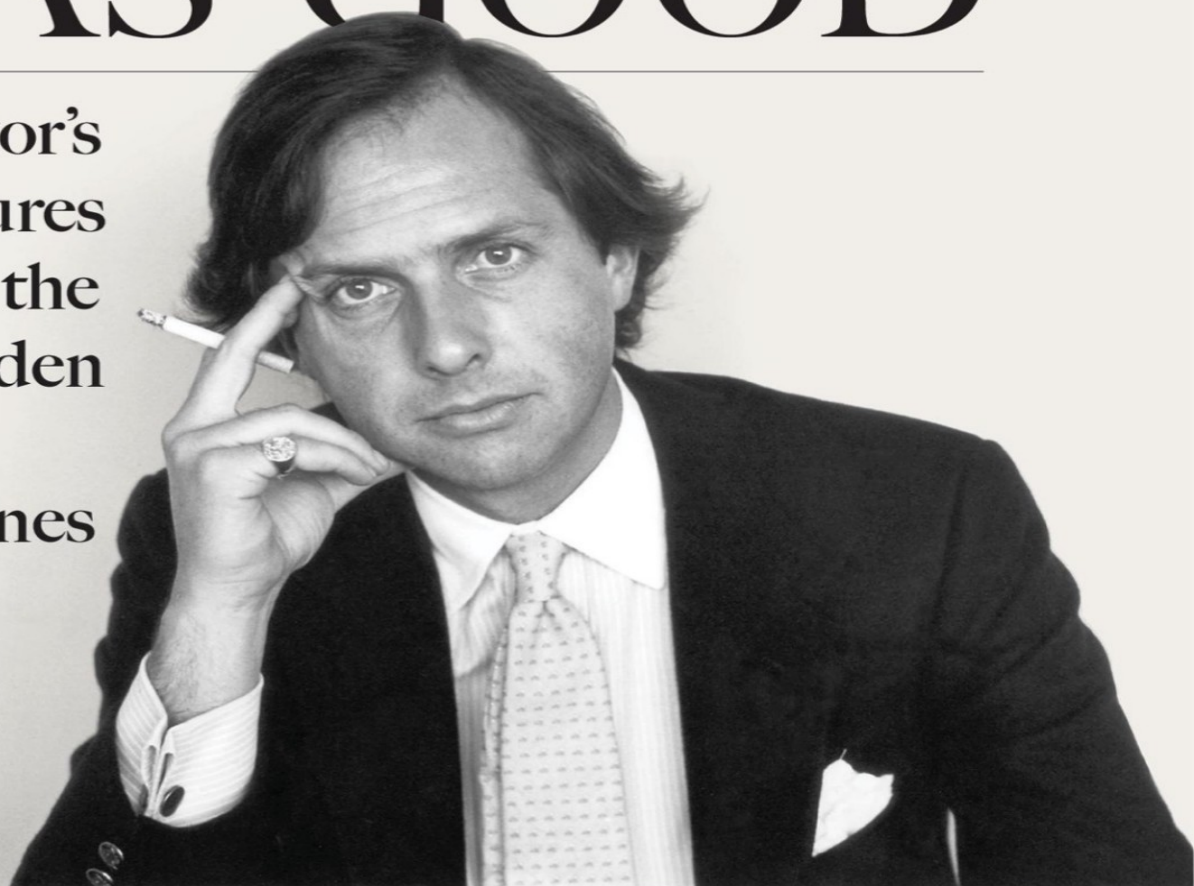

WHEN THE GOING WAS GOOD

An editor's
adventures
during the
last golden
age of
magazines



GRAYDON CARTER



WHEN THE GOING WAS GOOD

*An Editor's Adventures During the
Last Golden Age of Magazines*



GRAYDON CARTER

WITH JAMES FOX

Illustrations by Eric Hanson

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

*For the centers of my existence, my extraordinary wife, Anna; my five
equally extraordinary children, Ash, Max, Spike, Bron, and Izzy; and our
dachshund, Charley*

Chapter 1.

One Big Scoop and a Wedding

May 2005



This could so easily have been where it all ended.

My wife, Anna, and I were on our way back to New York from the Bahamas. We'd spent ten days at the Ocean Club on our honeymoon and it was time to get back to work—or "the coffee cup" as we say in the Carter household.

I'm not what you would call the most relaxed flyer, and I tend to get to airports early because I don't want to compound the stress by having to rush

to the gate. At the airport, while I fretted about the flight ahead, Anna's cell phone rang. I didn't have a mobile back then, and calling Anna's was the only way my kids or the office could get in touch with me. In those days I never left the house without a few quarters in my pocket for pay phones, along with a handkerchief (more about that later). Anna answered the call and handed me the phone. She whispered the words "David Friend!"

