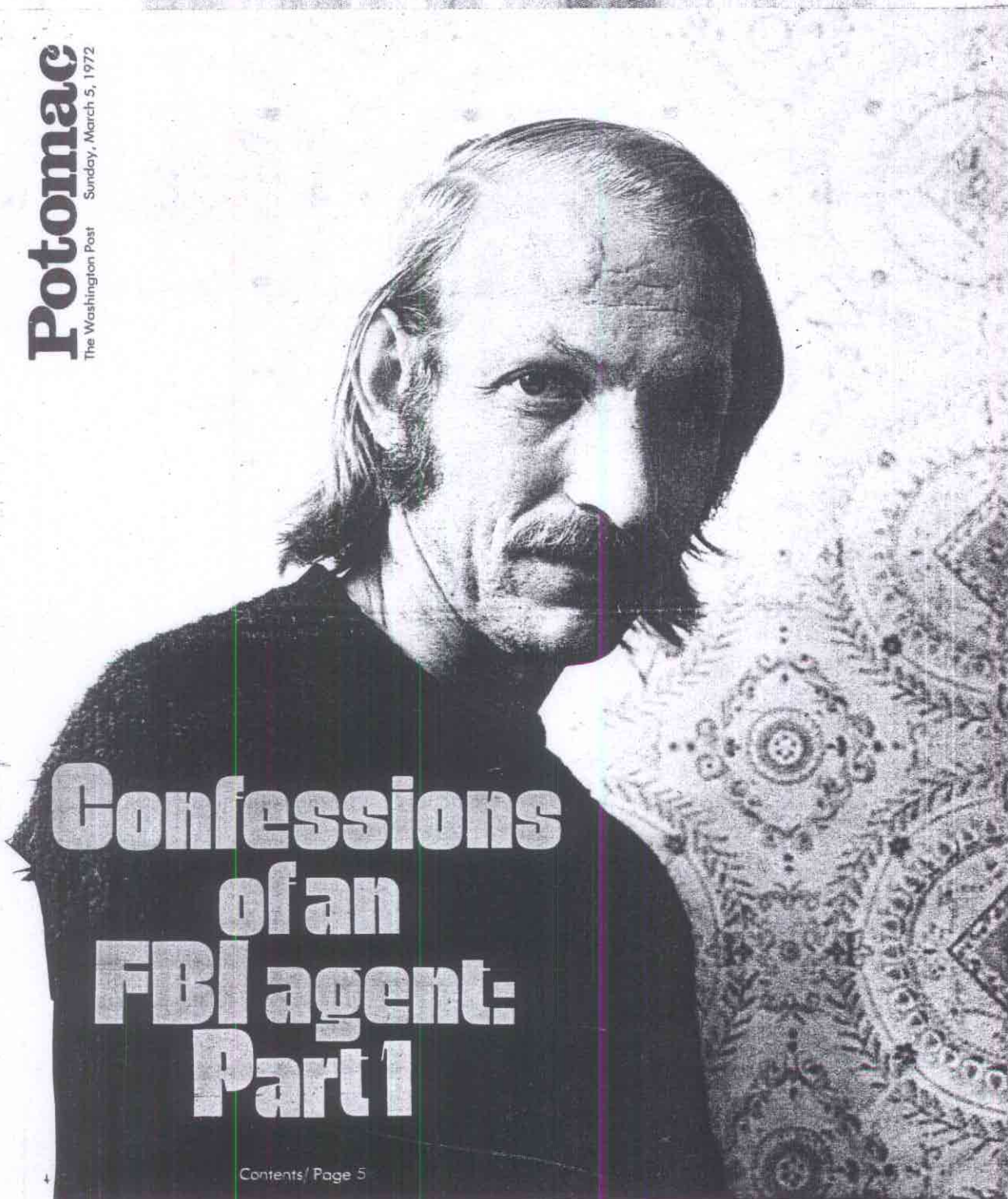


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Confessions of an FBI agent: Part I

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Ex-FBI agent Robert Wall helps his oldest daughter, Joan (5) with a math problem at a free school near his home in Buffalo, N.Y.

Confessions of an FBI agent

Robert Wall knows first-hand what goes on inside the FBI's Washington field office, and Robert Wall is leaving the country

About seven years ago, Robert Wall joined the FBI because he wanted to "do something for good in the world, as naive as that sounds, and the FBI stood for all the good things." He resigned from the Bureau in 1970 after five years of service, and today at 33, he is planning to resign from the United States, at least temporarily, and move with his wife and three children to a small, isolated farm in Nova Scotia.

