

Is Not Being a Police State Good Enough?

A Look at One's Own Dossier From the FBI Files

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GRADUAL revelations of the extent of FBI snooping on people not even suspected of any crime are making news. But it really isn't new. It has been going on for a long time, and a lot of people including congressmen have known about it without seeing fit to make an issue.

There happens to be a first-hand witness in my family. It is distasteful to be personal, but in this case it tells the story. My husband, who was born in Ireland, acquired a British passport and continued to use it for many years after he had gone to work for an American newspaper. He eventually decided to seek American citizenship, but as a foreign correspondent he was traveling too much to meet the usual residence requirement.

So about 10 years ago it was suggested that a private bill could be put through Congress, to accept his posting abroad by the U.S. paper in lieu of physical presence in this country, as fulfillment of the regulation. This was finally done.

But a private bill (as distinct from a public law applying to anybody) requires specific endorsement of the committee chairmen involved and unanimous consent in both houses.

IN THE course of getting the bill through, one chairman invited my husband up to his office to look at the papers! They included an enormous FBI dossier on both of us, going back almost 15 years before he even decided to apply for citizenship. It was quite illegal to show the file. But the congressman, who is now dead, was a tough, experienced and rather freewheeling man who did things his own way.

I am not at all sure that it was even legal for him to have the raw file in his possession, instead of a processed FBI evaluation report. But he did, and it was a startling collection of trivial facts and fiction showing that reports had been trickling in for many years both from abroad and from various cities in the United States.

One was about a farewell party given for

By Flora Lewis

us in New York just before we sailed in 1947 to return to Warsaw, where my husband was stationed as correspondent. The report was right about some of the people there, simply invented some others and made big drama about a friend who had drunk a bit too much and stretched out on the floor to let his head clear.

There were some fancy political notions in other reports, but so obviously foolish and groundless that so far as I know they were not even considered worth an evaluation. Anyway, the congressman, who was a crusading anti-Communist, saw it for the garbage that it was and seemed, if anything, to be amused.

Presumably, it is still there and maybe there is a lot more by now. To the best of my knowledge there was nothing at all unusual about it; it was apparently a routine collection on reporters dealing with international affairs. We weren't even surprised, except by the fatness and fatuity of the dossier.

We had both seen police states in operation and, as President Nixon remarked to editors the other night, this wasn't a police state because nobody was actually using the silly information against us!

So it has been going for over a quarter of a century. There is something artless about the current arguments of whether 50 or 90 wiretaps have been authorized in a year. Our file showed there had been a variety of surveillance, and for no discernible reason except that reporters are supposed to meet "the most interesting people."

TWO THINGS have changed to make this old story worth dredging up now. One is technology, not just the gadgetry which makes it possible to eavesdrop without tapping a wire or planting a microphone, but most important the computer banks which make it easy to look up all the drivel as well as official and unofficial information (credit

ratings, for example) stored about people. Before computers, you could figure that the rubbish would be snowed under by its own bulk.

The other change is the growing public sense that privacy really is endangered beyond any justifiable need for that vast bureaucracy of government to know. I was a bit irritated, but not outraged, when I learned about that file a decade ago, perhaps because I really do know what a police state is and didn't take those shenanigans seriously. Now, I'm coming to think I was wrong. Not being nearly as bad as a totalitarian state when it comes to watching citizens whom there is no reason to suspect is not good at all for the United States.

It isn't just a matter of whether or not you trust J. Edgar Hoover. Those mountainous files are there, and regulations about access are not always so strictly observed. What has been coming out lately about surveillance is a bare tip of the iceberg. You too may have attracted more attention than you ever thought while the FBI has been going its own unquestioned way.

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