

Confessions of a police spy

The media gave the story of a police provocateur the same shallow treatment accorded the likes of Charles Manson

Last year Louis Tackwood, a police agent provocateur in Los Angeles, defected and told his story to the Citizens Research and Investigation Committee, a group of academics, writers, former intelligence agents and others concerned about the impact of domestic spying on American life. Some of Tackwood's tales were so bizarre -- including one about a Los Angeles police plot to commit sabotage at the Republican National Convention in San Diego so the violence would be blamed on radicals and provide a pretext for wholesale arrests -- that he was given a lie detector test, which he passed. Tackwood also told of infiltrating the campaign organization of the radical caucus (which ultimately won the

municipal elections in Berkeley) in order to identify its sources of funds, and of police efforts to disrupt the ordinary legal business of militant organizations. Long-time CJR readers know that similar problems exist in Chicago and numerous other cities, and that one of the obstacles to reform is the indifference of the press. This article, which explores that subject in connection with Tackwood's revelations, is from a book soon to be published by Avon, *The Glass House Tapes* by the Citizens Research and Investigation Committee and Louis Tackwood, edited by Donald Freed. The CJR researcher on this section was Rick Smith. Tackwood's comments appear in italics, in roman type.

Take the three F.B.I. informers who came out. And they said it was such and such, and such and such, but they never gave any names, details or places. But the papers made a big thing out of it ... there were three of them who came out out of Seattle ... they were the ones who were doing the bombings in Seattle for the F.B.I. ... and blaming the radicals. And the papers did a big spread on it. But they never named a name or nothing like this... They named Sergeant Such and Such, they didn't know where he was, or who he was. You see what I'm saying, it was so general ... J. Edgar Hoover smothered the whole thing after a little while...

But as with this [Tackwood's story], I wanna tell you ... no major news network carried it. At all. They were fearful of it...

A list of charges as revealing and damning as those unleashed by Louis Tackwood would seem to be a newsman's dream story, a chance to shed light on the clandestine activities of the police for the public enlightenment. Yet for the most part this remarkable confession was given the same shallow treatment accorded the likes of Charles Manson. The Establishment press blew the story up in a flash and forgot it just as quickly (though the underground, Left, and college papers did accord it much more space and time). Press reception of the Tackwood disclosures ranged from cool

to neutral to sympathetic. Yet at the end of the questions still remained: Who is Louis Tackwood, and is what he says true?

First crack at the story was granted (by C.R.I.C.) to three carefully selected Establishment reporters -- Karl Fleming of *Newsweek*, Leroy Aarons of the *Washington Post*, and Jerry Cohen of the *Los Angeles Times*. They had the opportunity to investigate the claims. In doing so, they financed a lie detector test by a polygraph expert in an attempt to establish the veracity of their informant. Chris Gugas, past president of the American Polygraph Association and an ex-policeman who has a picture of J. Edgar Hoover on his wall, was engaged. He reported that "Louis Tackwood did answer all the critical questions truthfully on his examination ... Mr. Tackwood's statements have considerable validity." But this was not enough to counter the skepticism of some newsmen towards the ex-agent.

The Times wrote it off on Los Angeles so beautiful, it's pathetic ... the leftwing papers did a better job ... but the people who should've been reached were never reached ...

It's not that they didn't believe it. They didn't want to rock the boat. In other words, like, we were involved in political issues there too ... and they didn't want to -- what they were saying was, no, we're not going to touch it. 'Cause like if

you scratch the surface of the media, a lot of those are fervent people politically

Cohen's story, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* of October 1977, was undoubtedly the most distorted. The headline bore threatening implications: NO WAY OUT FOR LOUIS TACKWOOD: WEB OF TRUTH TIGHTENS ON POLICE INFORMER. The report was an inconclusive tangle of the charges and countercharges of the mystery man's story. The main implication was that Tackwood's generally ambivalent behavior rendered the charges valueless. The *Times* brought a more an indictment of Tackwood by the police who employed him as a provocateur. For example, Cohen wrote off his story:

"Ever since he was a run-of-the-mill cunning and cool have allowed Louis Tackwood to connive and surf on the hostile world out there on the streets of Los Angeles

"... Until now, Louis Tackwood has been a web of his own intricate lies. And, for the first time, it's been exposed. There is no way out for Louis Tackwood. A criminal by choice who has been a former because of his intelligence and plot and counterplot. He has no practical reasons. He has no conscience. He has his own rules. To justify his actions, he says, 'I'm just doing what I have to do to survive.'"