Both actions, rather drastic, are caused by varieties of disillusionment. And, by Wall's broadening quest for a life that makes sense to him.

The tale of his disillusionment with the FBI is traced in the following article by Wall (parts of which appeared in *The New York Review of Books*) and a second piece in next Sunday's *Potomac*.

It was not a single event or experience in the FBI that forced Wall's decision, but rather, as he said in a recent conversation, "the overall experience. I suppose more than anything, the repression of political thinking as contrasted with the Bill of Rights. In Soviet Russia, you know you have no rights and so it might be easier. You wouldn't expect anything there. But here, from history and the rhetoric all through our history, you do expect. Then came the realities of the Bureau . . . especially the treatment of black minorities."

When he resigned, his official reason for doing so was to attend law school. (That holding a law degree was not a requirement for an FBI agent was one of the first differences between the Bureau's public image and its reality Wall encountered.) "I didn't burn any bridges when I resigned. I was more cautious then and I didn't want any bad references in my personal fitness reports. I had no thought of going back, but was concerned about getting past the ethics board of the law association, if I had a bad FBI record."

Wall returned to Buffalo, where he was born and raised, where his large family still lives today. It is a family with a strong Catholic tradition; two of Wall's older brothers are priests, and he was educated in seminaries through high school, college and a year of post graduate studies, nearly becoming a priest himself. "They think I'm a radical," he said recently, "but they try to be very Christian in their attitudes. There is no open animosity. Nobody argues in our family."

In the fall of 1970, he entered law school at New York State University in Buffalo, believing that the law offered him his second chance "to do something for good . . . something that benefited mankind." Last January, he resigned, again hav-

ing realities betray his ideals. "The law, as it's constituted today," Wall says, "cannot answer the problems we have in society."

While attending law school, Wall became active in various causes—the Harrisburg Defense Committee, the Buffalo Defense Committee—and he "attempted to point out and stop arbitrary actions of the police department in Buffalo. You know, there'd be demonstrations, and demonstrators got beat up, and we'd file complaints." But the gap between his law classes and what was supposed to be, and what he found in the streets and what was, grew hopelessly wide in Wall's eyes. "I was turned off to law as an effective way to change things."

There was another reason he gave up on law school and decided to move to Nova Scotia.

"I came out of the Bureau looking for a different type of life. And I began to see that as a lawyer, I'd have the same life style, the same emphasis on competition for success, the same influences on my kids . . . I'm happier now. Before I was making \$23,000, drove a fancy car. Now we live in a changing neighborhood with a broken-down jeep wagon. But the change drew us close together, as people and a family. I have more time with the family."

He views Nova Scotia, in part, as an extension of his effort to create a "different kind of life."

"We'll be living in a relatively isolated situation and be able to deal with family and society on a different level . . . I decided on Nova Scotia for a few reasons. First, I wanted to get out of the country, so that we could get a perspective on the country you can't get any other way. Then, Nova Scotia is an economically depressed area, so land is cheap. And though we spent only two weeks there, we found it physically very beautiful. And we have some friends up there."

"A Cop-out? Yeah, everyone asks me that, and I have three things to say in reply. To begin with, my responsibility to my family comes first. In Nova Scotia, I think we'll grow even closer and I can build something for the future for them. Then, doing what I'm doing might serve as an example for others to follow. And, finally, there comes a point when you have to make an assessment of yourself and society, instead of charging ahead blindly . . . Who knows, maybe in a few years we'll be back."

"When you've come through what I've come through, you can't avoid a depression of a sort. But now, I'm not depressed. On the contrary, I look forward to a new and different life style."

— ROBERT WOOL



Wall and the rest of his family: Cameron holds Katie Ann, 2. Joseph, 4 (with glasses), and a neighborhood child are around the corner behind the toy tub. Most of their furniture has been sold to help pay for Nova Scotia.

Part I By Robert Wall

In May of 1965, after serving as a naval officer for several years, I arrived in Washington, D.C., to begin my training for the position of Special Agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I was both naive and apolitical. I thought of myself as an intense idealist and was convinced that the FBI was an organization in which personal integrity was highly valued. To me the organization was above all a protector of the innocent public and only secondarily the relentless pursuer of wrongdoers. In short, I was an ideal candidate for the job. I would not question; I would simply learn to do as I was told, content to believe that the FBI would never direct me wrong.

