

John Rees: His Newsletter Sup

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John H. Rees, a shadowy, British-born figure active in antiwar circles here in the early 1970s, was a police informant who surreptitiously gathered data for an elaborate private intelligence newsletter he has circulated to local police and the FBI, CIA and Congress.

Thus, through Rees' newsletter, "Information Digest," the names of thousands of persons associated with the antiwar movement went into police files and in some cases formed the basis for specific political dossiers. The digest still is published today.

Secretive and eccentric, Rees, 49, used false names and sometimes masqueraded as a Catholic priest. He was known variously as John O'Connor, John Seeley or just "Father John" among activists in the movement.

He lived in a commune with his wife Louise, also known as Sheila O'Connor, and operated a radical "book store," financed by police, near Dupont Circle to attract youthful disidents and provide cover for himself.

District of Columbia police also installed a bugging device at another location used by the Rees couple and recorded meetings, planning sessions and general conversation there in weeks just prior to the massive May-day demonstrations here in 1971.

Details of Rees' operation were disclosed earlier this month by New York State legislative investigators in a report on the New York state police intelligence apparatus and its utilization of Information Digest.

Most details outlined in the report, published by the New York State General Assembly office for legislative oversight and analysis, have been independently corroborated by official and private sources here. Additional information about Rees' activities also has been collated from these and other sources.

Rees also is one of several central figures in a recent investigation by the U.S. Attorney's office here into allegations of illegal surveillance tactics by the intelligence division of the D.C. police department during the antiwar years. The investigation ended inconclusively with no action recommended against those suspected of involvement.

Rees sold or gave away his biweekly mimeographed newsletter to as many as 43 recipients, most of them law enforcement agencies such as the D.C. police and Maryland and New York state police.

The FBI and CIA received Information Digest unsolicited from Rees and deny supporting it financially.

Staff members of the Senate Internal Security subcommittee and the now defunct House Internal Security Committee (HISC) also received the newsletter.

Rees still maintains a link with Congress through his wife who is on the staff of Rep. Lawrence P. McDonald, (D-Ga.), an archconservative and member of the national council of the John Birch Society.

Also on McDonald's staff is Herbert Romerstein, a veteran HISC investigator who is one of few persons now maintaining direct contact with the furtive Rees.

Rees' newsletter, which contains numerous reports on rightwing, antiwar and leftist organizations, also has been sold to several news organs including one "major broadcast network," according to Romerstein who would not elaborate.

Activists in Washington's leftist community who have seen samples of Rees' newsletter are alarmed at its detailed descriptions of internal meetings and its sophisticated analysis of leftist politics.

They said this suggests that Information Digest is not the product of a single freelance police informant and his wife but is part of a much larger intelligence network involving police and private individuals.

"It's just the tip of the iceberg," said one veteran movement observer. "The material in there reflects a sophisticated data collection system that would take a whole bureaucracy to run."

In some editions of Information Digest, Rees refers to a "filing/indexing service" he maintains. He also provides for recipients a confidential telephone number and a Baltimore post office box number through which he can be contacted.

Leftist activities contended that this suggests that he not only gives but receives information from police agencies and that Information Digest is some type of central clearing house for a nationwide intelligence exchange system.

Romerstein denied this, saying the "radical left is trying to make something out of nothing."

He said Rees, a journalist by training, relies largely on published material—radical newspapers, leaflets and other literature—and on exchanging information with fellow journalists.

"He may have informants in some of the radical organizations," Romerstein said, "but they're private, not government."

Romerstein would not discuss how Information Digest is financed except to say that Rees "never made any money on it."

Rees apparently provided the digest free to some law enforcement agencies. The CIA acknowledged receiving "some (unsolicited copies," according to a letter last Feb. 2 to New York state legislative investigators.

"We do not know why we were put on the mailing list," the letter said. "... and can only assume a shotgun approach was used in distributing it to various federal and state agencies."

The FBI said it has no record of receiving the newsletter, but William F. Haddad, director of the New York state legislative oversight office, said FBI officials told him they received it on an unsolicited basis.

Haddad said there is no evidence that the publication receives federal financial support.

