the Christian Right, declared himself "personally shocked" that an FBI official would "go sneaking around dark alleys and talking to reporters."

It is testimony to the ingrained right-wing bias in the corporate-controlled media that it solicits the opinions of Watergate criminals like Colson, who served four months in prison, and Nixon apologists like Buchanan, and reports their views as though they represented legitimate criticism.

It is ludicrous to suggest that Felt was somehow guilty of an abuse of trust because he failed to join Colson, Buchanan & Co. in covering up the crimes of the Nixon White House. Felt was supervising a criminal investigation into the burglary of the Democratic National Committee offices in Watergate, where the evidence pointed to a White House connection. This investigation was being systematically sabotaged by that very same White House. In other words, the criminal conspiracy that produced the Watergate break-in was continuing in the form of a cover-up.

Felt's release of information to the *Washington Post* was thus an effort to expose an ongoing crime whose ringleaders were his own bosses: the president of the United States and his chief White House aides, as well his immediate supervisor, interim FBI Director L. Patrick Gray. The aides were subsequently convicted of serious crimes and sent to prison, a fate that Nixon only escaped by agreeing to resign as president in return for a pardon from his successor, Vice President Gerald Ford.

That being said, Felt himself hardly had clean hands. At the very same time that he was meeting secretly with Woodward to leak damning information about the crimes of the Nixon White House, he was ordering illegal warrantless searches of the homes of family and friends of suspected members of the Weather Underground, a Maoist antiwar group that staged a handful of well-publicized bombings in 1970-71. The longtime FBI official balked at illegal break-ins organized by the White House through Nixon's "plumbers," while endorsing those conducted by the FBI. Felt was ultimately tried and convicted in 1980 on charges of violating the civil rights of those whose homes the FBI had burglarized. He was pardoned in 1981 by President Ronald Reagan.

The crisis of the Nixon administration came to the surface following the arrest of five men attempting to burglarize Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate office and apartment complex in Washington on June 17, 1972. One of the five was James McCord, an official of the Committee to Re-Elect the President, the official Nixon campaign committee. The other four were Cuban exiles with longstanding ties to the CIA. A trail of evidence led from the five men to two White House aides, E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, and ultimately to the highest levels of the Nixon administration, and the president himself.

The context of the Watergate scandal was a profound social and political crisis of American capitalism reflected in three interconnected phenomena: the defeat of American imperialism in Vietnam; the weakening international economic position of the United States; and the increasing social conflicts within the United States, especially the unrest in the labor movement and among students, blacks and other minorities.

Nixon took office in January 1969, with the United States deeply engaged in the Vietnam War. More than half a million troops were deployed in Vietnam, and the Pentagon was seeking an expansion to over 600,000. Nixon rejected this course of action and turned instead to the policy he dubbed "Vietnamization": the gradual drawing-down of the US ground troops, replacing them with additional forces raised by the puppet regime in South Vietnam as well as intensified aerial bombardment of both North and South Vietnam.

These methods did not stop the steady deterioration of the South Vietnamese regime and the growth of the political influence and control of the liberation forces. Nixon punctuated the troop withdrawals with a series of aggressive escalations, including the US invasion of Cambodia in 1970 and a more limited incursion into Laos in 1971. It was clear to the White House strategists, however, that the war had lost any public support and that Nixon could not win reelection if US military casualties continued at a substantial level. The troop withdrawals continued, and by mid-1972 all

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US ground troops had been pulled out.

Despite attempts of White House propagandists to sugarcoat the result—and further acts of homicidal vengeance against the Vietnamese, such as the infamous Christmas 1972 bombing of Hanoi—the forced US withdrawal from Vietnam, leaving behind a South Vietnam visibly on its last legs, was a historic strategic defeat. The most powerful nation in the world had been humiliated by a Third World people fighting a guerrilla war, armed largely with weapons captured from the invaders. Less than nine months after Nixon resigned the presidency, a final offensive by the liberation forces routed and overthrew the puppet regime in Saigon and reunified Vietnam.

