

U.S. knew Berrigan case evidence was insufficient

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department went ahead with the prosecution of Father 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.

FBI documents

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.

But the jury refused to convict them of the conspiracy counts thus proving that even the most unpopular radicals can still get a fair trial in America.

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.

The trial also cost the taxpayers a bale of money.

Political folly

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 except to publicize the radical movement.

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 oth-

ers were going ahead with plans for the "big action in Washington, D.C. . . ."

"He advised this apparently related to

Jack Anderson

the proposed destruction of the underground electrical network supplying power to government buildings in Washington, D. C., and-or 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.

Letter to Kissinger

On Sept. 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." By this time, the FBI regarded Douglas as a "sensitive" source "who has furnished reliable information in the past."

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.

Footnote: The documents we dug out of the FBI files, according to former Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark, defense attorney for the "Harrisburg Seven," "tend to confirm what I saw during the trial." He also told my associate Joe Spear that the government failed to disclose these damning documents.