

FBI Broke Into Newspaper Office Before 1969 Inauguration, 2 Allege

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH
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Washington — Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation broke into the offices of an underground newspaper in Washington without a search warrant shortly before President Nixon's inauguration in 1969 in an attempt to find evidence of overseas Communist influence, two former Army intelligence operatives said yesterday.

They said that their unit, the 116th Military Intelligence Detachment, had participated in the raid of the Washington Free Press at the request of the FBI agents.

The raid took place, they said, at a time when there was official concern over a

series of "counter-inaugural" activities, including a ball, that were being planned by antiwar groups.

Through a Window

"I knew it was illegal," said J. John Wagner, a former intelligence sergeant. "They went in through a second story window at night without a search warrant."

Wagner, 30, explained that he did not directly participate in the break-in against the newspaper himself. He was informed of the operation nonetheless, he said, because he was one of seven Army agents assigned the next morning to process the stolen material for intelligence data.

Effort to Confuse

Wagner recalled that among material taken from the news-

paper's office were about 300 to 500 pre-addressed postcards that were to be filled out by Washington residents who were willing to house demonstrators during the "counter-inaugural."

The FBI and the Army intelligence unit filled out the postcards with bogus names and addresses and mailed them — in hopes of confusing and demoralizing the demonstration organizers, he said.

Two or three FBI agents from the Washington field office took part in the mission, Wagner said, along with one enlisted man from the 116th and a civilian intelligence supervisor assigned to the unit.

The other former intelligence operative from the 116th, who requested that his name not be used, described the Free Press break-in as "part of the security operation in advance of the President's inauguration."

"The Feds set it up," the former Army sergeant said in a telephone interview, "and wanted the Army along." At the time, he said, he and his colleagues were aware that the operation was unusual. "When we wanted to penetrate," he explained, "we just grew beards and put on fatigues and walked in the front door."

Word Passed

After the break-in, he said, the word was passed that "you weren't supposed to be

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Burglaries

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telling anybody about it. It was secret."

The break-in came more than two years after Ramsey Clark, then the acting attorney general, ordered an end to all such FBI operations which were initiated in 1941 — on the grounds that they were unconstitutional.

The Senate Watergate committee is known to be expanding the scope of its investigation into the domestic intelligence activities of the Justice Department during the Nixon Administration. However, the pre-inaugural break-in in 1969 is the first such activity to be reported under the Johnson Administration after Clark's ruling.

"The place (Free Press Offices) was full of papers, Wagner recalled. "What they were really after was any kind of connection to an overseas Communist Party—you know, literature or funding."

The agents did find some magazine material from Eastern Europe, Wagner said, but it was determined to be from a publication similar to the now-defunct Life magazine. "None of it was radical," he added.