While the US policy in Vietnam was unraveling, the dominant position of the United States in the world economy was being undermined by the steady growth of the balance of payments deficits, fueled by government budget deficits and spending on the war. Under the system of fixed currency parities set up at the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference, the US was committed to redeem dollars held overseas at a rate of $35 to an ounce of gold. The buildup of dollar holdings overseas dwarfed the gold reserves in Ft. Knox, and ultimately compelled Nixon, on August 15, 1971, to sever the ties between gold and the dollar, inaugurating the regime of floating currencies that continues to this day.

A major factor in the collapse of the Bretton Woods system was a powerful wages movement among industrial workers in the United States, in a series of mass struggles beginning with the General Electric strike in 1969, and continuing through a 100-day strike against General Motors, the first-ever national strike by postal workers, and strikes by Teamsters truck drivers, by dock workers on both coasts, and by increasingly militant white collar and government workers. Nixon sought to counter this steady upward pressure on wages by imposing, as part of his August 15 measures, a limited wage freeze, restricting wage increases to no more than 5.5 percent a year.

The widespread labor militancy was part of a broader social movement of the working class and significant sections of the middle class: millions of youth and students participated in demonstrations against the Vietnam War; violent upheavals shook the black neighborhoods of major US cities from 1965 on, reaching a peak in 1967 and 1968, while civil rights struggles swept the American South; the radicalization brought new demands for equal rights for women, the beginning of a movement for gay rights, as well as protests against discrimination and poverty among Latinos and native Americans.

The Nixon administration felt itself under siege. In one well-known incident, Attorney General John Mitchell, watching a massive antiwar demonstration from the windows of the Justice Department, remarked in alarm that it looked like a scene from the Russian Revolution. This fear of the radicalized masses fueled an increasing paranoia about disloyalty within the federal government, especially the danger of leaks to the media.

In 1971, the Nixon White House tried to suppress the Pentagon Papers, a Pentagon internal history of the Vietnam War that confirmed the systematic lying about the war by a series of US administrations. A dissident Pentagon analyst, Daniel Ellsberg, leaked the documents to the *New York Times*, which published them after a unanimous Supreme Court decision rejecting the White House demand for censorship.

After this debacle, Nixon formed the illegal "plumbers" unit, a group of ex-intelligence operatives and Cuban exiles recruited for undercover jobs against political targets. The plumbers broke into the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist and rifled his papers. Nixon ordered them to do the same to the Brookings Institution, a liberal think tank. The Watergate break-in was another in that series of "black bag jobs" by the plumbers. The five men arrested were apparently seeking to retrieve or repair an electronic bugging device in the offices of Democratic National Committee chairman Lawrence O'Brien.

Two days after the arrest of the five burglars, Mark Felt was in contact with Bob Woodward at the *Washington Post* and began providing information derived from the FBI investigation of the break-in. Felt's role in this unfolding crisis expressed a definite political agenda. It was the outcome of a protracted conflict between the Nixon White House and the FBI, going back at least to 1970, when J. Edgar Hoover blocked Nixon's initial efforts to organize political surveillance and dirty tricks against opponents of the Vietnam War (the "Huston plan," after its author Tom Huston, then a Nixon White House aide).

Hoover was, of course, not opposed to political spying and repression, but he regarded such methods as the property of his agency and resisted efforts to set up a parallel capability outside his control. Felt was of the same mind, as a Hoover protégé loyal to the FBI as an institution and resenting White House efforts to usurp its powers. He also became personally disaffected when after Hoover's death in April 1972, Nixon named a political crony, L. Patrick Gray, as interim director, rather than promoting a longtime FBI official like himself, next in line in the bureau hierarchy.

These personal and institutional motivations, however, were the expression of a more deep-seated conflict, reflecting deepening divisions within the American ruling elite and its state apparatus over how to deal with the social convulsions brought on by economic crisis and war. The Watergate scandal became the means through which these divisions were fought out.