... part ghetto-shaped, ... of his native foxiness: ... part of the game. I've ... intrigue. It's like chess ... to play well) — you ... at it. . . . But the ... closed in on Louis Tack-

Cohen failed to mention that the police forced Tackwood into their service. He did not seek them out because he was fascinated with plot and counterplot and wanted to be an informer. Cohen also stated that now "conflict has taken possession of him." He said that Tackwood has told "wildly conflicting stories that could have some meaning 'if any of what he says is true or even partly true.'" In the rest of the article, Cohen recounted the charges made by the agent, but focused on the few vague or contradictory portions of the testimony and ignored the decisive import of the existence of a widely interlocking secret police force.

The *Times* quoted the district attorney as saying that "there will be no further investigation because of a lack of credibility and good faith on the part of Tackwood in refusing to take the lie test." And Cohen added the comment of Chief Ed Davis of the Los Angeles Police Department:

"A ... has been working for two weeks to plant a false story involving the President of the United States and the L.A.P.D. I think such a story would appear in *Pravda*. But I am surprised to hear that Los Angeles reporters are listening to the story."

Exit the *Los Angeles Times*. Ironically, a later editorial supported investigation of police graft in Hollywood. But no mention of police political provocation. The silence on this point was deafening.

Leroy Aarons of the *Washington Post* produced a subtler disparagement. He featured Tackwood's "fascination for intrigue" and reference to himself as a "master of conspiracy." The story showed more balance than that in the *Times* and an attempt at some insight into the personality of Tackwood. Yet, even though Aarons did not brand the ex-agent a "criminal by choice," as Cohen had, he painted a picture of a megalomaniac with "dreams of making a lot of money for book and movie rights to his story." But nothing about the reasons beneath the reasons, as Tolstoy called them.

Karl Fleming of *Newsweek* was the third member of the press called in on the story by C.R.I.C. Fleming seemed to believe the truth of Tackwood's charges. He also displayed more insight into

Tackwood's flamboyant personality, stating, "One thing that had motivated him was wounded pride . . . 'They thought I was just a black boy out of the ghetto who was good at snitching and they never looked past that.'" Although Fleming was *Newsweek's* Los Angeles Bureau Chief and a contributing editor, his story was killed, supposedly because it was too long. It is not clear why after financing the lie detector examination, that legitimated a story of burning relevance, the newsweekly would not run the report. Tim Tyler of *Time* magazine tried for weeks to break the story as part of a roundup of ex-agents. He failed.

Take the case of the Panther 13. What's amazing to show you the viciousness of the press is — they did something, let me tell you, that has caused maybe a blood-bath, in the handling of the Sandra Pratt murder. Police made the statement that it was a start of a war between the Panthers. And it was big headlines: "Panther versus Panther," "War." You see what I'm saying, they're playing it up. Anything to do with violence. In other words, they're trying to show that the Panthers are vicious and violent and that now they're starting two — was within the thing — and yet they play the other part down, that it was police orientated from the start. . . .

It's all one way. If it's violent and against the police, they'll print it like a son of a gun.

The select group of reporters who had been called in distributed the story via their press services. But the Associated Press, the United Press International, and the remainder of the Establishment press provided little or no coverage. The Hearst-owned *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, which specializes in sensational murder cases and big-name divorce stories, did not cover this story concerning the police forces of Los Angeles. The *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, extremely conservative, ran a banner headline, POLICE CHARGED WITH PLOT FOR GOP CONVENTION and a 6-inch lead at the bottom of page one. The brief story, which contained just a bare outline of the charges, emphasized the "plot" in the same sensational manner in which it deals with accounts of rape, murder, race, and drug use.

In San Francisco the *Chronicle* picked up the *Los Angeles Times* story, headlining it A POLICE SPY'S STRANGE STORIES and STARTLING ALLEGATIONS OF INTRIGUE AND BIZARRE PLOTS. It was somehow easy for the editors to label Tackwood's story as

"bizarre," so the reading public could shrug it off along with their morning coffee. Or if given the chance, would they really take seriously the threat of a secret police decimating the freedom of themselves and their institutions?

Surprisingly, the black press, both local and national, was just as tight-lipped on the story. One exception was the national Black Muslim publication, *Muhammad Speaks*, which ran a thorough three-part series presenting Tackwood's story in Tackwood's words. The Muslims came straight to the point with the headline, HOW POLICE SPREAD CRIME, and continued with Tackwood's description of police procedures.

