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What Is the FBI Up To?

With due deliberation and with considerate regard for the Attorney General's objections, this newspaper yesterday published the substance of some FBI records—stolen by unknown persons from the FBI's office in Media, Pa. and sent to The Washington Post anonymously by mail. The Attorney General, naturally, would have preferred no account at all of the records and, indeed, no mention of the theft. Because he asserted that "these records include information which would disclose the identity of confidential investigative sources and information relating to the national defense," this newspaper carefully refrained from any facsimile reproduction of the documents sent to it and from any disclosure of the various FBI codes on the records, including identification numbers and names of agents and of persons under surveillance. We reported the substance of the records, however, because we were convinced that it served the public interest to do so.

The records afford a glimpse, not often granted to the general public or even to committees of Congress, of some of the ways in which the FBI works and of some part of its concept of internal security. They indicate that the bureau focused a good deal of attention on college campuses and particularly on black student groups which, according to a memorandum issued by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover "pose a definite threat to the nation's stability and security" and that on one college campus in the Philadelphia area the bureau enlisted the services of the local police chief, the local postmaster, a campus security officer and a college switchboard operator to maintain surveillance on a professor regarded as a "radical." Other documents indicated that students were used, sometimes on a paid basis, as informers.

This lifting of a corner of the curtain on FBI activity in the name of internal security seems to us extremely disquieting. Granted that it by no means presents a complete picture, it nevertheless suggests strongly that an appropriate committee of the United States Congress ought to look much more thoroughly at what the bureau is doing. Disorder on college campuses undoubtedly presents a problem to the colleges concerned and perhaps to

the communities where they are situated as well. But it does not rise to the level of a threat to the internal security of the United States.

Moreover, the intrusion of undercover operatives and student informers into the life of an institution which has the interchange of ideas and the conflict of opinion as its very *raison d'être* introduces a disruptive element more deadly than disorder. The FBI has never shown much sensitivity to the poisonous effect which its surveillance, and especially its reliance on faceless informers, has upon the democratic process and upon the practice of free speech. But it must be self-evident that discussion and controversy respecting governmental policies and programs are bound to be inhibited if it is known that Big Brother, under disguise, is listening to them and reporting them.

The FBI is not only insensitive on this score; it is shown by these records to be callous and, indeed, deliberately corrupting. One of the documents encourages agents to step up interviews with dissenters "for plenty of reasons, chief of which are it will enhance the paranoia endemic in these circles and will further serve to get the point across there is an FBI agent behind every mailbox. In addition, some will be overcome by the overwhelming personalities of the contacting agent and volunteer to tell all—perhaps on a continuing basis."

That is a concept of internal security appropriate, perhaps, for the secret police of the Soviet Union but wholly inconsonant with the idea of a Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States. A government of snoopers in a nation of informers was hardly the vision in the minds of those who established the American Republic.

We believe the American public needs to know what the FBI is doing. We believe the American public needs to think long and hard about whether internal security rests essentially upon official surveillance and the suppression of dissent or upon the traditional freedom of every citizen to speak his mind on any subject, whether others consider what he says wise or foolish, patriotic or subversive, conservative or radical. That is why we published the substance of the stolen FBI records.