

A Cointel Story

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, March 28—William Albertson was a leading figure in the Communist Party of the U.S.A. until 1964. That year, a document reading like a secret informant's report to the F.B.I. was found in a car he had used. It was signed "Bill," appeared to be in his handwriting and ended by asking for "a raise in expenses."

Albertson protested that the paper was a fake. He had never spied for anyone, he said, and he had himself been a victim of F.B.I. informants. But the party leadership did not believe him. It expelled Albertson, denouncing him as a "stool pigeon" for "the ruling circles."

Most Americans would find it hard to imagine being pained at expulsion from a group as unpopular as the Communist Party, but communism had been William Albertson's life. He lost his friends and his job. His family was ostracized, threatened. A school took a scholarship from his youngest child, on the theory that F.B.I. money was ample. Albertson had transient work until he died in 1972, at the age of 61, in a grotesque accident.

Now, a dozen years later, it appears that Albertson was right about the incident that destroyed him: The F.B.I. manufactured it. The story is told by Frank Donner in the April-May issue of *The Civil Liberties Review*, a valuable independent magazine published by the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation.

The truth came out by ironic mischance. Last year a journalist asked the F.B.I. for documents about its past

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efforts to disrupt white hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. When the papers were released, one was on another subject.

It was a report to bureau officials, dated Jan. 6, 1965, that said a high functionary of the Communist Party had been expelled "through our counter-intelligence efforts." The name of the

"functionary" was deleted at the beginning of the document. But, perhaps through clerical error in the release, it was left in farther down. The name was Albertson.

The Albertson story is one small example of what went on in Cointelpro, the covert F.B.I. program of J. Edgar Hoover's late years to injure those he disliked. Cointelpro has had less public attention than C.I.A. illegalities and abuses. But in a way it was a special horror: An effort by the American Government to set Americans against each other.

Some Cointelpro activities have already come to light: anonymous letters to the spouses of civil rights sympathizers charging infidelities (and some marriages did then break up); attempts to stir up warfare between black activist groups; and, best-known, the letter to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. encouraging him to commit suicide. More are expected to be detailed soon in the report of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Cointelpro activities came to an end in 1971 and 1972, according to Justice Department officials. But of course that is not a reason to forget the whole thing. The question now is how to make sure that such horrors do not happen again.

One step has already been taken: the adoption of internal rules by the Justice Department itself. Attorney General Edward H. Levi has approved guidelines that restrict the F.B.I. to the function of aiding in enforcement of the law. The next logical step is for Congress to write some rules into permanent statutory form.

Public reassurance also requires an official effort to acknowledge and deal with the wrongs done in the Cointel program. For example, those who committed abuses might be prosecuted, or disciplined if they are still Government employees.

That is not so easy. The Cointel files often leave unclear exactly what happened. It would be hard to prove specific criminal offenses, and in most cases the statute of limitations has run. But Attorney General Levi has

been trying to find an appropriate course of action, and a decision is near on one proposal.

The idea is to notify all the victims of Cointelpro who can be identified—tell each one, privately, what was done to him or her. They could then decide what to do or say, or what action to urge on the Justice Department. At least the survivors would know—as the Albertson family would not otherwise have known; but for the accidental release of that paper.

William Albertson's widow said the other day that she had never expected to know the truth, "and I don't think we ever would except for Watergate." The need for openness is one lesson of Cointelpro. The other is the need for officials to respect the law. In the case of William Albertson, officials took it upon themselves to punish someone who had violated no law. His views were unpopular. But the principle we treasure in the Constitution, Justice Holmes said, is "not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate."