

FBI Papers Reveal More Activities of Doubtful Legality

By Margaret Gentry
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Wildly imaginative tactics, some of doubtful legality, marked a 15-year FBI campaign to disrupt dissident groups. But many of the operations were failures even by the bureau's standards.

The operations are detailed in 52,648 pages of counter-intelligence files the FBI released yesterday under terms of the Freedom of Information Act.

The heavily censored files covering activities from 1956 to 1971 describe the FBI's attempts to harass and disrupt groups ranging from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Ku Klux Klan to the Black Panthers and the Students for a Democratic Society.

The bureau already has released much material on the programs, which was known as Cointelpro. Both the Justice Department and the Senate Intelligence Committee have said many of the activities were illegal, but department officials concluded that criminal prosecutions were unwarranted.

WHAT THE LATEST files made clear was that the bureau launched Cointelpro with little apparent thought to its effectiveness, much less its legality.

A favorite Cointelpro tactic was use of anonymous letters and leaflets. Parents of student protesters received mysterious missives, often signed "Concerned Friend," warning of drug use whether it was true or not. Black Muslims in New York received comic books ridiculing Muslim leaders. Communist Party members received unsigned leaflets designed to foment dissension within the party.

The agency also published a fake student newspaper called The Rational Observer, which was distributed at American University in a campaign to discredit the anti-war movement.

But the FBI had no way of judging what impact such activities were having. Field offices frequently reported to headquarters that "no tangible results" were produced.

In 1966, for example, the FBI plotted to stir up a battle between the Mafia and U.S. Communists on the theory that neither side could do much harm if both were engaged in battling each other.

New York agents tried to get a phony letter attacking a Mafia leader published in the party newspaper, The Daily Worker, but it was never printed. Another fake letter was sent to Teamsters Union locals in Philadelphia, purportedly from a party member angered by mobsters' alleged union infiltration.

FOR ALL THE FBI agents knew, nobody paid any attention to the letters. The New York office concluded two years later the operation had been fruitless.

San Francisco agents, however, claimed success in 1971 for an effort to split the Black Panther Party into warring factions supporting Eldridge Cleaver, then in exile in Algeria, and Huey P. Newton.

~~New York~~

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Other memos show Washington officials often rejected field office proposals with a strong potential for disruption, not because of qualms about the propriety of such acts but because of fear the FBI involvement would be publicized and "embarrass the bureau."

Other ideas were rejected because headquarters officials considered them unnecessary, such as a proposal to install an FBI man as imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. That idea was shelved in 1967 on grounds that the FBI already had enough informers in the Klan.