

APPRAISAL OF THE RECORDS OF THE
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

A Report to Hon. Harold H. Greene
United States District Court
for the
District of Columbia

Submitted by the National Archives and Records Service
and the Federal Bureau of Investigation

November 9, 1981

Appraisal of the Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation

Summary

On January 10, 1980, the Court ordered the National Archives and Records Service (NARS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to prepare and submit a retention plan and disposition schedule for the records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Subsequent orders amended this and set November 9, 1981, as the final date for submission. (Section 1.)

To carry out the tasks NARS established a 17 member FBI Appraisal Project staff headed by Dr. James E. O'Neill and Dr. Charles M. Dollar. The FBI effort was directed by Robert P. Finzel and Robert W. Scherrer. Intensive work by the two teams began in March 1981. (Section 1.)

The records of the FBI date from 1908 and became particularly voluminous after 1939. They consist of approximately 25 million case files (roughly 300,000 cubic feet of records) located in the FBI Headquarters and in 59 Field Offices and 12 U.S. foreign missions. (Section 2.)

The records are organized in a numerical filing system comprising some 214 classifications. Each classification contains case files related to FBI investigations of alleged violations of a specific Federal statute (e.g. Migratory Bird Act) to a cluster of such statutes on a common subject (e.g. Bank Robbery), or to logical subdivisions of a subject (e.g., Fraud Against the Government - Department of Defense). Individual cases in each classification are filed in numerical order as the case is opened. (Section 2.)

The large volume and numerical organization of the records suggested the use of a statistical sampling technique in examining records for appraisal. In consultation with outside specialists NARS developed such a statistical methodology. Using it the NARS team selected and examined in detail nearly 18,000 FBI case files, nearly 6,000 at FBI Headquarters and the remainder in seven selected Field Offices (Washington, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta, and Miami.) (Section 3.)

In each instance the specific files were selected solely by the NARS team, were "pulled" by NARS and FBI team members jointly, and were under NARS scrutiny or in NARS custody throughout the review period. (Section 3.)

Basic information about each case file examined—size, date range, types of documents, categories of subjects, case history, research interests, potential and values—was placed on a data collection sheet designed for the project. That data, in turn, was entered into a computer. Computer-produced profiles were, thus, generated for the case files in each of the 214 classifications. (Section 3.)

In addition, the OO files which contain policy documentation and the history of each classification, were examined and synopsisized. (Section 3.)

The basic information gathered for each classification was summarized by individual team members and was formally discussed by the team. The retention plan recommendations (Section 5) emerged from this process. (Section 3.)

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It was assumed that some kind of statistical sample of FBI records would ultimately be made permanent and transferred to the National Archives. To assure that historically important records, which might be missed by such a sample, were preserved, a list of approximately 4,000 Exceptional Cases was developed. Contributions to the list were sought from the research communities through their journals and newsletters and through letters sent to some 600 scholars. In addition, the team members provided Exceptional Cases from their research and their work with the case files. (Section 3.)

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Based upon the proportional sampling technique employed nearly one-half of the case files examined came from 33 classifications. Case files from two classifications — 100 (Domestic Security) and 105 (Foreign Counterintelligence) — comprise more than 10% of the 18,000 case files. Although it is commonly assumed that FBI case files are bulging dossiers, two-thirds of the sample are less than one-fourth inch thick. Another common assumption that most FBI case files are rich historical sources is not supported by the 18,000 case files in the data base. Indeed, only 26.5% of the sample have any research potential. (Section 4.)

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Information on the case files in the data base was used to generate "classification profiles" that formed part of the background material relied upon in making appraisal recommendations. (Section 5 and Appendix A.) The data base also was used to test several hypotheses about FBI case files. Contrary to what one might expect, more criminal related case files are opened than security related ones, although it is clear the latter tend to have greater research potential. An analysis of the data base revealed only one time period — the 1940s for security related classifications — when research potential was significantly greater than any other time period. Another analysis disclosed that Field Office/Office of Origin case files tend to have more research potential than Field Office/Auxiliary Office case files, and that the research potential of Field Office/Office of Origin case files is identical to Headquarters. A comparison of selected Field Office/Office of Origin case files with Headquarter counterparts shows that 60% had identical research potential ratings; and where the research potential rating differed, a higher research potential was marked for Headquarters case files. Finally, "fat files" clearly had greater research potential than "thin files", and proved to be the best single predictor of research potential. This analysis also suggested that a "fat file" or multi-section file should consist of two or more sections. (Section 4.)

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Several studies of special topics such as indices, abstracts, non-textual records, and the like were conducted. The permanent value of main subject index cards is determined by the disposition instructions for related case files. A variety of other indices, including some relating to electronic surveillance activities, have research potential and should be retained. Generally, the value of non-textual records derives from whether or not the related case file is to be permanently retained. With few exceptions, disposal of computer tapes is not authorized at this time, although in some areas they are of permanent value. A review of the Bureau's abstract system indicated that only abstracts arranged by "source" and those related to the SIS program in Latin America should be permanently retained. (Appendix A.)

Based upon analyses of the case files in the data base, examination of other

aspects of FBI record-keeping activity, and consultation with historians and other researchers, a records retention plan was submitted to the FBI. The records retention plan calls for the permanent retention at Headquarters of all extant OO files and some O file material predating 1977. Other O file material relating to criminal classifications is not now authorized for disposal. The records retention plan specified either total or virtually total retention of Headquarters and sometimes Field Office case files in some classifications. In other classifications the research potential is such that only a portion of the case files will be retained in a systematic informational sample. The size of the sample (ranging from 1,500 to 5,000) depends upon the research potential of the classification and the volume of records in the classification at Headquarters or Field Offices if a systematic informational sample is called for at the latter. In some classifications where the research potential is so low or records from other Federal agencies better document this investigative activity, only a systematic evidential sample will be retained. Multi-section files at Headquarters and some Field Offices also will be retained. Exceptional cases at both Headquarters and Office of Origin Field Offices will be retained. (Section 5 and Appendix A)

The records retention plan declares as permanent about 50,000 cubic feet of FBI records with more than one-half of this coming from Field Offices.

Based upon the NARS retention plan submitted on September 28, 1981, the FBI developed the Disposition Schedule (Standard Form 115) for its records. This Schedule incorporates the NARS recommendations on the retention of records deemed of permanent value. In addition, the Schedule sets the proposed periods for retention by the FBI of non-permanent records. (Section 6.)

Under the Disposition Schedule, which has been accepted by NARS, most permanent files will be transferred to the National Archives 50 years after the file has been closed. For some files, transfer will occur as soon as 30 years after closing. Consequently, some files from the 1930's, and 1940's will be among those transferred. (Section 6.)

The Disposition Schedule also includes provisions for the transfer to the National Archives of selected non-textual (audiovisual and machine-readable) records, indices, and abstracts. (Section 6.)