This belief managed to survive my first two years in the Bureau, during which I worked on criminal investigations and government job applications. It was when I was assigned to work in Internal Security in Washington, D.C., that I began to have my first serious doubts about the integrity of the organization, its motives, and its goals.

The Washington Field Office is the operating arm of the FBI in Washington, D.C. Like other field offices, we reported to the Bureau's Washington headquarters, but our office was one of the largest. Assigned to the office were between 500 and 600 agents, broken up into squads of from a handful to 50 or 60. Two squads worked only on applications for government jobs and five or six handled criminal investigations. In addition, there were nine squads assigned to do "security" work. One of those nine was charged with investigating all of the various individuals and organizations that allegedly threatened the national security or that advocated the overthrow of the United States government by force or violence.

It was to this squad that I was assigned in May, 1967, shortly before my second anniversary as an agent. I looked forward to the assignment because anything would have looked good to me after a few months spent investigating applicants for government jobs. But I realized that all my FBI experience until then had in no way prepared me for work in security. During the training course for new agents which I had undergone in 1965, instruction on "security" meant listening to stories of the Bureau's great accomplishments, e.g., the capture of the Nazi espionage teams that landed in Florida and New England during World War II, and, of course, the apprehension of Colonel Rudolph Abel. We learned also that the Bureau had been able to break up the Ku Klux Klan and the Communist Party.

But nothing in this training was meant to define how the FBI views national security or threats to it. We were told instead that only a handful of experienced and carefully picked agents, the "cream of the crop," were selected to work in this most difficult and challenging field. Furthermore, information about the security work of the FBI was supplied on a "need to know" basis only, and there was no immediate need to tell us much more.

Later, in September, 1967, I was sent to the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Va., for a two week in-service training in "Basic Security." But this consisted mainly of an elaborate rehash of the noninformation we had received during new agents' training. Nonetheless, I was eager to learn more about the work of the squad and the men assigned to it.

The Washington Field Office occupied the entire fourth and fifth floors and part of the sixth and eighth floors of the Old Post Office

Building located between 10th and 11th Streets on Pennsylvania Avenue.

I found Squad 5-7's space on the fourth floor on the 11th Street side of the building. Three rooms were designated for its use. The first was utilized by the squad supervisor, the second by the supervisor's secretary, a confidential file clerk and a few filing cabinets and the third by the dozen or so agents who made up the bulk of the squad. The third or squad room, as it was called, was jammed full of desks.

Groups opposed to the war in Vietnam, the draft, the House Un-American Activities Committee and other politically deviant groups fell to the squad for investigation as did a variety of civil rights organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and later the Black Panther Party.

After introducing me to a number of the squad members who were present at the time, my new supervisor directed me to acquaint myself with the work of the squad by reading through sections of the Manual of Instructions which pertained to Security Investigations. I found an empty desk and began to scan the seemingly endless pages of precisely ordered gibberish contained in the manual. This task was so boring and the result so meaningless that I was soon searching for any excuse to get out of the office.

In mid-morning of my second day on the squad, the supervisor came into the squad room with a teletype and laid it on the desk of an agent sitting nearby. He told the agent to get a few others who weren't busy and cover the demonstration mentioned in the teletype. A group gathered around to see what the assignment was and I joined them. Anxious for any diversion, I volunteered to assist. A number of others also signified their willingness to take part in the coverage. No one who expressed an interest was refused. It reminded me of the city room of a newspaper in an old movie where the editor comes rushing in yelling that there's a big fire in the old Glutz Warehouse and orders out a couple of reporters and a photographer to cover it.

No special preparations were required. The agents who had agreed to take part returned to their desks and cleaned up their paper work and a few minutes later gathered at the door of the squad room. There were five or six in all including one who was specially trained and equipped for photography.

