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Policies of Paranoia

Without in any way condoning the theft of documents from an office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, one is tempted to ask: who watches the watchman? Little confidence is inspired by the security measures of a security agency whose files can be so easily burglarized.

More disquieting than the bureau's internal security is the evidence, provided via the stolen files, of F.B.I. incursions into political surveillance which far exceed legitimate efforts to protect the national interest. One need not minimize the seriousness of certain violent and lawless episodes in the recent history of student unrest to be disturbed by the F.B.I.'s measures of campus infiltration, especially its apparent stress on surveillance of black students and their organizations. Such procedures assume undertones of latent racial prejudice. With rare exceptions, the protests by Negro students have been concerned with their personal place in the academic community rather than with the revolutionary excesses of the white (or black) radical fringe.

The Justice Department replies that the main thrust of F.B.I. activities has been distorted by the disclosure of only fourteen documents out of a total of 800 taken from the files. This argument offers small comfort to those whose right to privacy is improperly invaded. But even more dangerous are the consequences—clearly intended—that flow from the widespread use of informers. These tactics, said an F.B.I. newsletter, “will enhance the paranoia” among left-wing dissenters and “get the point across there is an F.B.I. agent behind every mailbox.”

The dictionary definition of paranoia is “a mental disorder marked by delusions or irrational suspicions.” It is difficult to be paranoid over police surveillance which, far from being a delusion, is carried out with such plainly stated intent.

Assistant Attorney General William H. Rehnquist recently denied that political surveillance as currently practiced has a “chilling effect” on free expression of dissent. Apparently the F.B.I., the Justice Department's investigatory arm, disagrees. Could anything be more chilling than the knowledge that the Federal Government allows law enforcement to be perverted into a deliberate process of spreading fear and suspicion, on the campuses or anywhere else in a society that wants to remain free?