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What Was Behind Reporter's Arrest?



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PRESS SPOKESMAN Ron Ziegler has described as "wrong, wrong, wrong," our report that the White House has instructed the Justice Department to "nail" us.

We will be happy, if Ziegler is wrong, to accept President Nixon's apology for jailing Les Whitten. It remains a fact, meanwhile, that Whitten was arrested and his notes ripped out of his hand while he was covering a story for this column.

He was charged with possessing stolen documents and converting them to his own "use and gain." Furthermore, the FBI knew the charges were false before its agents pounced on him.

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FOR WEEKS, Indian leader Hank Adams had been trying to arrange the return of the documents that the Indians had taken from Government files. He had managed to secure a few papers and other stolen items, which he turned over to the FBI. Agent Dennis Hyten signed a receipt for them on December 11.

Yet after the January 31 FBI raid on Adams' apartment, Hyten signed the criminal complaint, charging him with possessing stolen documents. Our FBI informants say the FBI was really laying for us and timed the raid to catch Whitten in the net.

Adams' role as the negotiator, merely trying to return the stolen documents to the Government, was well known. The respected Indian writer Vine Deloria told us all the Indians involved in the theft knew Adams wanted to return everything.

There is pictorial evidence that the FBI's undercover man, John Arellano, knew it, too. For an unshown ABC-TV film depicts Arellano, in his Indian pose, sitting right there when Adams announced the documents would be returned "in a short period of time."

Evidence of the FBI's duplicity is supported by massive documentation about Adams' innocent role as the middle man trying to persuade his more militant Indian colleagues to give back the stolen papers. From the White House on down, Adams spoke to Government officials about retrieving and returning documents.

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CERTAINLY, THE FBI agents, who had been scurrying all over the country in a futile search for the Indian documents, read the press accounts and their own informer's reports on Adams' activities. They knew Adams was trying to collect the stolen documents from Indians around the country and return them to the Government. Yet the FBI arrested the innocent negotiator, Hank Adams, after the first large stash of stolen documents reached him.

Their real object, of course, was to nail Whitten, who had persuaded Adams to let him witness the return of the documents as a reporter. Whitten, of course, had no part in stealing the documents and at no time possessed them.

Then what was his crime? He is guilty only of embarrassing the Nixon Administration. The White House, apparently, would like to make this a crime.