David, one of my deputies at *Vanity Fair*, where I'd been the editor for more than a decade, was indeed on the line. In the euphoria of marriage and honeymoon and all that, it had utterly slipped my mind that at ten thirty that morning *Vanity Fair* had released an article we'd been working on for the past two years. It revealed the identity of "Deep Throat," the highly secret source Bob Woodward relied on during his Watergate reporting with Carl Bernstein. As the *Post* itself had noted, the identity of Deep Throat was "among the most compelling questions of modern American history, dissected in books, in films, on the internet, and in thousands of articles and hundreds of television programs."

Two years of work and worry over a major story—at the time, the Holy Grail of journalism scoops—and here I was stuck on the day of its release in the tiny departure lounge of Nassau International Airport. I mouthed the words "Holy fuck!" to Anna. She mouthed back, "What?" David reminded me that, as we'd planned before my departure, he had called both Bob and Carl that morning at around nine thirty to tell them we were faxing them advance copies of our story naming Mark Felt, the former deputy director of the FBI, as Deep Throat. I asked what their reaction had been. David said they had thus far made no comment, but that word was trickling out and the phone lines at *Vanity Fair* were already jammed.

A more confident editor would probably have been elated at the news. I am not made of such vibrant stuff. My foremost worry was one that I'd had the whole time we were working on the article: that we had somehow gotten it wrong. The fact of the matter was, we weren't 100 percent sure we had the right man. A mistake of such magnitude becomes the stuff of legend and winds up in the first paragraph of your obituary. Also, this was a rough

period for journalists. It was during the George W. Bush administration, and if you got something wrong, armies of righteous nitpickers on the right—and the left—would descend to lay waste to your career and possibly your livelihood. Our main worry was that there was in fact no Deep Throat: that it had been a journalistic device, a composite of several sources—perhaps ginned up, some even said, by Alice Mayhew, who was Woodward and Bernstein’s editor at Simon & Schuster, to move the plot along in *All the President’s Men*. I never bought into that rumor. Alice was the preeminent nonfiction editor of political books in the nation. And an aboveboard and formidable person in every way. I had played tennis with her as her doubles partner a few times out on Long Island, and whenever I missed a shot, she wouldn’t say a word. She’d just give me a look that could have de-strung a racket on the other side of the court.



Ten days earlier, Anna and I had stood at the altar of a small Episcopalian church a short walk from our home in Connecticut, about to get married. It was, as it is for so many grooms, aside from the birth of my children, one of the happiest days of my life. I felt incredibly fortunate to be marrying this smart, beautiful woman before my kids and our relatives and friends. There were a number of hymns, including “Jerusalem,” which I was told later had confused a number of our Jewish friends who were surprised to hear a hymn with that name in an Episcopalian service. Anna, in addition to having Scott as a surname, is a Scot, and her father, Sir Kenneth Scott, a distinguished former diplomat, and her brother Andrew both wore kilts. For the walk to our house, we thought bagpipers would be a nice touch and hired a group associated with the New York City Police Department. Along the way, Harry Benson, a Glaswegian whom I had worked with at *Life* and *Vanity Fair*, was taking some snaps. At one point he whispered to me that some of the tunes weren’t Scottish at all. They were IRA anthems.

The weather was decent, and the wedding party had assembled on our terrace and spilled out into the garden. After dinner, we made our way to our barn, which conveniently had a stage. There, Tom Freston and John Mellencamp had an incredible wedding gift for us: Otis Day and the Knights of “Shama Lama Ding Dong” and “Shout” fame, the band that had performed so memorably in the movie *Animal House*. When the night was winding down, Anna and I were about to drive off to the Mayflower Inn, not far from us, for the first night of our marriage when we found Fran Lebowitz sitting beside our driver in the front seat. Fran was a big part of our lives. We had first met in the men’s department of Bergdorf Goodman years earlier when she asked my advice on a tie she was buying for her father. A friendship developed and Fran became an integral part of our family, joining us for Christmas dinners as well as any number of trips to Los Angeles. But this was a bit more togetherness than we expected. It seemed that her ride to a friend’s house, a town away, had left early, and so Fran was hitching a ride with us. In the boisterous delirium of the moment, and with the need to get us to the Inn and Fran to her destination, the office and our big scoop seemed a million miles away.



