

. . . and Their Trials

THE FBI AND THE BERRIGANS

The Making of a Conspiracy
By Jack Nelson and
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By BETTY MEDSGER

IN THEIR BOOK dissecting the bizarre case in which six Catholic radicals and

BETTY MEDSGER, a Washington Post staff writer, reported on the Harrisburg conspiracy trial.

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involved in a Texas banking scandal, Lynch bade him farewell, saying, "I have only one bone to pick with you—giving me that Berrigan case."

But the reasons that he did not like the task are not examined. Lynch had redrawn the case in such a way that conviction was much easier than it had been under the original indictment prepared by the Justice Department's chief prosecutor of radicals, Guy Goodwin. And he certainly went about the case with vigor.

It is not clear if the authors believe Lynch's reluctance is based upon an assertion made near the end of the book: that the defendants never would have been indicted but for the FBI director's premature announcement—before an investigation had even reached the grand jury stage—that there was such a plot.

Perhaps the most interesting revelation by Nelson and Ostrow is that Robert C. Mardian, then assistant attorney general for Internal Security at the Justice Department and now part of the Committee for the Re-election of the President, so distrusted the credibility of the government's only important witness in the case, Boyd Douglas, that he considered designating him a "national security figure" so that the FBI could wiretap and/or bug Douglas.

a Pakistani scholar were charged with conspiring to kidnap Henry Kissinger and bomb tunnels under federal buildings, Jack Nelson and Ronald J. Ostrow have gleaned the most interesting portions of the trial transcript, as well as some verbatim trial testimony that never made it into news accounts.

It was Nelson and Ostrow, two Los Angeles Times reporters, who wrote the first newspaper account of the major role of ex-convict and informer Boyd Douglas in the case. Although their book does not contain much new information, they do reveal that after FBI director J. Edgar Hoover informed the world of the Berrigan "plot," he wrote one of his "blue ink" notations. It stated, according to an unidentified source, "that other officials had failed to keep him properly informed about the case prior to his testimony. That way not even history could ever blame him." A blue ink note in the margin, said the source, "was all that was needed. When the director made a blue ink notation, it was more powerful than a long legal memorandum."

We also learn from this book that the chief prosecutor, William Lynch, never wanted the task of prosecuting the case. When Will Wilson resigned as chief of the Justice Department's Criminal Division as a result of his ties with a man

In fact, Douglas testified in cross-examination that he had lied at various times to Philip Berrigan and other defendants and that he wasn't always honest with the FBI about his activities. His own testimony on the witness stand was contradictory on some points. And others did not corroborate Douglas's tales. Even while he was on the stand, Nelson and Ostrow write, Douglas called William Zeidler, the Harrisburg Patriot reporter who covered the trial, and asked him to collaborate with him on "his story" for a magazine.

In asserting that the FBI and Hoover were "on trial" in Harrisburg, Nelson and Ostrow fail to point out two significant moves by the FBI that, perhaps more than any others, point to the bureau's particularly hostile behavior toward the Catholic Left:

- In September 1970, informed by Douglas of an impending raid of federal offices in Rochester, New York, the FBI chose to let records and equipment be vandalized instead of preventing the raid, as they easily could have done. The Justice Department prosecuted for that raid twice—the raiders for the act itself; and later, one of the raiders, Theodore Glick, and the seven Harrisburg defendants for conspiracy to com-

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that his original principles were the mildest liberal reform, and argues he was driven to his tough line by the intransigence of white resistance to modest demands for change.

Historically, the most useful section of Forman's book is his long and detailed account of the developing split within SNCC between integrationists and black separatists. The external sequence of confrontations is well-known: the clash over the seating of the Mississippi delegation at the Atlantic City Democratic Convention in the summer of 1964, Selma the next spring, and the "Meredith march" in Mississippi in the summer of 1966.

Forman supplements and elucidates this vital piece of history with the inner story of debate and eventual dissension within the SNCC leadership. Using long extracts from minutes and other contemporary accounts he traces the growing fissure through a series of fascinating staff meetings. These begin with the meeting in October 1964, at which the leadership took what Forman believes to have been the crucial, and catastrophic, decision not to follow the 1964 Mississippi summer project with a South-wide Black Belt project in 1965.

At a meeting a year later, a SNCC field organizer, Courtland Cox, wrote on the blackboard, "Get power for black people," and "something clicked" in Forman: he went up to the blackboard and wrote, "Power, Education, Organization." By May 1966, Forman was trying to get the SNCC leadership interested in "U.S. imperialism" and "certain Marxist concepts." And by December 1966, at a meeting in upstate New York at the resort owned by a black entertainer called Peg Leg Bates, Forman had been reading Maos Tse-tung's essay on contradiction, and the movement had reached, per the title of a paper Forman himself read at that meeting, "Rock Bottom."

Was there a connection between the conversion of a significant fraction of the black leadership to revolutionary ideas, and the decline in their practical effectiveness in American society, where they had, after all, been quite effective for some years?

It is a tempting hypothesis for liberals, but one which Forman, now a committed revolutionary, rejects. He ends his book with a dithyrambic flurry of revolutionary exhortation: "Armed with a correct ideology . . . uniting all into a disciplined, centralized mass party . . . we shall win

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without a doubt. In brotherhood, Remember Lumumba. Fanon pointed the way!"

Without a doubt? Forman is not the

first black man in America to come to the conclusion that racism here, or in any other white country for that matter, will not be eradicated without a fundamental restructuring of society, which is what I take the much-abused word "revolution" to mean. Nor will he be the last to come to that conclusion. But how likely is that fundamental restructuring?

James Forman believes, apparently—believes, at any rate, at the formal level of the words he puts on the page—that the trend to revolution climbs ever onward and upward, in an exponential curve. The sad thing is that I felt that the shape of his book, which is also that of his life and of the great cause he has given himself courageously to, is very different: that it curves upward, at first, from rage into hope, and then downward like a parabola, through frustration and fear and rhetoric down to rage again, and something like despair. I find pathos, rather than anything else, in the contrast between the courage and intelligence with which he has understood the great struggle of which he has been a part, and the repetitious rhetoric of those closing pages. But then I have not had the experiences which have made James Forman, and many thousands like him, into black revolutionaries.