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2 Ex-Timesmen Say They Had a Tip on Watergate First

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA
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The Watergate break-in eventually forced a presidential resignation and turned two Washington Post reporters into pop-culture heroes. But almost 37 years after the break-in, two former New York Times journalists have stepped forward to say that The Times had the scandal nearly in its grasp before The Post did — and let it slip.

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Associated Press

The scene of the crime a year after the break-in at the Watergate complex.

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George Tames/The New York Times

L. Patrick Gray of the F.B.I. is said to have supplied tips to a Times reporter.

Robert M. Smith, a former Times reporter, says that two months after the burglary, over lunch at a Washington restaurant, the acting director of the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#), L. Patrick Gray, disclosed explosive aspects of the case, including the culpability of the former attorney general, John Mitchell, and hinted at White House involvement.

Mr. Smith rushed back to The Times's bureau in Washington to repeat the story to Robert H. Phelps, an editor there, who took notes and tape-recorded the conversation, according to both men. But then Mr. Smith had to hand off the story — he had quit The Times and was leaving town the next day to attend Yale Law School.

Mr. Smith kept the events to himself for more than three decades, but decided to go public after learning that Mr. Phelps planned to include it in his memoir.

In the days after that 1972 lunch, the Times bureau was consumed by the Republican convention, and then Mr. Phelps left on a monthlong trip to Alaska.

So what happened to the tip, the notes, the tape? Were they pursued to no effect? Simply forgotten?

“I have no idea,” said Mr. Phelps, now 89, who describes the episode in a memoir, “God

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and the Editor: My Search for Meaning at The New York Times” ([Syracuse University Press](#)), published last month.

Former colleagues he interviewed said they never knew of the material, he said, leading him to guess that the fact that it came to nothing “was probably my fault.”

If his and Mr. Smith’s accounts are correct, The Times missed a chance to get the jump on the greatest story in a generation.

It also means that both of the top two F.B.I. officials were leaking information about the scandal. [W. Mark Felt](#), the associate director of the agency at the time, was identified in 2005 as Deep Throat, the secret source for [Bob Woodward](#), the Post reporter who, with his colleague [Carl Bernstein](#), rode the story to fame.

On June 17, 1972, a group of men were caught breaking into and trying to wiretap the [Democratic National Committee](#) offices in the Watergate complex. On Aug. 16, Mr. Smith and Mr. Gray, who had been made acting director in May, went to lunch — a date shown in Mr. Gray’s records, which were kept by his son, Edward Gray, who helped his father write a book about his experience in the Nixon administration. Patrick Gray died in 2005.

“My dad liked Robert Smith and gave him some interviews,” said Edward Gray, 64, and took him to lunch at Sans Souci, a fashionable restaurant, to bid him farewell. He says he finds it hard to imagine his father, who disapproved of leaks, divulging the kinds of secrets Mr. Smith recalls.

But that lunch “was more between a mentor and a young man than between an acting director of the F.B.I. and a reporter,” Mr. Gray said. “I’m sure my dad may have let his hair down a little bit with Bob Smith, but only because he didn’t think he was a reporter anymore.”

Mr. Smith said he sat across the table from Patrick Gray, listening in shock to details about Donald Segretti, who helped run the Nixon campaign’s “dirty tricks” operation, and John Mitchell, who had stepped down as attorney general to run Nixon’s re-election campaign.

“He told me the attorney general was involved in a cover-up,” Mr. Smith said, “and I said, ‘How high does it go? To the president?’ And he sat there and looked at me and he didn’t answer. His answer was in the look.”

Returning to the bureau “in a super-charged state,” he said, he found Mr. Phelps and marched him into the editor’s office. “I was too excited to sit down. I paced up and back.”

Then he left for law school, and watched over the following months as Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein leapt ahead of the competition. Mr. Phelps left The Times for The [Boston Globe](#) in the mid-1970s.

Mr. Smith, who worked at the Justice Department after graduating from Yale and then went into private practice, spent more than three decades wondering what happened to his tip. When Mr. Phelps set out to write his book, he called Mr. Smith to compare recollections.

“The fact that he had seen Gray and he had talked to me after his lunch, that I



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remembered," Mr. Phelps said. But he said it was not until Mr. Smith jogged his memory that he recalled what revelations had the young reporter so excited.

In the book, he wrote, "We never developed Gray's tips into publishable stories. Why we failed is a mystery to me."

"My memory is fuzzy on the crucial point of what I did with the tape," he wrote.

Mr. Smith said that knowing the episode would be described in Mr. Phelps's book persuaded him, for the first time, that he was free to tell it. Until then, "I couldn't breach the source confidentiality with Pat Gray," even after Mr. Gray had died.

"What he did was, in my mind, a quite wonderful thing, and no one knows about it."

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