The identity of Deep Throat had been a guessing game in Washington and journalism circles for years. Everyone from Henry Kissinger to Diane Sawyer had been proposed as Woodward and Bernstein’s secret informant. Our evidence that Felt was Deep Throat was, we believed, close to conclusive, but it came from secondhand sources. We were 95 percent sure—but that last 5 percent was unnerving, the difference between great success and humbling failure. If we were incorrect, it wouldn’t quite be on a par with the London *Sunday Times*’s 1983 publication of the fake Hitler diaries, an episode that its editor, Frank Giles, never lived down. But it would be close. After David’s update, I realized I simply could not get on that plane unless I knew one way or another if we had the right man.

The journey to this moment had begun two years earlier, when I got a call from John O'Connor, a San Francisco-based lawyer. He said that he represented the man who was Deep Throat and that he and his client wanted the story to break in *Vanity Fair*. You get a lot of crank calls when you're an editor of a magazine, but I had a general policy of always taking the calls and looking into leads when they presented themselves. O'Connor and I talked for a time. He wouldn't reveal who his client was. But I was intrigued enough to say, "Let me have someone get back to you." I asked David if he was free and if he could come down to my office. We had worked together at *Life* in the mid-1980s and I'd brought him to *Vanity Fair* a few years after joining it myself. David had sort of an oddball role at the magazine. Unlike the other editors there, he had few fixed writers. He was listed on the masthead as editor of creative development, a title I must have given him, though I was never sure what it meant. I'm not sure he did either. But David was a dogged hand and, more important, because he wasn't always closing stories for the current issue, he was available. I told him about the phone call with O'Connor, gave him the number, and asked him to follow up.

Their conversations dribbled on for a few months. Eventually, we had a name: Mark Felt. Neither of us had ever heard of him. We learned that he had once been number two at the FBI. David and I would meet every few days about the story, but we had our doubts. Chief among them was Felt himself. He was in his early nineties by this time, he had suffered a stroke two years earlier, and he was starting to show signs of dementia. The evidence supporting his claim was strong but essentially circumstantial. He had said nothing about the matter for more than three decades. He had only acknowledged the truth to his family a year or so before O'Connor called me, after family members, having put various clues together, had confronted him. He admitted to them that, yes, he was Deep Throat, but he was reluctant to go public with the information. Felt was proud of his part in exposing the corruption and obstruction of justice he saw in Nixon's White House during the Watergate cover-up, but he also remained loyal to the men and women of the agency.

When David flew out to San Francisco to meet Felt in person, he found him in a diminished state. This meant we had to work around him to firm up the story. All we had to go on were sources at one remove: Felt's daughter, a college teacher; his grandson, who had gone to school with O'Connor's daughter; and O'Connor himself. They all confirmed earlier conversations in which Felt had described his role as Deep Throat. There was also Felt's autobiography, published in 1979, which contained a number of subtle clues, as well as noncommittal but suggestive phone calls between Felt and Woodward. Felt's daughter remembered that someone called Bob Woodward, whose name she didn't recognize at the time, had come to visit her father in 1999, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Nixon's resignation.

After about a year and a half of back-and-forth, we felt we had hit a wall. Then we came up with an idea that would allow us to publish Felt's claims without the sort of guaranteed proof you want when you are wading into such a potential mess. We figured that O'Connor, like so many lawyers, might be a closeted writer. So we offered the story to him. We believed that it would give us a slight, gossamer layer of cover. O'Connor agreed and turned in an article that, after a number of rounds of editing, we thought worked. At that point, only a handful of people knew of the assignment: me; David; Chris Garrett, our managing editor, who had to sign off on the plan; and Robert Walsh, our legal editor.

We soon brought Susan White, the director of photography, in on the secret. In order to keep the circle as small as possible, she sent her husband, Gasper Tringale, a photographer, to San Francisco to shoot Felt. (I later got an earful from Annie Leibovitz, *Vanity Fair*'s principal photographer, who thought she should have shot it. I couldn't disagree with her—although I did admire Gasper's picture.) We set up a special room at the magazine, an office within the office. We papered the glass doors and kept it locked when not in use. We also put the story on a separate server, one that wouldn't be accessible to anyone at Condé Nast, the parent company of *Vanity Fair* and a score of other magazines—and competitors—including *Vogue*, *GQ*, and *The*

New Yorker. David Harris, our art director, joined the Felt gang. So did John Banta, our head of research, who oversaw fact-checking.

