

The Deep Throat scoopster

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The man who wrote the Vanity Fair scoop that blindsided the Washington Post and solved one of American politics' enduring mysteries is a San Francisco attorney whose publishing credits had never, before Tuesday, gone much beyond the San Francisco Daily Journal, a legal newspaper.

John O'Connor isn't a journalist, much less one who has every news organization in America scrambling in his wake. Yet suddenly on Tuesday, instead of reporting to his office at Howard, Rice, Nemerovski, Canady, Falk & Rabkin, he was in New York explaining to Ted Koppel on "Nightline" why former FBI official Mark Felt finally revealed himself as Deep Throat. He was challenging David Gergen on the "NewsHour with Jim Lehrer." He was chatting with Katie Couric on the "Today Show."

And, in brief moments between appearances, he was talking to me by cell, trying to convince me, his old buddy, that he really was going to call over the weekend and let me know that all this was about to break, but somehow he just didn't. I was still in a bit of shock. I had been sitting in The Chronicle's Tuesday morning news meeting when I heard that the author of the Vanity Fair piece was a San Francisco lawyer named John O'Connor. I left the room and called John's office. Maybe it wasn't the same John O'Connor.

"Is this about the Vanity Fair piece?" his receptionist asked.

Only once did John ever hint at the secret he held for three years. "I'm going to have something for you," he told me a few months ago. "An interesting story."

I didn't push. John O'Connor is not the pushable type. He is about as deliberate a man as you will ever meet, someone who studies a problem and arrives through research, logic and creative thinking at the solution. To him there is almost always The solution, not A solution. And The solution to helping his 91-year-old client come forward as Deep Throat was, in the end, for O'Connor to write the story himself, controlling how it would be presented and, one presumes, preserving future publishing rights for Felt and his family -- rather than Bob Woodward or another journalist.

(John took on Felt's case pro bono and has put his Vanity Fair author's check in an account the family can use to pay expenses related to exploring book or film deals.)

For almost three years, only two people outside the Felt family knew about the impending revelation and both were sworn to absolute secrecy: O'Connor's secretary and a 41-year-old legal assistant named Will Rehling. When O'Connor wanted to talk through some snag or puzzle in the case, Rehling became a focus group of one. "Yesterday, I was finally able to tell my mother what I've been working on for so long," he said from the firm's office in Embarcadero Three.

Rehling researched every story and report ever issued about the identity of Deep Throat, and his boss kept pushing him for more. "John has an incredible hunger about getting to the bottom of things," Rehling said. "He's tenacious about digging up the very last detail. He knew there were very bright people who had enormous amounts of work and come to different conclusions (about who Deep Throat was). John wasn't resting until he understood where these other people had gone wrong."

A mutual friend, restaurateur Perry Butler, told me he had seen John last Friday night, three days before the story's publication. O'Connor had been so preoccupied he left the dinner party for a long stretch to sit by himself outside. Finally he revealed to his guests he was flying to New York on Monday for Vanity Fair. He told them about the story and said he was feeling nervous about the reaction. O'Connor had spent more than two years in painstaking negotiations with the magazine -- after other publications reportedly declined to run the story without confirmation from Woodward, Carl Bernstein or Ben Bradlee, the three people who knew Deep Throat's identity. His job in the negotiations with Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter was to make sure Felt could reveal his long-held secret in his own way.

"The family didn't want the story to come out wishy-washy," he said. "He didn't want to be kind-of Deep Throat. He wanted to be Deep Throat."

Still, as the revelatory moment approached, O'Connor worried how the news would be received: Would his client be seen as a hero or a traitor? Would people doubt Felt's claim?

By Tuesday afternoon, of course, the Washington Post confirmed Felt's story. And the reaction has been, predictably, mixed. Some in the Nixon administration accused Felt of betraying his country and staining the reputation of the FBI. O'Connor, in lawyerly fashion, defended his client's motive and reputation in interview after interview.

"It's been a lot of fun," O'Connor said Tuesday night of sparring with the likes of Gergen and Pat Buchanan. "It's a lot like being in a trial. People are trying to come after you, but they're less prepared than you are."

In some ways perhaps it is not so surprising that O'Connor has found himself in the midst of a story like this. He has always been a voracious reader of history, politics, current events, conspiracy theories. I sometimes come across him at Noonan's in Larkspur, sitting by himself at a table in the early evening, his head buried in some thick tome about al Qaeda or World War II or the Clinton administration. Long before he became Felt's attorney, he had concluded that Felt was Deep Throat. He had sifted through the evidence years ago, as many of us did. Of all the people on everyone's short list of candidates, Felt was the only one who made sense to O'Connor. "He had motive, means and opportunity," he said. He was the one candidate who never left town, who read the Justice Department reports on the investigation every day, who listened to first-hand accounts from his boss about Nixon's interference in the case and who cared deeply about the incorruptibility of law enforcement.

"I'm surprised more people didn't figure it out," he said. "So many people who did these studies didn't even come close."

Now he has a scoop to his credit. He could have thrown it my way. I think he owes me lunch.

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