

How the FBI 'got its man'

A picture of police-state tactics

Richard Gutman

New details of the FBI's COINTELPRO domestic political disruption program continue to surface through documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act and civil lawsuits. One significant recent addition to our knowledge of the FBI's covert war against political freedom came to light when plaintiffs in a Chicago class-action civil lawsuit obtained the COINTELPRO files of the Chicago FBI field office — 4,186 reports contained in twenty-two volumes, constituting the most complete record ever obtained of a single FBI field office's COINTELPRO operations. Although the reports were censored by the FBI before they were made available, what was left provided a dramatic picture of police-state tactics.

Perhaps the most startling revelation in the new documents was an FBI plot to disrupt projected Presidential campaign. On May 18, 1967, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover sent a memo marked "PERSONAL ATTENTION" to the heads of the Atlanta, Chicago, and New York FBI offices. Hoover noted the possibility of a 1968 anti-war Presidential campaign by Martin Luther King Jr. and Dr. Benjamin Spock, and proposed that the FBI fabricate and circulate flyers, leaflets, cards, bumperstickers, and buttons ostensibly issued by the Communist Party in support of the King Spock ticket. Hoover re-

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quested comments and recommendations from the three field offices.

Two weeks later, the head of the Chicago FBI office responded, "Effectively tabbing as communist or as communist-backed the most hysterical opponents of the President on the Vietnam question in the midst of the Presidential campaign would be a real boon to Mr. Johnson." However, the Chicago bureau chief warned, "We would suggest that our use of such tactics, if ever made known or even hinted at, could be the source of the most severe sort of embarrassment for the Bureau. It could be asked, with telling cogency, 'What does the FBI have to do with the selection of Presidential candidates?' The only possible answer could be, 'Nothing.'"

As an alternative, the Chicago memo proposed that a nationally known reporter be persuaded to write an article attacking the King-Spock ticket. The reporter, the memo suggested, "would not be about to divulge the identity of his source. Thus the Bureau would stand harmless."

By far the most successful tactic in the FBI's domestic "psychological warfare" was its frequent clandestine use of the mass media to discredit dissenters. A memo dated April 25, 1965, reveals that the Chicago FBI office had a list of at least thirty-three Chicago-area "reliable cooperative news media sources" to be used in its COINTELPRO operations. Representatives of all major newspapers and broadcast outlets were included, and the file is rife with instances when the

FBI planted stories to "expose" and disrupt groups opposed to the status quo.

In an effort to disrupt Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and its June 18, 1969, national convention, the head of the Chicago FBI office got in touch with an editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, who assigned reporter Ron Koziol to write an article. On June 16, 1969, Koziol met with three FBI agents who "provided background information" and "sharpened the understanding of Koziol relative to the underlying political dispute between the factions vying for the control of SDS." The resulting story, headlined "Red Unit Seeks S.D.S. Rule," was splashed across the front page of the *Tribune* on June 17. On June 30, the Chicago FBI chief reported to the Bureau that the article "which resulted from the Bureau authorized contact by Special Agent in Charge M.W. Johnson with [name deleted] of the *Chicago Tribune*... aggravated a tense situation and helped create the confrontation that split SDS."

To promote "factionalism among the leaders and discredit them among the black community and the organization's membership," the Chicago FBI in January 1969 supplied a *Chicago Tribune* reporter with information regarding the extensive commercial holdings of the Nation of Islam. The resulting article appeared on the front page of the *Tribune* on January 26. One week later, gunmen robbed a top Nation of Islam official of \$23,000 in cash. In a March 13 letter to headquarter-

