

Big Brother Is Watching

THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE: The Aims and Methods of America's Political Intelligence System. By Frank J. Donner. Knopf. 554 pp. \$17.95

By DAVID WISE

IT IS A TRIBUTE to the reach of Frank Donner's scholarship that in his stunning and encyclopedic survey of government spying against the people, he has even unearthed the fact that J. Edgar Hoover investigated Pogo. The late Walt Kelly, Donner notes, featured "a recognizable caricature of Hoover" in his comic strip. "The Director ordered a cryptanalysis by Bureau experts of the dialogue of sample strips to determine whether its humor concealed further disparagement—in code." An FBI document, released under the Freedom of Information Act, reports glumly:

"Efforts were made to interpret specimens Q1—Q10 according to purported meaning supplied [but] examination did not reveal any technical basis to establish validity of interpretations of the submitted 'Pogo' cartoons."

One can almost see the hapless agent sweating as he wrote those words, fearful that his failure to crack the nefarious code would doom him to banishment in Butte, Montana, or some other Hooverian purgatory. As Donner points out, subversion lurked everywhere to the FBI and to Hoover, "a countersubversive fanatic." For more than half a century, the government's intelligence agencies have used the Menace of Communism (today retooled as the Menace of Terrorism) and the talisman of "national security" to spy upon, catalog, index, wiretap, bug, disrupt and sometimes destroy their fellow citizens—all in utter disregard of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the law, or often, simple decency.

Donner's book is a horror story, an American tragedy, and should be required reading for every citizen. A civil liberties attorney and director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Project on Political Surveillance, Donner has been collecting and researching his material on government spying and repression in America for 30 years. This book is the result.

I began his massive study on the day that the Senate threw in the towel and decided that—despite the abuses its own members have so well documented—there would be no comprehensive intelligence reform bill in 1980. One could pick no more appropriate day to begin reading *The Age of Surveillance*. Not that the news was surprising. For, as Donner points out, Con-

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gress has seldom acted in the field of intelligence. Perhaps it does not want to. As Donner suggests, the very abuses that Congress has lately disclosed confirm "that the surveillance of dissent is an institutional pillar of our political order, a mode of governance."

His book, I think it is fair to say, is the definitive work on FBI political surveillance in America. Meticulous detail is piled upon detail, fact upon fact, until the sheer weight of the evidence is overwhelming and persuasive. Yet it is not so much the relentless detail as the clarity of understanding that Donner brings to his material that makes the book so valuable.

The introduction, taken together with the first chapter entitled "The Theory and Practice of Domestic Political Intelligence," is as clear an analysis of the ori-

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Surveillance

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gins, and raison d'être for political spying in the United States—"domestic intelligence gathering" as the spooks would prefer to call it—as will be found anywhere in the literature.

Why, Donner asks, has such a powerful police and intelligence apparatus blossomed "in the unpromising soil of a democratic system?" Fear of communism is the key, he suggests. "Recurrent counter-subversive movements illuminate a striking contrast between our claims to superiority, indeed our mission as a redeemer nation to bring a new order to the world, and the extraordinary fragility of our confidence in our institutions. This contrast has led some observers to conclude that we are, subconsciously, quite insecure about the value and permanence of our society."

As a people, Donner adds, we are "programmed for fear." Surveillance, he notes accurately, "has transformed itself from a means into an end: an ongoing attack on nonconformity."

Hoover, who could blackmail presidents—"He has a file on everybody," Richard Nixon remarked as Watergate closed in—was not, in Donner's view, *sui generis*, but a child of his time, the product of a nativist, fear-centered xenophobia with deep roots in our history. Although Donner does not draw the analogy, he obviously sees Hoover and the FBI in the 20th century as direct descendants of the nativist Know Nothings of the 1850s, who embraced Millard Fillmore as their presidential ideal.

The FBI director, Donner maintains, viewed himself as defending not only American institutions but civilization itself. "Our way of life, the purity of our women and the innocence of our children, were being befouled by the bearded foreigners, godless and filthy, cunning and bloodthirsty, in alliance with parlor Bolsheviks and intellectual perverts."

Hoover flourished in a "vigilante political culture" aided by elaborate manipulation of the news

media. "In a real, if unacknowledged sense, he became our first minister of propaganda, an American Goebbels."

The result was chilling, sometimes tragic. Donner's account of the career of FBI informer Howard Berry Godfrey is instructive. Godfrey was in the car with a right-wing militant in San Diego who fired a shot into the home of a university professor, seriously wounding a woman in the house. Godfrey gave the gun to his control, FBI agent Steve Christensen, who promptly hid it for six months while police were trying to solve the crime.

Although Donner includes a good summary of military surveillance of American civilians and of the Nixon Justice Department's misuse of grand juries, he concentrates for the most part on the FBI, with less comprehensive descriptions of the National Security Agency, Internal Revenue Service and other members of the intelligence "community." He does not tell us enough about the CIA, a major lapse in a study of political intelligence in America. But this is more than compensated for in the sweep and breadth of the rest of this deeply disturbing, often brilliant, book.

Donner is not optimistic about the future; the police and intelligence agencies are resurgent. Now, more than ever, they are expanding their power, financed by their victims and targets, the taxpayers. 1984 is fast approaching, but does anybody care? Apparently not. □