Although Tackwood admitted that he set up a Muslim mosque for a police raid, the article did not judge him. Instead of blaming Tackwood, the authors placed the guilt on the police, who masterminded the secret operations. Further evidence of police espionage was contained in the extensive discussion of Ron Karenga and his militant group US. No other paper covered any of Tackwood's charges in comparable depth.

Possibly the most rational account of the story was published a week later in the *New York Times*. Brief but objective, it seemed to sum up the official viewpoint on the whole affair in the lead paragraph:

"A long-time informer for the Los Angeles Police Department appeared to offer an intriguing glimpse last week into the shadowy world of domestic espionage against radical political groups. But no one seemed quite sure."

Indeed, no one seemed quite sure. Yet, if the press was caught in a quandary of uncertainty, they did not go to great lengths to clear up the situation. Whether it was because of official neglect or just simple inertia on the part of reporters, at the end of a week the story lay dead on the newsroom floor.

I can see one of their main things is that . . . it's a campaign year, and all of them are fighting for that big money. What they're fighting for is that 80, 90, 100 thousand. The Republicans, they have 10million dollars earmarked right now for advertisement, and about 8 million of it are going to television. You see what I'm saying? Major networks. So why cut 8 million dollars off your budget?

. . . The guy from Time magazine took about a thousand pictures . . . he interviewed us, me and my wife both . . . Marilyn and Bob. He was going to print*

*Marilyn Katz and Robert Duggan, C.R.I.C. staff members.

the story, he said . . . he was hot on it. And that was 3 weeks ago. And every week we buy Time magazine. Nothing. Canned it dead.

How would I put it to you? I don't know — just like — it just don't seem like nobody was interested . . . what I'm trying to tell you is that in this day and age, just using my story, for instance, that we're under a state — we're living in a country that the State controls the press really . . .

For those readers who wanted to know more, alternative media gave the story more than short shrift. In Los Angeles, the competing weekly underground papers, *The Staff* and the *Free Press*, dissected the barrage of charges with an eye to their significance for individual liberty. Both papers filled their front pages with illustrations of police machinations and backed up their headlines with extensive interpretation of creeping police espionage.

The Staff's Michael Blake was the reporter first contacted by Louis Tackwood when the former was with the *Free Press*. Recognizing a big story when he saw it, Blake referred Tackwood and his tale to the more politically knowledgeable Michael McCarthy and C.R.I.C. Blake related a very lucid, almost minute-by-minute account of the complex progression of events.

"In the almost three months that followed, Marilyn Katz, Michael McCarthy, Robert Duggan, and several others would interview Tackwood many times. Tape recordings would be made, cover stories rationalizing Tackwood's new interest in these people would be manufactured, careful copies of all information would be made. Marilyn Katz knew little of what she had when Tackwood walked off with her on that morning in early August. Boundless information on the activities of the police lay firmly enconced in the informer's brain, information that most radical workers would give years to know. It was not to be known without a price however and that price turned out to be the agony of working with and through a man like Louis Tackwood."

Blake's story featured himself to a large degree, but nevertheless wound up with an articulate assessment of Tackwood's significance:

"It all means that the formerly fuzzy picture of police power and the illegal practices that go with it is much more in focus. Like the Pentagon Papers, Louis Tackwood's revelations tell us many things we already suspected but could not come close to proving . . .

"For those (and there must be many)

who view Tackwood's story with skepticism, it can only be said that whether or not his strange tale is totally accurate cannot be crucial at this time. What is crucial is that Tackwood's allegations be investigated, not by the Internal Affairs Division of the L.A.P.D., but by the highest and hopefully the least tainted agencies in the country.

The other underground paper, the *Free Press*, is headed by long-time editor and publishing entrepreneur, Art Kunkin. In September the paper had suffered a split which resulted in the formation of *The Staff*. Since Blake had left the *Free Press* for *The Staff*, the "inside story" of Tackwood went with him. Kunkin nonetheless ran a powerful story, somewhat more sympathetic to Tackwood than Blake's rendition. Kunkin ran this quote of Tackwood's position, which no one else seemed to notice:

"Tackwood says, 'I am not politically right or left. It's not a thing where I feel I am politically obligated right or left. It is a time when political right and left (should demand) that the police department of Los Angeles stop being provocateurs. I feel once this atmosphere is cleared up that the Black man and the Chicano can clean up their own houses.'"

