

The U.S. Versus Father Berrigan



Jack Anderson

THE Justice Department went ahead with the prosecution of the Rev. Philip Berrigan and his friends with full knowledge that the evidence was insufficient to get a conviction. Father Berrigan, Sister Elizabeth McAlister, both militant Catholics, and five others were accused of conspiring to kidnap presidential adviser Henry Kissinger and to blow up steam tunnels in Washington. They were found innocent of these charges after a long, costly trial to the taxpayers.

We have now obtained documents from FBI files casting doubt on the validity of the government's case. Apparently, the Justice Department's objective was to get the "Harrisburg Seven" into court and take a chance the jury might convict them because of prejudice if not evidence.

★ ★ ★

THE Justice Department's strategy, meanwhile, completely backfired. Instead of suppressing the political radicals, the trial gave them a national forum and made heroes of them.

In retrospect, some high government officials believe the Justice Department not only wasted the taxpayers' money but committed political folly. For the trial accomplished nothing.

The first word of a plot to destroy government property and disrupt Washington came to the FBI on June 19, 1970, from "a confidential source of unknown reliability."

This dubious source "advised he had received a telephone call from Neil

McLaughlin, a Catholic priest from Baltimore, Md. (one of the seven defendants at the Harrisburg, Pa., trial), who indicated he and others were going ahead with plans for the 'big action in Washington, D.C. . . .'

"He advised this apparently related to the proposed destruction of the underground electrical network supplying power to government buildings in Washington, D.C., and/of destruction of computers at the Pentagon."

Our sources say the FBI's uncertain informant was Boyd Douglas, who later said the Catholic plot against Washington would be directed at steam lines. He also produced the famous "kidnap letters," discussing the alleged plot to make off with Henry Kissinger.

★ ★ ★

ON SEPTEMBER 4, 1970, the late J. Edgar Hoover sent a letter, stamped "Secret," to Kissinger informing the presidential adviser he had been "mentioned as a possible (kidnap) victim."

The Secret Service, which is responsible for protecting the people at the White House, was also notified. But the Secret Service was unimpressed.

"The plans to destroy steam lines in Wash., D.C., has been investigated by the FBI and this Service," concluded a secret memo. "No information has been developed to confirm that plot."

Yet the Justice Department went ahead with a grand jury investigation and indictments.