I had no idea of what I was supposed to do. The teletype had said simply that two busloads of steelworkers from Bethlehem Steel's Sparrow Point Plant (near Baltimore) were planning to picket at the Department of Labor, charging Bethlehem with racial discrimination in hiring and promotion and demanding that the Department of Labor step in to protect the rights of the workers discriminated against. I remember asking at the time, "Why are we covering this demonstration?" The answer, which I accepted unquestioningly at the time, was something to the effect that the FBI is charged with the responsibility of reporting on situations from which possible racial violence could arise. It was a glib response which was easily accepted. The riot in Watts was still a fresh memory. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was sponsoring the demonstration. I knew of a case in the office titled "Cominfil Core" (short-hand for Communist Infiltration of CORE). And I reasoned that we wouldn't even have such a case unless there was a good reason to believe that the Communists were trying to take over the civil rights movement. So, logically, we could cover the demonstration to guard against any attempt to provoke racial violence.

I also asked what I was supposed to do. The answer here was simply that I should stand discreetly near the picketing, observe and record any signs being carried, try to identify the leaders or spokesmen of the group and determine, if possible the full extent of the group's plans. And so I spent the afternoon standing near the Department of Labor watching about 100 people march about in a circle, carrying signs, chanting and singing until a small delegation from the demonstrators met with some Labor Department officials inside the building. The remaining pickets gathered in the Departmental Auditorium located next door and were addressed by James Farmer who was then a former director of CORE. He spoke movingly of the struggle for civil rights in the South and how demonstrations such as the one which had just taken place were carrying on the spirit of that struggle in the North. Again I wondered why we were covering the demonstration when it seemed more consistent that we should have been there, if at all, to protect the marchers rather than surveil them.

I received my appointment to the FBI just one month after I was released from active duty in the Navy. In my final year of active duty I was stationed near Washington and looked there for a job for the time when I would be getting out. I had long considered joining the FBI and to facilitate this had begun going to Law School at night. I was then still under the impression that to be a Special Agent of the FBI required that you be either a lawyer or an accountant. Acting on instinct, one afternoon when I was in Washington I dropped in at the FBI headquarters building and went to the personnel office. I wanted to find out if there was any way in which I could work for the Bureau while I completed my studies at Law School. The secretary in the personnel office asked me a few questions about my current status with the Navy and then provided me with some applications for the job of Special Agent. Encouraged by this, I filled out the forms and a few weeks later stopped by once again, intending to drop them off and spend the rest of the day sightseeing in D.C. The same secretary then asked me if I had a few minutes to take a few tests and perhaps be interviewed briefly. My affirmative response began a day-long session of tests and interviews which terminated near 6 p.m. that evening. The tests seemed quite simple. One was a spelling test of 30 or so words and another was a matching test which required that the names of famous persons such as Stalin and Tito be joined with their true given names.

The interviewers repeatedly asked why I wanted to join the FBI, as though my response to this query would in some way tell whether or not I was qualified to get the job.

Less than a month after my release from active duty in the Navy, I received a telegram advising me that I was being offered an "excepted" appointment to the FBI to commence on 5/10/65 and if I accepted, I was to wire my reply immediately. I didn't know what an "excepted" appointment was but nonetheless I readily accepted and so on 5/10/65 found myself in the lobby of the Old Post Office Building looking for directions to the training division.

My strongest recollection of the three months that followed was that I spent most of my time fighting the impulse to fall asleep. However, the threat of surprise quizzes and the realization that a career hung in the balance aided in the fight. Almost seven of the 12 weeks were spent in one room on the sixth floor of the Old Post Office Building where from 9 am until 6 pm, with rigid 10-minute breaks on the hour and an hour for

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"If your wife embarrassed the Bureau . . . you could be put on the transfer circuit . . ."

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lunch, we were verbally assaulted by a variety of individuals, each of whom prefaced his remarks by reciting what seemed to be a formula: "What I'm going to tell you will be the most important thing that you'll hear in the course." Except for the three weeks we spent at Quantico, Va., learning how to point a gun in the right direction, the only break in the monotony was speculating about the places where we might be sent for our first office assignment.

On our last day in Washington, my wife along with the wives of four other agents who happened to be in D.C. at the time were given a guided tour of the FBI headquarters ending in a visit and short lecture by Asst. Director J.J. Casper. The lecture consisted of a streamlined course in how

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to be a "good FBI wife." It was a condensed version of the socialization which we as new agents had received over the period of 12 weeks. He told them how they were expected to dress, how to behave in public and that they should refrain from making any

public statement, even to neighbors, about politics because what they said as wives of FBI agents would reflect on the Bureau and the careers of their husbands.

It was understood among agents that if your wife somehow embarrassed the Bureau, say, became active in some peace or civil rights organization the Bureau considered radical, you could expect to be put on the transfer circuit, which

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meant being transferred from one undesirable office to another, until you had enough and quit.

