

FBI's San Francisco Field Office Felt Hoover's Prodding, Wrath in Late '60s

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It couldn't have been easy being an FBI agent in the San Francisco field



J. EDGAR HOOVER

...urged "enthusiasm, imagination"

office in the late 1960s. There was so much to keep track of: the Black Panther Party, headquartered across the bay in Oakland; the volatile student movement at Berkeley, Stanford, San Francisco State and San Jose State, and assorted leftists drawn to the Bay Area as Moslems are to Mecca.

On top of that, the San Francisco agents weren't very diligent about keeping their Washington FBI bosses happy. Documents released this week from the FBI's enormous counterintelligence program (Cointelpro), designed to disrupt the activities of right- and left-wing groups and individuals, reveal that Director J. Edgar Hoover was upset because San Francisco agents were not pursuing suspected subversives with a full measure of enthusiasm.

One aspect of the Cointelpro program was to dig up dirt on the sexual activities of radical leaders and leak the information to friendly news media contacts. But the permissive San Francisco atmosphere rendered that approach somewhat useless.

When the San Francisco office informed Washington of that fact, Hoover replied in a June 17, 1968, memo: "You are reminded that the program requires enthusiasm and imagination. Inasmuch as your office is a center for the New Left, you are expected to pursue this matter aggressively."

San Francisco got the hint, but stuck to its guns. "Extreme perverse immorality might be of possible use to depict and embarrass New Left leaders," an agent wrote back a month later. "However, it is not felt just plain ordinary immorality means anything to them."

On another occasion, the Chicago

FBI office cabled its San Francisco counterpart that Yippie leader Jerry Rubin would be flying from Chicago to San Francisco and using a reduced airfare card that did not belong to him. The Washington headquarters expected Rubin to be arrested immediately for "following deceptive practices." When he wasn't arrested, Hoover was incensed.

"In the face of a situation pregnant with possibilities for neutralizing one of the most reprehensible of the New Left leaders," the director wrote in an Oct. 10, 1968, memo, "it appears your office did nothing more than make a perfunctory contact with United Airlines . . ."

"The above circumstances indicate clearly that the agents of your office have not yet grasped the significance of the counterintelligence program, are not alert to opportunities that may arise to counteract the New Left and its adherents, and are not sufficiently motivated to aggressive action."

Chastened, the San Francisco office wrote back that agents tried to have Rubin arrested, in fact they "did everything possible under the circumstances in order to cause trouble for Rubin upon his arrival." The problem was, it was against United Airlines policy to have someone arrested on the spot simply for using someone else's youth card. The airline preferred, through civil means, to try to get back the difference between the youth fare and the regular fare.

Rubin apparently had the last word. According to an Oct. 15, 1968, FBI memo from San Francisco to Washington, United Airlines approached him, but he "uttered some obscenities and walked away."