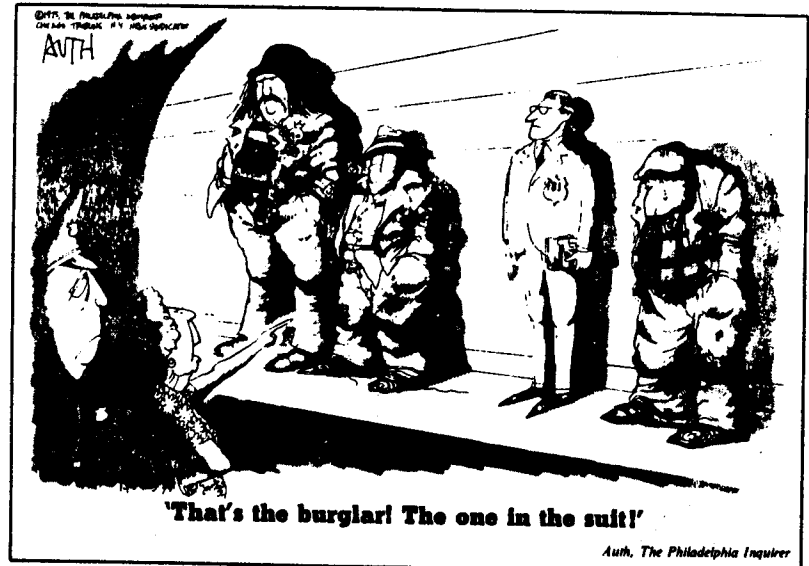
ters, the chief of the Chicago FBI concluded that one of the "tangible results obtained" from the use of the *Chicago Tribune* reporter was that "articles authored by him may have had the effect of rendering Nation of Islam officials vulnerable to robbery efforts."

The intent of the FBI to influence the very nature of dissenting organizations was most evident in plans to change the program and leadership of the Nation of Islam. On January 7, 1969, Hoover wrote to the Chicago office, "When [Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad] dies a power struggle can be expected and the NOI could change direction. . . . We should plan how to change the philosophy of the NOI to one of strictly religious and self-improvement orientation, deleting the race hatred and separate nationhood aspects."

Three weeks later, the Chicago FBI office responded, "Serious consideration has also been given towards developing ways and means of changing NOI philosophy to one whereby the members could be developed into useful citizens and the organization developed into one emphasizing religion — the brotherhood of mankind — and self-improvement." After arguing that it was desirable from the FBI's perspective to have Elijah Muhammad succeeded by his son Wallace rather than by his son Herbert, the Chicago FBI noted, "Chicago continues its contacts with its sources whose identities are known to the Bureau and feels these sources will be of possible extreme value at the time of the demise of Muhammad."

The FBI's objective of disruption was often carried out by infiltrators. Memos in the Chicago COINTELPRO file indicate that in 1970 and 1971 the FBI had its infiltrators provoke violence between rival Nazi groups. In the winter of 1968-1969, the Chicago FBI used its infiltrators in the black community to "encourage within the Negro community the idea that SDS is a racist organization."

The FBI often utilized its infiltrators to exacerbate dissent within COINTELPRO-targeted organizations. In advance of Communist Party national conventions, the FBI briefed its infiltrators on specific arguments to be advanced in supporting or opposing con-



vention resolutions. As one Chicago FBI memo declared, "Our objective remains to split the party and to keep them so preoccupied with internal problems that they will have neither the time nor the inclination to put the party program into effect."

While using its informants to disrupt, the FBI was falsely labeling dissenters as Government agents. In January 1969, the Chicago office created and disseminated a cartoon depicting Tom Hayden as a CIA agent. The files also reveal two instances in which the Chicago FBI planned to tag left-wing Americans working in communist countries as U.S. spies by sending them incriminating communications. A successful operation of this nature presumably might result in the execution of the target.

Another major objective of the COINTELPRO was to block communists and communist sympathizers from participating in non-communist organizations. In Chicago that goal led to the covert manipulation of an NAACP election. The Chicago FBI, through one of its infiltrators in the NAACP, learned in 1959 that the Chicago NAACP's "left caucus" planned to run a slate of candidates for election as delegates to the NAACP national convention. A telephone call to the president of the Chicago NAACP alerted him to the plans of the "left caucus" and alleged that the

caucus included Communist Party members. The Chicago NAACP president proceeded to keep the location of the election secret until the day of the election and then packed the meeting with newly enfranchised members. In the subsequent election, the "left caucus" was duly defeated. Hoover commended the agent who suggested this operation, and it was later cited at an FBI headquarters training session as a model of a successful action.

Unfortunately, the COINTELPRO danger remains real. An FBI memo of April 28, 1971, which "discontinued" COINTELPRO following public exposure, expressly provided for the consideration of future counterintelligence action "on an individual basis. . . in exceptional instances where it is considered counterintelligence action is warranted." In fact, the Chicago litigation has already uncovered two instances of planned COINTELPRO operations since 1971.

Furthermore, the first proposed FBI charter legislation, currently before Congress, does not expressly prohibit COINTELPRO-type operations. Until these long-standing political disruption actions have been outlawed by legislation or court order, they can only be viewed as a clear and present danger to American democracy. ■