My wife resented Casper's lecture and attitude, rejecting as unreasonable most of what he said. In part, this led us to resolve to keep our personal lives separate from the Bureau and to avoid as much as possible socializing with other agents and their wives when I was off duty.

In my first assignment in Miami, Fla., where I handled routine criminal investigations such as interstate transportation of stolen motor vehicles, this resolve led us to take an apartment in the city in a section where recent arrivals from Cuba were making their homes, rather than in the suburbs where most of the other agents lived. What little socializing we did was mainly among the Cuban refugees. Wives of

agents in Miami had a club, but my wife was not a part of it.

My assignment to the Washington Field Office's Squad S-7 (Internal Security) coincided with stepped up activity of the peace movement. The anti war movement was rapidly becoming a movement of national significance and the FBI was gearing up to investigate what was becoming, in its eyes, a threat to national security.

The heyday of this squad was during the late '40s and early 50s when those who were called Communists, pinkos, reds, Commie symps, fellow travelers, and sundry other names were being "discovered" and routed from all levels of American society. By the time I arrived on the scene the squad was jokingly referred to by some as "the graveyard," owing to the advanced age of some of the agents and the motionless manner in which they conducted their investigations now that their prime had passed. Of the dozen or so agents on the squad, all were near or past their 20th year of service in the

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"The agent . . . liked to tell of the lively sexual activities he had seen . . ."

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Bureau. Most of them had spent the better part of their careers on the squad as "red chasers."

Each of the older agents would willingly relate how he had shared in the FBI's successful smashing of the Communist Party. The stories most often had the flavor of back fence gossip, for they concerned not some insidious plot to overthrow the government, but rather the clandestine love affairs of various Party members.

One agent told me that he spent 12 years of his Bureau service in "lookouts." A lookout is a place where an agent can sit (sometimes stand, kneel, lie, or squat, but usually sit) unobserved and look out to see what the person under investigation is doing. One of these lookouts which he recalled fondly was in a hotel room across an airshaft from a room rented by a Communist Party "angel" in a downtown Washington, D.C., hotel. In fact this agent had spent some years of his life peering across the airshaft at his wholly innocuous subject. The blinds in the room he watched were never closed. He liked to tell of the lively sexual activities he had seen. He seemed to think that, in the absence of other evidence, they confirmed that something subversive was taking place.

Another agent told of months spent watching the suburban home of a sus-

The bureau leaked rumors of violence before mass marches to scare away those whose commitment was weak.

pected "Commie" where the only information of value obtained was that after the suspect left for work in the morning his wife would signal to her lover, who lived two streets

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away, by switching on the back porch light. The lover would then jump in his car and race over for a morning visit. The agent's report indicated the time elapsed from the moment when the porch light went on until the lover arrived panting at the door, and then the length of his stay. The lover was not known to be a

member of the Party, but was suspected of being a sympathizer, which may have been the justification used by the agents to account for the time they spent watching that particular house.

By 1967, the Communist Party in Washington, D.C., had only three members remaining. The main function of the squad then was to verify the residence and employment of the persons who once had been subjects of FBI investigation and who were still considered dangerous enough to keep track of, even though they were no longer active with the Party or any other subversive group, for that matter. Every three, six, nine, or 12 months the files on these persons would be reopened and assigned to an agent on the squad who would make certain that the individual still lived at the same address and worked at the same job.

To accomplish this task, the agent could use several methods. He could personally observe the subject at his home and follow him to work. Or he could request the agents handling one of the three remaining informants familiar with former Party members to ask the informants about the man in question. The latter method was usually chosen since it would eliminate any real work for the agent. After the informant had reported, the case could then be closed again. In closing the case, the agent could either certify that the subject was still worthy of the Bureau's attention or try to give him a

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"Had the Bureau believed its own propaganda, it would have investigated only the 'Communist agitators' in the antiwar movement . . ."

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lower priority, thereby lengthening the interval before the file had to be reopened. It was simpler and required much less paperwork to certify that the subject still needed watching. Thus the investigations of hundreds of perfectly harmless people continued on through the years.

Also by 1967, the antiwar movement was growing from its lean beginnings to a movement of national significance. The response of the Bureau was consistent with its history. It determined that the movement was a part of the larger Communist conspiracy to overthrow the United States government. Having decided this, the Bureau set about to investigate the movement to show the existence of the conspiracy.

