

... Disruption by Stealth

Even in retrospect and with some of the documents in hand, the F.B.I.'s counterintelligence programs seem to have been almost too crude to believe.

The latest revelations are contained in F.B.I. documents relating to "Cointelpro New Left," a program designed some years ago to "expose, disrupt and otherwise neutralize the activities of [the New Left] and persons connected with it." To put Cointelpro in perspective, it is useful to keep in mind that the bureau's basic function is to probe specific violations of Federal laws.

The memorandum setting up this program did not allege violations of specific statutes of the United States. Rather, it cited the bureau's reasons for uneasiness about the unrest of the sixties, including the assertion that "the New Left has on many occasions viciously and scurrilously attacked the Director and the Bureau in an attempt to hamper our investigation of it and to drive us off the college campuses."

The program's supposed purpose was to reduce the New Left's "violent and illegal activities"; but the arrest of persons for committing specific Federal offenses—the lawful course available to the bureau—seems not to have been included in the program.

Instead, it began disrupting the lives of American citizens by distributing information about them anonymously, by informing their employers of their political activities and by publishing phony campus newspapers. In essence, Cointelpro was a crude and unlawful attempt by a Federal police agency to bludgeon people into political orthodoxy by intruding destructively into their lives.

The fact that the program has been shut down makes no less disturbing the fact that it did happen here. Perhaps these latest revelations will finally serve to awaken the slumbering F.B.I. oversight committees in Congress to the need to develop some clear new rules of conduct for the bureau.