Kunkin harked back to the *Free Press's* 1970 report of a Rand Corporation study on the feasibility of cancelling the 1972 election due to "radical disruption." Emphasizing this point, the front page demanded: **WILL NIXON CANCEL 1972 ELECTION?**

In Berkeley the *Barb* ran the same story as *The Staff*, with a supplementary article on the San Diego plot, plus a column giving more personal detail on the Tackwood revelations. The stories were transmitted around the communes and street ghettos of the Woodstock Nation via Alternative Press Service and College Press Service, which acted truer to the tenets of good journalism than had the more established services. For example, to check on Tackwood's story a College Press Service reporter contacted F.B.I. officials in Washington. But, according to the *Barb*, "F.B.I. officials claimed no knowledge of Tackwood and his allegations, asking the College Press Service reporter if he was 'drunk or tripping.'"

The Left press played the story as an example of repression and the trampling of police on individual liberties. But the question, "Who is Louis Tackwood?" still ran through the minds of many. Witness the lead paragraph of Peggy Holter's report in the *Los Angeles News Ad-*

vocate, a self-styled alternative newspaper:

"Louis Tackwood — police informer, agent provocateur, opportunist, sociopath, publicity hound, a bit player in the dramatic struggle between the police and the left, cunning and contriving or contrite and bewildered, pawn, a chameleon, and the bearer of incredible allegations against the Los Angeles Police Department, and now, temporarily at least, the center of controversy."

This is not a paragraph, not even a sentence; it is more of a question, which tries to define the man of many roles. In the face of such puzzlement over the identity of their informant, the Left could not help but feel a little paranoid about his fluctuating statements. Different papers responded in different ways.

The radical weekly *Guardian* led off its story, "If Louis Tackwood is telling the truth . . ." but later conceded, "But Tackwood's testimony about the police and his own career as an informer is consistent, detailed, and concrete." This was the key point, despite the colorful nature of his stories. As the *Guardian* concluded:

"What the next stage in Louis Tackwood's odyssey on both sides of the fence will be, we do not know. But the possibility of a major breakthrough in the case only in part — should be enough to stimulate several investigations."

The Communist Party's *People's World*, published on the West Coast, gave half its front page to a picture of the ex-agent captioned **THE SPY WHO CAME OUT AND TOLD**. The story led off with one of his most significant quotes about his ex-colleagues: "They believe totally in the power of the police over the people." The *World* thus squarely planted itself on the side of "the people." As the paper put it:

"Tackwood is a child of the ghetto streets. He lives by his wits and admits being intrigued by the world of conspiracy. But as so often [happens] in that world he became a victim of its amoral intrigues."

To counter the victimization by police of blacks, whites, browns, radicals, young people, and poor people, the Left was unanimous in calling for an investigation of Tackwood's allegations. The *People's World* was the only publication to quote an official other than the Los Angeles Police Department's chief, Ed Davis, when it ran black State Senator Mervyn Dymally's statement:

"It seems to me that possible law enforcement interference into election

processes, and use of paid informers in city elections would be an appropriate area for study by the state legislature's newly created joint committee for revision of the election code."

Dymally, who is on the committee and is head of the Senate's Elections and Reapportionment Committee, added that "the public ought to know to what extent law enforcement officials and their informers are meddling in local and state elections."

The *News Advocate* recognized the ambiguity of Tackwood's position, yet noted:

Tackwood's personal character and his inclination to "love the one he's with" are not the main issue. Tackwood was a police informer, and this fact is central to the story and has been confirmed by independent sources.

LANA [*Los Angeles News Advocate*] recommends that all citizens should DEMAND that the Los Angeles Police Department answer Tackwood's allegations and that a full-scale Congressional investigation be launched immediately.

College students have been in the forefront of protest against illegal, inhumane, and repressive policies on the

campus.

Tackwood's alleged involvement in the police state when he appeared at San Fernando Valley State and San Diego State Colleges. The two big western college dailies, the *U.C.L.A. Daily Bruin* and the *U.C. Berkeley Daily Californian*, stuck to a straight factual account of the events. It should be noted that in recent years, the Regents of the University of California have brought increasing pressure to bear on the editorial policies of the campus papers.

The *Daily Bruin* article spoke of Tackwood as an "alleged" police informer (after the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* had revealed conclusively that he was). The story highlighted Tackwood's knowledge about Angela Davis, who had been a U.C.L.A. instructor prior to her arrest.