Significantly, while Felt was in possession of information that could have shattered the Nixon reelection campaign, he withheld it until after the election. Felt was aware, for instance, not only of key details of Watergate, but also of Vice President Spiro Agnew's involvement in a bribery scandal that would not be made public until a year later (according to Bob Woodward's account yesterday in the *Washington Post*). Whatever his differences with the Nixon White House, he evidently did not want to aid the campaign of Nixon's Democratic opponent, George McGovern.

The initial media response to Watergate was relatively low-key, although the *Post* carried a steady stream of major articles, some fueled by Felt's "Deep Throat" revelations. After Nixon's reelection in November 1972, the crisis began to gather steam. Judge John Sirica imposed stiff sentences on the five burglars, in a successful effort to force them to name those who commissioned the attack on the Democratic National Committee.

By the spring of 1973, the Watergate investigation began to arouse widespread public interest. As more and more evidence emerged of major crimes against the American constitution and democratic rights—the compilation of a White House "enemies list," the use of government agencies like the FBI and IRS to persecute political opponents, systematic illegal surveillance and disruption of antiwar groups—it became impossible for official Washington to sweep the case under the rug.

A Senate committee chaired by Sam Ervin, a North Carolina Democrat, held public hearings which attracted an enormous mass audience. The Nixon White House began to disintegrate. His two top aides, Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, were forced to resign. White House counsel John Dean became a witness against the president and testified, before a national television audience of tens of millions, about criminal obstruction of justice by the president.

In the summer of 1973, it came to light that Nixon had authorized a taping system to record all major conversations in the Oval Office. A protracted legal struggle ensued to force the White House to release the tapes of key conversations about Watergate. Nixon attempted to suppress these demands by firing the first Watergate special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, triggering widespread protests and the beginning of impeachment proceedings in the House of Representatives. In July 1974 the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that Nixon had to hand over the tapes. A month later, after the release of tapes that confirmed his role in the cover-up, Nixon resigned.

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The Watergate crisis has enormous relevance to the current state of affairs in American political life. By any objective standard, the administration of George W. Bush is guilty of far more flagrant crimes than even those of Richard Nixon, yet it faces virtually no comparable opposition within official political and media circles.

Like Nixon's, the Bush administration is engaged in a criminal war of aggression, launched under false pretenses (the 9/11 attacks, which had nothing to do with Iraq, playing the role of the Gulf of Tonkin "incident" used by Lyndon Johnson to obtain congressional authorization for war). Like Nixon's, but on a much greater scale, the Bush administration presides over a deteriorating US position in the world economy, which threatens, sooner rather than later, to trigger socioeconomic convulsions within the United States.

The great difference is that unlike Nixon, George W. Bush does not yet confront a mass social and political movement from below, in opposition to his reactionary policies. The American labor movement has collapsed, as globalization has undermined its perspective of pressuring corporate employers within a national labor market, and a bureaucracy comprised of gangsters and parasites has sabotaged all efforts by workers to defend their living standards and jobs.

The protest movements of the 1960s were ultimately absorbed into the Democratic Party, that graveyard of political opposition to American capitalism. The former antiwar protester, Bill Clinton, personifies the drastic swing to the right in American liberalism and the abandonment of even the slightest criticism of the capitalist market and imperialist war. John Kerry, who made his start in politics as an impassioned opponent of the Vietnam War, based his presidential campaign last year on his war record, not his antiwar record, and vowed to achieve victory for the American occupation of Iraq.

Nature abhors a vacuum. The policies of the Bush administration and the crisis of American capitalism—far deeper than in Nixon's time—will inevitably call forth a movement from below. Neither the Democratic Party nor the AFL-CIO bureaucracy have anything to offer such a movement. A genuine struggle against war and reaction can only be waged through a complete break with all the parties and political instruments of the American ruling elite, and the building of an independent mass political party of the working class, fighting for a socialist program.

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