

FBI Transcripts Full of Inaccuracies

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and Les Whitten

Transcripts bearing the momentous stamp, "Evidence, Federal Bureau of Investigation," are riddled with serious errors that could jeopardize the rights of the accused.

The FBI circulates these transcripts to prosecutors and courts. Their accuracy is essential, therefore, to the integrity of the judicial process. Yet we have found thousands of errors, more than 100 of them serious, on approximately 1,000 pages of FBI transcripts.

Most of the errors are merely careless, but some appear to be intentional. We found them in the transcribed confessions of an ex-Mafia courier, the conversations of a diplomat and the statements of witnesses in a variety of cases.

The FBI insists that the mistake-ridden transcripts are merely "drafts," which never achieve the dignity of formal evidence. Yet we have established that the transcripts, mistakes and all, have been used in vital judicial functions.

Some have figured in motions; some have been submitted to federal courts. Others have been studied in civil, criminal and security proceedings.

By the time the errors are discovered and corrected, a defendant could be dragged wrongfully through the judicial mud. The cost for pre-trial actions, bond hearings and attorneys' fees could run into thousands of dollars.

We have been able to compare several FBI transcripts with the tapes from which they were taken. Some of the mistakes, like those in the original White House version of the famous Nixon tapes, appear to be self-serving.

At one point, for example, a Mafia mobster is asked on tape by a Customs agent whether the FBI had been informed of a large payoff case. The FBI transcript records his answer as "No" when, in fact, he said "Yes . . . Yeah."

The clear implication is that someone in the FBI didn't want his superiors to know that a major crime had been reported but, apparently, had not been prosecuted adequately.

In other transcripts, the names of FBI informants have been omitted, warnings of federal violations have been left out and the details of serious crimes unaccountably have been dropped.

Some of the mistakes are simply zany. The words, "Yeah, I called him," for example, came

out "Yeah, cold ham." In another tape, a voice says: "De Klotz ain't doing nothing." But in the FBI transcript, this passage reads: "The clock says he hasn't done nonting (sic)."

There are countless misspellings. Often, one man's words are put in another's mouth. Lengthy sequences are lifted from one section of a tape and published in the transcript as part of another section.

On one page, we found no fewer than 248 errors, enough to send a junior high school typing teacher into hysteria. In tapes of room conversations, the number of mistakes per page averaged around 50. Even in clear telephone conversations, the average was about 30.

We listened to an audible tape of an African diplomat; everything he said was easy to understand. Yet the FBI transcript of his conversation was distorted, and 41 of the first 110 words were omitted as "unintelligible."

We were given access to several tapes by a Washington private detective, Richard Bast, from whom they were seized illegally. Both the tapes and the FBI's transcripts were delivered to him under court order a few weeks ago. For days, we have compared the actual tapes with the FBI transcripts.

Footnote: An FBI spokesman conceded that he was distressed over the mistakes that appeared in the transcripts. But he insisted these were "rough drafts of no evidentiary value." He said they had not been reviewed by FBI agents and, as far as he could determine, had not damaged anyone.

Traveling Tux—An Air Force colonel in need of a dress uniform recently arranged for a KC-135 tanker to fly it across the country.

He is Col. Frederick Roth who traveled from Pease Air Force Base, N.H., to Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., to attend a seminar. Upon arrival, he learned that he was supposed to attend a black-tie reception and dinner.

So he directed a KC-135 tanker, suitable for hauling heavy cargo, to pick up his fancy duds and deliver them to Nebraska. The giant plane apparently conducted training maneuvers on the flight, so the taxpayers' money wasn't completely wasted.

The well tailored colonel had no comment on the incident. The Air Force, however, had something to say; it formally reprimanded him for misuse of the great plane.

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