With our doubts continuing to linger—as doubts have a habit of doing in journalism—I knew that I could have settled the matter with a phone call to either Bob, who was still at *The Washington Post*, or Carl, who was on our masthead. I figured that if I called Carl, he'd call Bob, and Bob would get the revelation into the next day's *Post*. And obviously if I called Bob, we'd get the same result. By this time, a dozen and a half *Vanity Fair* staff members were in on the plan. We had all worked together for more than a decade and the trust between us was rock-solid. We held the secret as closely as Bob and Carl had done since the early 1970s. The big trouble here was the lead time. This was before magazines had digital editions, so we had to edit the story, photograph the story, lay out the story, check the story, print the issue, ship the issue, and then wait for newsstand people all around the world to open their boxes of the magazine and start selling copies. With a monthly magazine, you have ten days to two weeks between the time it leaves the printer and when it appears on newsstands. During this period, the issue is completely out of our control, and we'd had problems before with printers tipping off someone else to a hot story. We'd also heard that *The Washington Post* had gotten wind of what we were up to. We couldn't afford to wait until the magazine hit the newsstands, so we decided to release the story even before we shipped it to the printers.

In advance of printing and shipping any issue, the various top editors at Condé Nast were required to deliver a summary of each issue of their magazine at a grim affair called Print Order. Si Newhouse, the chairman, would be there. As would the president of the company and the heads of three or four departments. The editors stood at one end of the conference table with their publisher and anxiously tap-danced their way through a draft copy of their new issue. The publisher then reported on how many pages of advertising had been sold in the issue compared with the same month the previous year. The number of copies that were printed for each issue was dependent on the quality of the issue that was presented that day.

Well, not quality so much as the perceived newsstand salability. I left the Mark Felt story out of my presentation for the July 2005 issue. I told Si after the meeting that it might be wise to print more copies than the look of the issue warranted. He nodded without asking a question.

In those days, you didn't announce news with a tweet. You released it in successive waves to selected press outlets. Or you released it all at once and wide to the wire services, newspapers, and television news divisions. Which is what we did with our Deep Throat story. Just before we released it to the wire services, Beth Kseniak, our head of communications, gave the scoop to ABC News, which broke into regular programming with the story. By the following day, it was front-page news around the world. For the first seven or eight hours of that first day, though, all through the rollout, there was still no confirmation from Bob or Carl that Felt was indeed Deep Throat.

When David had told them about *Vanity Fair's* plans to name Felt, they'd been cool, giving nothing away. What we learned later was that Carl had flown from New York to Washington to meet up with Bob and Ben Bradlee, their editor during the Watergate investigations. Ben was eighty-three and retired but still a dynamic force of nature. He called a meeting to decide how to respond. The three men were joined by Leonard Downie Jr., *The Washington Post's* executive editor, who had been at a management retreat on the Maryland shore when he got the call to return to the office.

According to a front-page story in *The New York Times*, written by Todd Purdum and Jim Rutenberg, Bob and Carl stalled. They didn't want to give their story away by simply confirming our reporting. And who could fault them? They'd kept the secret for three decades. (I suspect, though, that Carl might have shared it with his ex-wife, Nora Ephron; in *Heartburn*, her novel based on the breakup of their marriage, the husband is named Mark Feldman.) Ben spent all day trying to persuade Bob and Carl to confirm the news. Bob kept pushing back, because he had made a promise to Felt that he wouldn't release his name until after Felt's death or upon his request to do so. Bob questioned whether Felt was mentally capable of making the decision to go public and whether he was fit enough to release him and Carl

from their promise. It turned out that Bob had a book ready to publish after Felt died, and our story would have doubly scooped him. Ben put his foot down. As Carl later recalled, Ben said, “Not even a close call. No way to go but to confirm it. We got beat on our own story.” Ben himself told *The Times*: “That story laid it all out, and it’s silly to say you have no comment and won’t even say whether the goddamn thing is right, when you know it’s right.”

I knew none of this that afternoon as the call for boarding was announced at the airport in Nassau. Anna and I kept moving to the back of the line, waiting for word about Bob and Carl’s statement. To make matters more stressful, the battery on Anna’s phone was about to die. After letting pretty much everyone else move into line ahead of us, we finally had to make our way toward the gate. Just as we were about to hand the boarding agent our tickets, David called.

“Please tell me something good,” I said.

He obliged: “Woodward and Bernstein just confirmed it was Mark Felt.”

Anna would later say she detected a tear in my eye.

Beth, meanwhile, was in the ABC News studios. She had booked O’Connor for *Nightline*, then the network’s premier late news show. Ted Koppel was the anchor. And he was a tough interrogator, badgering poor O’Connor with questions about how he could possibly know for sure that Felt was Deep Throat. Beth felt so sorry for O’Connor that she almost cut the interview short. As Koppel continued his questioning, her phone rang, and she got the news about Bob and Carl’s confirmation. Her eyes, too, began to water, both from relief and from the general tension of the days and months leading up to the moment. She watched as Koppel was informed of the news. He had been taping the show as if it was live; now he had only fifteen minutes left. Beth noticed that his manner changed dramatically: gone was the haughty, suspicious inquisitor. Koppel spent his remaining time trying to get all the questions out that he had avoided during the first part of his interview. Beth pulled O’Connor when the fifteen minutes were up and rushed him over to *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* on PBS. The next day,

she rotated him among all three morning shows—a feat people in her trade consider a major trifecta. It was a wonderful moment for the staff and a great thing for a monthly magazine that was approaching its centenary.