In the Nov. 19, 1971 edition of Information Digest, Rees made a plea for money, noting that it cost \$50 in supplies and postage for each issue, plus "the ever increasing overhead of maintaining a filing-indexing service."

Of the general findings in Haddad's report, Romerstein said: "Some are right and some are wrong, and I'm not going to say which is which."

He said, "I'm not going to let Haddad clean up his act. I'm speaking for Rees now, and he doesn't want Haddad squirming off the hook."

Rees now lives in almost total anonymity and refuses to talk with reporters.

Last winter, he agreed to meet briefly in a motel room here with investigators looking in D.C. police intelligence activity, but he gave them little information. He would not even tell them where he lives, a source said, citing fear that his life could be endangered.

Rees' wife, now working as a researcher in Rep. McDonald's office, also refuses to talk to reporters.

Several members and employees of the National Lawyers Guild, a long-time leftist legal assistance organization mentioned prominently in Information Digest, said Louise Rees worked in the Guild's Washington office in 1972 and 1973 while her husband was working as a police informant.

"She was terrific, very efficient," recalled Sheila O'Donnell, a former Guild

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officer. "She was kind of an office coordinator . . . She put together a (Guild) membership list complete with home addresses and phone numbers . . . She maintained and updated our donors' list, things like that."

In 1971 and 1972, Rees and his wife lived at 1616 Longfellow St. NW, a commune with a floating population in a quiet cul-de-sac near Carter Barron Amphitheatre.

John Rees also set up the "Red House Book Store" at 1247 20th St. NW near Dupont Circle. The store was stocked with radical tracts and underground newspapers but few books. D.C. police funds were used to pay the rent for the eight or nine months the store existed.

Sources close to the investigation of D.C. police intelligence activity say there is no evidence that the locations on Longfellow Street or 20th Street were bugged. But police did install a listening device at a third location used by the Rees couple and recorded numerous conversations there, the sources said. The sources would not identify the location.

In one bizarre development, Robert Merritt, a former FBI informant, told The Washington Post that after the Red House Book Store was set up, the FBI apparently did not know the store was a D.C. police front and instructed him to obtain information about it.

"I stole mail and some telephone num-

bers from that place and gave them to my FBI contact," Merritt said.

Samples of hundreds of pages of Information Digest examined by The Post indicate that Rees and his informants penetrated numerous internal meetings of both rightwing and leftwing organizations, gathering political literature and the names, addresses and biographical backgrounds of participants.

Also included were repeated analyses purporting to show how Communist and other Marxist cadres were interwoven with memberships of what ostensibly were "peace" and "antiwar" groups.

The Feb. 19, 1971 issue of Information Digest, for example, displays a massive list of supporters of the National Peace Action Coalition (NPAC), an umbrella organization which sponsored many demonstrations during the antiwar years.

An analysis of the list, Rees said, shows that the "Trotskyist dominated NPAC has made significant . . . inroads into the groups and constituencies usually regarded as the preserve of the Moscow-controlled Communist Party USA."

At the other end of the political spectrum, Information Digest contains detailed notes on such groups as the Ku Klux Klan, Minutemen, Aryan Brotherhood and the Posse Comitatus.

The March 7, 1975 issue of Information Digest reported that each "central

organization" member of the National Socialist Liberation Front, an American Nazi Party spinoff on the West Coast, was ordered to obtain certain equipment including .45 automatic pistol, 12-gauge shotgun, .308 assault rifle, gas mask and bulletproof vest. The report did not say what the equipment was intended for.

D.C. police officials acknowledge receiving Information Digest during the antiwar period but will not say whether Rees was an informant for the department. They cite a general policy of not disclosing the names of informants. Rees' role as a salaried informant was confirmed by The Post through other sources.

"We were getting it then (during the antiwar years)," said Insp. Albert Ferguson, former head of the department's intelligence division, "but we weren't paying for it . . . We had a special employee (paid informant) who brought it by . . . I always assumed it was his own report."

Ferguson said he terminated the informant in 1973 as the antiwar movement cooled and the department stopped receiving Information Digest.

Insp. Robert Zink, current intelligence division chief, said some excerpts from Information Digest may have been placed in specific files on antiwar groups and individuals. But he said he could not be certain because the division, under pressure from the D.C. City Council last year, destroyed all its political files.