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Against Provocation

“Agent provocateur” is a fancy term for a quite ugly kind of spy. Unlike ordinary spies, the provocateur does not join a “suspect” group to keep close tabs on its activities; instead, his aim is to stampe the group into doing something rash, egregious, and incriminating.

Consider George Demmerle, who several years ago infiltrated New York City’s chaotic student-Left protest scene. To make himself stand out, he wore bizarre face makeup and a helmet streaked with Day-Glo paint. During protest demonstrations, he went in for knocking over garbage cans, doing wild dances in the street, and otherwise making a spectacle of himself.

Impressed, young activists took him in, dubbing him Prince Crazy. Soon they were listening, enthralled, as he told them how to make submachine guns for only \$12 each, and how to blow up the Brooklyn Bridge using only a garden hose and other simple household materials.

Prince Crazy’s mission to the street people ended suddenly when police caught him and three young companions planting a time bomb in a National Guard truck. All four were jailed and accused of eight earlier Manhattan terror-bombings.

But then it came out that Demmerle had all along been a paid agent of the FBI. He was promptly released, and the glaring question of who had got whom to bomb what was left up in the air. When a reporter asked the ex-Prince Crazy if other provocateurs are abroad

in the land, he replied wryly, “Quite a few.”

So there are, as witness Thomas (“Tommy the Traveler”) Tongyai. Several years ago, Tommy turned up at Hobart College, in upstate New York, talking revolution and showing the youngsters how to handle carbines and make firebombs. Hobart at first remained massively uninterested. But (success!) several of Tommy’s young friends presently fire-bombed the college ROTC office—endangering 120 students asleep in the dormitory where the office was housed.

Soon after, Tommy was unmasked: He was a police employee who had for several years been making the rounds of upstate colleges, posing as a fiery student-Left organizer. As *Time* put it, “. . . everywhere he went, violence seemed to follow. . . . The fire-bombing of the Hobart ROTC might never have happened if Tommy had not instigated it.”

Earlier, in Brooklyn, undercover police agent Raymond Wood had insinuated himself into an obscure black-militant group calling itself (rather bravely) the Black Liberation Front. Until agent Wood moved in on them, the front’s members had gone in mainly for rhetoric and arm-flailing. But Wood seems to have bullyragged and shamed the BLF leaders into promising him that the group would shortly “get active”—by bombing, no less, the Washington Monument, the Liberty Bell, and the Statue of Liberty. To this end, he put the half-reluctant

front in touch with a French-Canadian separatist group that obligingly supplied the needed explosives and know-how. As soon as the scenario had matured sufficiently, everyone concerned — except agent Wood — was scooped up and jailed.

When challenged about using such provocative, para-legal tactics, the “fuzz and feds” claim they are just needling extremists into attempting now, in a botched, premature way, anti-Establishment exploits that they would have brought off with devastating success if allowed more lead time.

This is, of course, thin reasoning. As “red squad” people well know, an impassioned-cause group is like a Navy blimp that is riding free just a few feet off the ground. The blimp may weigh many tons, but a good hard shove by a determined man can warp the craft around and send it floating off in any direction the shover chooses. When an undercover agent gives a volatile splinter group a hefty push, the group is likely to go kiting off in an ideological direction astonishing to the onlooker.

But why push for empty violence that only enrages both the public and the police? Why not try instead to provoke—or evoke—positive, fruitful activity? Roger Baldwin may have hit on part of the explanation when, thirty-odd years ago, he wrote in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, “Sometimes the political police have provoked or committed crime. . . to make a showing of the need for their services and thus to wrest from a hesitant government increased funds and larger powers.”

It is no secret that this country is well supplied with firebrands of the Right and Left. But in the absence of overt acts, should the authorities merely keep a patient, beady eye on the disaffected brethren? Or should they try to speed things along by sending provocateurs among the disgruntled, to dispense guns, bombs, and incendiary rhetoric?

Until this question is cleared up, skeptics are bound to wonder just which highly publicized extremists and splinter groups are for real—and which are “fictions” conjured up by those same agencies that brought us Prince Crazy and Tommy the Traveler.

These are hard suspicions, painful to those who entertain them, and painful to those at whom they are directed. But the authorities can easily enough stem hurtful public speculation along these lines: All they need do is get their people out of this dirty business. In that happy event, “agent provocateur” will soon become again what it once was in this country—a rather obscure, thoroughly distasteful foreign term.

—HALLOWELL BOWSER.