Proof sufficient to satisfy the Bureau was readily available. For example, it was noted that among the 35,000 to 40,000 persons who took part in the march on the Pentagon in October, 1967, approximately 20 persons who had once been named as members, suspected members, or sympathizers of the Communist Party were reported to be in the crowd. A few among them had actually assisted in organizing the march. Although the Bureau always insists that it neither draws conclusions nor makes recommendations from the facts it gathers, the FBI report on the march on the Pentagon was leaked to the press and its impact was obvious: the thousands who marched to protest the war in Southeast Asia were publicly labeled as mere pawns in a Communist master plan to spread dissent throughout the nation. They had been duped into giving aid and comfort to the enemy and demoralizing our fighting men.

Had the Bureau believed its own propaganda, it would have investigated

only the "Communist agitators" in the antiwar movement. Instead we were directed to investigate all the leaders in all the local peace groups and to determine among other things the source of any money used to finance the movement. From there it was a simple step to the investigation of anyone connected to the peace movement in any way. The number of investigations was limited only by the time available and the problem of distinguishing the organizers and leaders of mass rallies from the passive followers.

To deal with the peace movement the FBI followed its usual practice of planting informants. It was easy to recruit young people to infiltrate the antiwar organizations and other groups in the so-called "New Left" since large numbers of volunteers were needed to hand out leaflets, run mimeo machines, answer phones, stuff envelopes, and similar chores connected with political organ-

We were directed to investigate the leaders of peace groups and to determine the source of movement money . . .

izing. All one of our FBI informants needed to do was walk into the office and state briefly that he was opposed to the war and wished to volunteer his services. He would seldom be challenged to prove his allegiance to the movement. Then, with little additional effort, he had access to mailing lists, names of contributors, copies of leaflets and handbills, and was able to report in detail on any organizational meetings that might take place.

Since an organization gave an informant a con-

"In trying to suppress . . . a broad-based national political movement . . . the FBI acted as a national police force . . ."

venient base from which to operate, the Bureau tried to place informants in all the organizations likely to participate in any mass march or demonstration. Then if a coalition of groups was formed to plan a large rally, at least one informant would, we hoped, be among those selected to represent a group when the coalition met to plan its activities. Frequently this was the case.

The informants were always directed to look especially for any indication that violence was being planned by any group or individual within a group. This was the rationale by which the Bureau justified its infiltration of these political organizations, although during my three years working on radical groups I never found any evidence that would lead to a conviction for criminal violence.

But the Bureau also had an active counterintelligence program which was titled "Coin-telpro—New Left." This program was designed to develop means to thwart and undermine the activities of any organization that fell into the category of "New Left." A frequent tactic was to leak stories to the press and television shortly before any mass march or rally. This was easy enough to do. Agents in our offices would write often fanciful press releases warning that violence was expected on the day of the rally, or that the organizers of the march were in contact with Hanoi, or that some known Communists were active in organizing the march. Our superiors in the Internal Security Division at FBI headquarters would then pass on the information to conservative newspapers, which published it immediately. The purpose of such stories was not only to influence the general public but to scare away those

whose commitment was weak and thereby reduce the number of persons who might otherwise attend.

Another purpose of the program was to create dissent among the various groups involved in the New Left to prevent them from working together. In one case we addressed a letter to the leaders of the National Mobilization Committee (NMC) which said that the blacks of Washington, D.C., would not support the upcoming rally of the NMC unless a \$20,000 "security bond" was paid to a black organization in Washington. At the same time we instructed some informants we had placed in the black organization to suggest the idea of a security bond informally to leaders of the organization. The letter we composed was approved by the Bureau's counterintelligence desk and was signed with the forged signature of a leader of the black group. Later, through informants in the NMC, we learned that the letter had caused a great deal of confusion and had a significant effect on the planning for the march.

I should stress that such "counterintelligence" activities were carried on frequently, although some were quite absurd. For example, some of the agents in our office tried to confuse peace demonstrations by such collegiate tactics as handing out leaflets giving misleading information about the time and place the marchers were supposed to meet.

The FBI claims to be a nonpolitical organization and asserts that it is not a national police force. But in its intelligence and counterintelligence work on the New Left it was engaging in activity that clearly was political. Moreover, in trying to suppress and discourage a broad-based national political movement, it acted as a national political police. ■