

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Deep Throat's Public Diplomacy Connection ^[1]

So now we are told that Mark Felt may not have been Deep Throat after all.

The watchdog group *Accuracy in Media (AIM)* quotes a Watergate scandal expert, Joan Huff, a Montana State University history professor, as saying that this is all "an orchestrated publicity stunt on the part of the (Washington) Post" to publicize Bob Woodward's new book.

Cliff Kincaid of *AIM* claims that former Deputy FBI Director Mark Felt also has his motives. Kincaid says the 91-year-old Felt was videotaped by news cameras at his home in California where he said he was enjoying the press attention and that he could "arrange to write a book or something, and collect all the money I can."

So what does this have to do with international broadcasting and public diplomacy? Let me explain.

Thirty-one years ago this month, around the time that Acting FBI Director Mark Felt was said to be meeting with fledgling reporter Bob Woodward in dark garages in the wee hours of the morning to leak information about the Watergate investigation, I was tramping about the Middle East with the White House press office advance team setting up TV press coverage for President Nixon's upcoming trips.

The President was about to practice public diplomacy with heads of state in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, and Israel, and to get some press about himself apart from the Watergate debacle. We visited each location in advance of the visits, then returned for the events themselves, together with the White House press corps covering the President. Thus, the White House press corps would be away from Washington and not covering Watergate for at least a couple of weeks, perhaps a motivating factor for White House planners.

All the while, we are told, Mark Felt and Bob Woodward were communicating by re-positioning flower pots on balconies, marking up deliveries of the New York Times with code, and getting together in darkened parking garages.

The trips abroad did not interrupt Watergate coverage however, as we know, and two months later President Nixon would announce his resignation.

Now, if there had been such a thing as international satellite news channels back then, and audiences for them overseas, and the U.S. was beaming its coverage of the President's Middle East trip, and reporting what was happening in the Watergate investigation back home, what then? What do we expect from the audiences who watch government-funded satellite news channels? I've not seen any measure of effectiveness as to whether the channels are getting into anyone's heart or mind.


Yet almost daily we learn of another government leader abroad who is going to spend tens of millions of dollars to get into the international satellite news channel business, to set his record straight with audiences of other countries.

Here comes Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who blames Washington for Latin America's economic problems, and is starting his own regional satellite TV news channel called Telsur (Television of the South). Within a few weeks he is expected to have his TV satellite channel ready to beam news and documentaries throughout the Southern Hemisphere to combat U.S. influence in the area.

Telsur is said to be modeled after the controversial Middle East satellite channel al Jazeera, started on a whim by the emir of Qatar, the tiny Gulf state that now commands world attention through al Jazeera.

If amassing press attention for himself and his country through al Jazeera was the emir's objective, he has certainly succeeded, although it is costing him an estimated \$100 million per year to operate the channel, which is now set to be extended in the English language and to seek advertising in the U.S. A children's channel is also said to be planned, as well as a documentary channel.

And Vladimir Putin, angered over the portrayal of Russia's problems broadcast by his state-run television systems, took control of them and plans to start Russia's own English-language satellite news channel to burnish the image of a "united Russia" sometime this summer. Called "Russia Today," programming will attempt to counter criticism of the Russian government for silencing dissent.

It was also announced this week that a French International News Channel  is due to be launched next year, with the aim of bringing "the French point of view on international news to foreign audiences."

And a BBC Arabic TV service is also being considered by the UK government.

Of course the U.S. government-funded Middle East regional broadcast facilities, Radio Sawa and TV Alhurra, are there to provide their coverage of the war of ideas to the Arab-Muslim world, especially in response to what many believe is the strident, anti-U.S. coverage of al Jazeera. And Alhurra, which also has a program channel targeted to Iraq, is scheduled to begin transmitting its program service sometime this summer to European Muslims.

The popular Pan-Arab satellite news channel Al Arabiya was launched by the Saudi government, also to counter the influence of al-Jazeera's voice from neighboring Qatar.

But some world leaders had other ideas on getting their points across, albeit in earlier times.

Like Richard Nixon, President Lyndon Johnson could not order up his own satellite news channel to provide balance to what he perceived as bias by the then three domestic U.S. television network news operations.

Each night he watched all three network news shows on TV sets contained in his mammoth oval-shaped, polished wood cabinet, whose doors opened by remote control like parting movie curtains. (I know this for a fact, because President Nixon's Communications Director, Herb Klein, inherited this ornate TV console from the Oval Office several years later, and my

office was right next door.)

With one hand on the TV remote and the other on the telephone, President Johnson would call what he perceived as an offending network, such as when he personally called CBS News to complain that applause had been cut from his speech about Vietnam.

Another piece of Lyndon Johnson folklore at CBS News, where I used to work, involved the President summoning a CBS makeup person to the Oval Office after Lady Bird complained about how awful the President looked on a CBS News taping. The makeup man and his bosses showed up, and as Executive Producer Don Hewitt once related to me, the following exchange took place:

The President strode over to the quivering young makeup man who arched back against the President's desk as far as he could lean, while the President asked, inches from his face, "You tryin' to (blank) me, boy?"

That was public diplomacy, Lyndon Johnson style, who had his own way of bringing people around to his way of thinking.

And so we return to Mark Felt, who had once been suspected as a mole by the Nixon team. I know how Lyndon Johnson would have handled the situation, right on the edge of his desk, without his own satellite news channel.