The *Daily Cal* ran an equally disinterested story. A prefatory editor's note even displayed some doubt as to Tackwood's credibility:

"However, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, Tackwood's allegations have changed several times. He has aligned himself sometimes with leftist radicals against the police, sometimes with the police against the radicals, and sometimes with the District Attorney's office against both."

Perhaps the paper's misgivings about Tackwood stemmed from its findings

reported in an accompanying article, an interview with radical black city councilman Ira Simmons, elected as part of the April Coalition in 1971. In the interview Simmons denied one of Tackwood's allegations, which was that Simmons and D'Army Bailey had inadvertently discovered Tackwood's police status. Simmons claimed instead that Tackwood had freely revealed his role in an attempt to gain Simmons' confidence and achieve a position within the campaign. Simmons added that by then there was no reason for the "big circle" for Tackwood, since he had then "drifted away from the campaign."

The *Daily Bruin* article at San Fernando Valley State College was the story by Bill Hill of the *Los Angeles Times*. (The *San Diego Daily* also published a story calling Tackwood a "liar" and "chameleon" who had earned a reputation as a point of Tackwood's speech on campus, in which he was accused of false charges. Headlined "RELEASE TACKWOOD'S OUT AGAINST REPRESSION," the story reported that an "atmospheric event" came to hear the ex-convict speak. The Leftist Coalition which sponsored the speaking engagement was quite active on campus.

The *San Diego Daily* reflected the skepticism of San Diego students when it noted that Tackwood's "speech was a

search for new allies. [His] speech was headed as one of the 'student observed.' Who knows, he could still be working for the L.A. Police."

Although the print media covered much of the Tackwood disclosures fully, there were only scattered reports of the matter on radio and television. The self-confessed provocateur was interviewed by several different television newsmen, and he even appeared on a local talkshow. But the host of this show was subsequently fired, and the other interviews never got past the editorial chopping blocks. This more restricted coverage demonstrates the difficulty of airing diverse views on radio and television as compared to the relative ease of getting into print. Apparently, Marshall McLuhan notwithstanding, the linear media will continue to have a sizable impact in communications for a long time to come, since they have more space and time.

The only bright spot in electronic coverage was the extensive attention given the case by KPFK, the local listener-sponsored radio station run by the Pacifica Foundation. The station aired Tackwood's press conferences and followed up closely all angles of his story. As a result, KPFK was presented the Golden Mike Award by the local broadcast journalists' association.

The question the editors of the *New York Times* have asked themselves before publishing the Pentagon Papers is applicable here: "Do we as a newspaper really try to get at the facts by pursuing the implications of this man's story; or do we let sleeping dogs lie and preserve the *status quo*, by abandoning the story as a momentary sensation or isolated event?" Fortunately for America and posterity, they chose to take the crucial step towards truth.

In the Tackwood case, unfortunately, the opposite was the case. The story was printed but played down in the general press. This was easier in the Tackwood instance, since his claims, though important, were not cast in the same terms of acceptability as was the war issue. Tackwood did not have "the silent majority" behind him. Daniel Ellsberg wrote from his professional niche in the Rand Corporation; Tackwood was a cloudy figure from the underworld. Ellsberg was white, educated, middle-class; he had a distinct advantage over Tackwood, who was young, black, a convicted felon, a "child of the ghetto streets," whom the establishment press could shrug off with impunity. Ellsberg had the "papers" to prove his allegations; Tackwood had only his hellish

story. On Tackwood was given to fluid expression and uninhibited acting out of what he had to say, and as such, his was a personality somewhat foreign, somewhat strange, to the reading public.

After it was all written, the question remained: Who is Louis Tackwood? Few could come close to the answer, including Louis Tackwood himself. As anyone who deals in words or ideas knows, "truth" is not easily found; it is a very slippery substance. It was on a stage of this slippery substance that Tackwood balanced provocatively as a bit player in his own drama within a drama.

Yet the role of Louis Tackwood was not some ethereal charade played out on a metaphysical plane. His character of a man with many faces, trapped between a hostile police department and a wondering public, was all too firmly rooted in American social reality. And it is a reality that continues to permeate our lives, whether we know it or not.

I'm going to show you why Karl Fleming was mad. The reason they gave him for squashing the story was that it was too long, it would take five columns . . . and it was a week old. And what made him mad, they gave five pages to Disneyland . . . So really, what they're saying is, [the new] Disneyland opening up is more important than what the police are doing in America.