

Garry Wills

No, the FBI didn't frame quite everybody

Since it is the crime of the FBI to have smeared so many people, it is important that we not stoop to its level. Yet the flagrant criminality of the FBI is overlooked by those who concentrate on wild charges brought against the Bureau. For instance:

1) The charge that the FBI framed Alger Hiss — a charge made on grounds we would find laughable if the FBI adduced them.

2) The charge that the FBI cooperated in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, or helped his assassins to go free. The House of Representatives got taken in, recently, by Mark Lane, but fooling congressmen is no big deal. The rest of us should see that Lane is one of the few people who can make a careful civil libertarian.

3) The charge that the FBI framed the Rosenbergs. Robert Coover's

novel will probably give this nonsense a new lease on life.

4) The charge that the FBI framed Sacco and Vanzetti. The sentimentalists are out again, this month, to mark the 50th anniversary of the two anarchists' execution. Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis added to the problem with his weird "exonerated" of the pair, which was not a pardon, not even a judgment, but a kind of uncensored apology — indeed, a proclamation that he would make no judgment. That may represent a new kind of political honesty, but even honest people should try, at times, to think. The best thinking on Sacco and Vanzetti has been done, over the years, in a book and series of articles by Francis Russell. But he has not been alone. A whole group of reluctant witnesses against the radical "heroes" has been pro-

duced. Katherine Anne Porter, in her sappy little book, *The Never-Ending Wrong*, takes pride in her almost total ignorance of all later studies of this murder case. (Miss Porter managed, however, to read the one serious recent book that tried to exonerate the two immigrants. She read only one article by Francis Russell, and misreports that she seems not to know his book on the subject.)

If Miss Porter had conceded to do her homework, she would have found that Russell has retested the ballistic evidence, the charges of trial bias and the evidence for FBI framing and found that Sacco's gun was used in the murder (though Vanzetti might not have known this), the trial was called fair even by the defense lawyers (no matter what the prejudice expressed outside the courtroom), and the appeals

established proper procedure.

In the current *National Review*, Russell adds the last conclusive bit to his case. For years he could not pry FBI documents out of J. Edgar Hoover. But now the Freedom of Information Act has revealed that two ex-FBI men who alleged a plot against Sacco and Vanzetti were disgruntled hars from the pre-Hoover regime. Hoover's crimes were ideological. These men's were just venal, and had nothing solid to back them.

None of this can excuse the FBI's vile and tragic activities. Power tends to corrupt, and J. Edgar Hoover, given a power unique in American history, was uniquely corrupted. I do not mention Russell's important findings for the good of the FBI, but for our own good. Repudiating false charges is the only way we can escape the FBI's own fate. The bureau ended up mimicking its own enemies, becoming crooks to catch crooks, adopting totalitarian methods to fend off totalitarianism. Those who imitate the bureau forfeit their credibility in criticizing it.