I spoke to both Bob and Carl that week, and they could not have been more gracious. In the end, the Deep Throat revelation proved good for them too. Bob finished the book on Felt he had been working on, and *The Secret Man* was published that summer. Bob and Carl's victory lap of the news cycle in the days that followed the *Vanity Fair* revelation was like seeing the journalistic equivalent of Watson and Crick, Martin and Lewis, or Brad and Jen back together, however briefly.

Chapter 2.

Bitter Winters and a Lot of Hockey



Growing up, I worried at times that I was destined to become little more than one of those faceless, nameless men in the scenery of someone else's better life. I was decent at sports, but nobody would have ever called me a jock. I read everything I could get my hands on, but nobody would have ever called me a scholar. I was clever, but nobody would have ever called me a brainiac. I was reasonably good-looking and could talk to girls and make them laugh, but nobody would have ever called me a Casanova. I had dreams, but nobody would have ever called me ambitious. Everything was impulse driven: toward sports, music, cars, books, films, and girls. It could

also be said that my parents, and indeed a good number of my friends, thought that life, in the professional sense, had little in store for me.

As I regularly tell my kids, few people learn from success. A worthwhile professional life is built over a boneyard of failures. Early failures, as opposed to successes, are instructive. The trick is to keep them minor. And to figure out what went wrong and why. There is no school for editing, like there is for dentistry, cooking, or even real estate sales. Journalism is a lead-from-your-instinct business. You just have to be really curious, and care, about everything.

And so, somehow, in my case, with a lot of mishaps and a dollop of good luck along the way, things just worked out. It wasn't easy all the time, but step by step I managed to achieve the four things the twenty-five-year-old me thought would bring me happiness in my adult years:

1. Living in New York. Greenwich Village specifically.
2. Becoming the editor of a big, general-interest magazine.
3. Being one half of a wonderful marriage.
4. Having a large, happy family and a dog.

All this came in time. But I'm getting ahead of myself.



In the early 1950s, my parents packed up me and my younger brother, Gary, and we sailed from Canada to Southampton on an ocean liner, the RMS *Scythia*. It had been a Cunard Line workhorse during the war, serving as a troop and supply ship. Transatlantic flight was still relatively new back then, and most ocean crossings were done by sea. From Southampton we went to stay with my uncle Wallace, an otherworldly eccentric who lived on

D'Oyly Carte Island, a family property on the Thames. We got there by means of a flat-bottomed skiff that was hauled across a bend in the river by chain. The house itself was enormous and dark and teeming with cats. Peter Cushing would have felt right at home. My uncle was, my mother told us later, a distant relation to Richard D'Oyly Carte himself, the producer of the Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas.

After a few weeks there, and then a stopover in London, we decamped to Zweibrücken, a small German town about an hour from the Luxembourg border. This would be our home for the next four years. My father was there with the Royal Canadian Air Force, training young pilots, and my mother had her hands full with my brother, who was not yet one. I was four years older and was on my own a lot of the time. I played in abandoned bunkers, learned a smattering of German, and spent hours with my Britains toy soldiers, the Fleischmann HO gauge model train I got for Christmas one year, and a small toy Royal Canadian Mountie. All of which I still have. We traveled constantly, and even though I was a kid, I remember the sight of European cities and towns that had been devastated by war. In the winter, my parents would head off to Chamonix and Méribel to ski, leaving us with our housekeeper, Frau Fleigga, a smoker of Promethean might. I had few close friends, and my brother was too young to be of much use to me, but I remember those days with great fondness. I was sorry to return home to Canada. Which we did, the year I turned seven.

Life in Canada for a boy pretty much revolved around skiing and hockey in the winter and fishing, canoeing, street hockey, and goofing off in the summer. There was little of the surfboard, bikini, and hot-rod glamour that American kids seemed to swirl around in. Family vacations were endurance contests that pitted inattentive yet restrictive parents against their captive children. Sitting in the back seat of a two-tone '57 Chrysler—the one with some of the biggest tailfins Detroit ever put on a car—on a long, hot road trip with both parents smoking up front, and Perry Como and Percy Faith on the radio, was nobody's idea of heaven.