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Watergate Remains a Missed Opportunity for Reform, Says Illinois Wesleyan Historian

June 1, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — For Illinois Wesleyan University history professor W. Michael Weis, this week's unmasking of Deep Throat merely reinforces his belief that, in hindsight, Watergate represents primarily a missed opportunity for curbing the power of government.

Weis, who specializes in the history of the 1960s, recently finished teaching a short-term course on the decade. "Our last session, just a week ago, was on Watergate," Weis said. "My students were curious about Deep Throat's identity, and I would have been wrong with my guess since I had thought it was somebody in the White House."

Instead, W. Mark Felt, then the No. 2 man at the FBI, was identified this week as the anonymous source who helped Washington Post reporters in their investigation into the Watergate burglary more than 30 years ago.

"One thing that this does underscore for me is that there are always a lot of people close to an administration, but not actually in the administration, who probably know a lot more about what's really going on than they're willing to admit," said Weis. "But not many of them are willing to come forward and do what Deep Throat did."

In Weis's view, the fact that the Post investigation ultimately led to President Richard M. Nixon's resignation is not a vindication of the system, as many have suggested.

"While it was seen as a victory for open government and democracy at the time, I believe that Watergate taught the people who want to engage in these illegal activities how to be better at it. They learned from the mistakes that were made by those involved in Watergate," said Weis. "Consequently, when the Iran-Contra scandal breaks in the late 1980s, you have people spending days and days shredding and burning documents and cleaning out hard drives.

"In the immediate aftermath of Watergate, we had a chance to curb the power of government and to enact reforms that would make it impossible to deceive the American people. And we didn't do it."

Added Weis: "If democracy is going to prevail, then citizens have to know what's going on in the government; citizens have to understand why decisions are made and how they're made. Today, we know less than ever before."

To discuss the impact of Watergate in light of Deep Throat's identification with Weis, contact either Jeffery G. Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.