

Phoenix

Edited CIA Files Tell a Little To Hide a Lot

By Danny Schechter

They came in an official-looking brown envelope distinguished by the logo of the American Revolutionary Bicentennial and the slogan, "An Equal Opportunity Employer." The return address was the ominous give-away: Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, D.C. 20505.

At last, here they were! My CIA files! I had been after them with letters and telegrams for over four months, trying to use the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act [FOIA] to pry open the secret computer banks which, I knew, knew about me. The correspondence had been classic: the demands in my letters had been alternately angry and cute, their responses unshakably bureaucratic and form-letter precise. In late June, I sent the CIA a copy of my recent *Phoenix* tirade against their procrastination and delay (*Phoenix* Forum, June 17). I even invited their reply. Perhaps it put the fear of Michael Harrington in them, because within two weeks an expurgated selection of their info was in my filing cabinet.

Not all the files, understand — just the ones they decided I could look at. By their own admission, the CIA has located 145 different cables, dispatches, memoranda, internal memoranda and one name-check pertaining to me. Of these, they released a mere 19 blotched xeroxes marred by as many deletions as the White House tapes. CIA officials apparently consider the law that is supposed to insure government disclosure and accountability just so much Swiss cheese. It is so full of holes in the form of amendments, exemptions and overriding Executive Orders that the CIA can use it to withhold more information that it provides. According to their interpretation, the FOIA has to do with protecting the freedom to inform more than the freedom to obtain information.

The documents I have received reveal that the CIA has been on my trail since 1968. That was the same year I got on theirs, as an editor and researcher for *Ramparts* magazine. I was then based in London and looking into a whole network of covertly subsidized organizations we had uncovered. According to the first of 12 censored Agency cables, CIA headquarters was alerted to my journalistic sleuthing. Dated February 29, 1968, the version supplied to me reads: "(WORDS DELETED) VARIOUS REPORTS HAVE BEEN RECEIVED CONCERNING ACTIVITIES HERE OF DANIEL SCHECHTER, YOUNG AMERICAN WHO RESEARCHING (DELETED) EXPOSE BOOK WHICH RAMPARTS HOPES TO BE PUBLISHED BY McGRAW HILL."

And so it began, the first of a series of cables chronicling my European travels, reporting on my whereabouts, schooling and background. None of the information released is very detailed. Censored, it certainly doesn't inspire too much confidence in the CIA's research abilities. But, of course, there is more — much more. The CIA seemed very interested in *Ramparts*. A March 25th
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cable from Headquarters refers to "OTHER RAMPARTS PERSONALITIES KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN IN LONDON." No names were listed next to the letters A through G on the form supplied to me, but there I am, listed as H. Two days later, a short biography was cabled noting, "HAS BEEN INVOLVED PROTEST GROUPS IN U.S. AND LONDON." The next line bears the curious instruction: "(DELETED) INTERESTED ALL ACTIVITIES (DELETED) SCHECHTER."

In the meantime, a "Memorandum for Chief" and a "Memorandum for Record" were prepared in early March 1968, presumably detailing my activities. The CIA will not let me see these documents because they contain other names, and "to release them would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of their personal privacy." It was not until reading that passage that I recognized the Agency's deep commitment to civil liberties and personal privacy.

In its cover letter — an apt term — the office of the CIA's Freedom of Information Coordinator lists various categories of information which they've collected on me over the years. Each category also contains appropriate legal references to regulations and statutory authority explaining why I can't see what they have. In one case, information was received "from our liaison relationship with a foreign government." Hence "FOIA subsection (b) (1)" applies. In another instance, the CIA says it must protect "the identity of confidential sources" and "investigate techniques and procedures." And on and on.

It turns out that the CIA has also been collecting and sharing information with other govern-

ment agencies. I found this out rather inadvertently when, in response to a separate FOIA request I submitted to the FBI, Director Clarence Kelley informed me that the G-Men first had to consult with "another agency." It sounded so mysterious that I wrote back wondering what agency that could be. (Fishing and Wildlife?) Kelley has since replied, advising me that there are classified CIA documents about me in the FBI's central file. In its letter, the CIA doesn't cite the FBI by name but admits to having sent 22 memoranda "to another government agency containing information relative to your anti-war and other activities abroad." The CIA then cites a maze of subsections and rulings to circumvent disclosure. Incidentally, the FBI is still "processing" my request but does promise to make some documents available.

Supposedly, all of this information is restricted to my activities abroad. In the eyes of the Rockefeller Commission and many CIA apologists, that would make the CIA's curiosity legitimate and quite legal. I am afraid I cannot take comfort in these distinctions. First of all, the CIA has been claiming that all of its meddling abroad was legal — which is quite possible. As newspaper reports make clear, the CIA helped shape the laws which guide its operations and has quite successfully undermined and co-opted efforts by Congress to assert any independent control: I do not think that spying on journalists or legal protesters is a legitimate function of government, here or overseas.

The CIA's interest in me did not diminish when I returned to the United States. One of their dispatches plainly links me to a publication supporting the Harvard student strike of 1969 and makes reference to the now defunct *Old Mole*, described as a "militant bi-weekly underground paper." There are also references to anti-war groups in the US. All of this suggests that I may have been one of the 10,000 Americans who came to the at-



Chil Garboden

Danny Schechter: "Who knows? Maybe they know more about me than I do."

tention of the CIA's domestic program Operation CHAOS.

The sanitized files I have received are slim pickings, I know, but they have confirmed my suspicions about CIA surveillance. I now know for certain that at least some of my paranoia has been justified, and that the CIA is concerned about people who are concerned about them. The folks at *Ramparts* were watched. There's even a dispatch offering a "Who's Who of the *Ramparts* staff as of November 1, 1970." That information may even have come from an agent on the magazine's staff. According to a recent *Boston Globe* report there was a reference to a "CIA contact" at *Ramparts* in a memorandum supplied to Dartmouth College Professor Jonathan Mirsky by the CIA. We still don't know who that person was.

There may never be any way of getting all the facts about the sordid intrigue of the CIA. Michael Harrington's ouster from the House committee investigating the CIA shows Congress's attitude, and the Church Committee in the Senate has already limited the scope of its inquiry. The Rockefeller Commission report was an example of telling a little to hide a lot.

I am still going to press for full disclosure from the CIA: the FOIA allows for an appeal. The only catch is that the appeal goes to an Information Review Committee composed of CIA brass, with a chairman appointed by Agency Director William "Operation Phoenix" Colby. In other words, the CIA reviews it-

self.

If, as I expect, the bureaucracy rules in favor of itself, the next step is to take the CIA to court. A number of people are already doing that, some to demand more information, others to protest CIA interference in their lives and livelihoods. A Presidential apology last week to the family of the scientist who committed suicide after unwittingly ingesting Agency acid does not seem to have headed off their suit, and there are others. A Rhode Island man is suing because his mail was tampered with. In New York, Grove Press has filed a \$10 million damage suit against the CIA, accusing it of having participated in the firebombing of the firm's offices back in 1968. The Rockefeller Commission revealed that Grove was a target of CIA attention. Publisher Barney Rosett says the Agency tapped its phones, infiltrated its staff and intercepted its mail, and he says there is evidence suggesting that the CIA supplied anti-Castro groups with bombs. One such group attacked its offices. Grove published the writings of Cuban revolutionary partisans Che Guevara and Regis Debray.

I don't seem to have been firebombed or materially damaged by the CIA's comparatively minor interventions directed my way. I am angry, though, about what these files suggest — and determined to find out more about what they found out.

Who knows? Maybe they know more about me than I do.

I also want to know if their files on me are as good as mine on them.