

How FBI Spied On Feminists

Washington

Using female informers to provide details its male agents could not obtain, the FBI investigated women's liberation groups for a least four years — learning among other things that a New York group used actor Paul Newman's telephone credit card number.

The investigation, which apparently ended in the spring of 1973, never resulted in any criminal charges. But it provided a catalog of information about the political beliefs and sexual preferences of activist women throughout the nation.

In 1969, early in the investigation, several field offices suggested there was nothing about women's liberation groups that should concern the FBI. But then, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover overrode his subordinates and demanded the collection of information.

In response to a Freedom of Information Act request, the FBI has made public 1377 pages from its file on the women's liberation movement, or WLM as it was known to the FBI.

The documents were censored to eliminate the names of informants and of some, but not all, of the individuals under investigation.

But it was clear that the FBI made extensive use of informants, probably members of the groups that were being studied. For instance, a May 28, 1969, report from the New York FBI office to FBI headquarters in Washington contained items such as this: "(name deleted) advised that a WLM meeting was held on 4-6-69, at 518 East Sixth Street, New York City. Each woman at this meeting stated why she had come to the meeting and

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how she felt oppressed, sexually and otherwise."

The New York field office filed longer and more detailed accounts of women's activities than other offices, but the file showed the investigation was conducted by FBI offices in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati, Seattle, Portland, Philadelphia, Chicago, Newark, St. Petersburg, Fla., and other cities.

The New York office filed an inch-thick report on women's activities in that city on August 14, 1970. It said there were 3200 names, "not all of them radicals," on the mailing list of the Women's Liberation Center (WLC) on West 22nd street.

The portion of the file that was made public did not indicate whether the informant gave the mailing list to the FBI.

According to the New York office report:

- "A notice was posted, as of

May 25, 1970 . . . recommending that women use Paul Newman's credit card number when dialing long distance."

- "During a meeting at WLC June 11, 1970, discussion was held regarding the use of a mailing list of the center. It was decided that Bella Abzug (then a candidate for Congress) should not be allowed to use the center's mailing list as this would enable her to 'organize out of the center' and 'promote her politics.'"

- "Karate classes are being organized and are held at the center."

There was no indication from the report whether Newman had authorized use of his credit card number. Unauthorized use of telephone credit cards for interstate calls is a federal crime. The report contained no indication of whether the FBI pursued the question.

On May 26, 1969, a little more than three months after the date of the first document in the file, the

Washington office sent Hoover a copy of a newspaper article that it said "best illustrates WFO (Washington Field Office) belief that captioned organization does not presently constitute an activity requiring active investigation under applicable instructions and regulations."

Three months later, Aug. 11, 1969, the San Francisco office told Hoover: "The Women's Liberation Movement may be considered as subversive to the New Left and revolutionary movements as they have proven to be a divisive and factionalizing factor . . . It could be well recommended as a counter-intelligence movement to weaken the revolutionary movement." Later San Francisco and Chicago formally requested permission to close the case. In May, 1970, Hoover rejected the request.

"It is absolutely essential that we conduct sufficient investigation to clearly establish subversive ramifications of the WLM and to determine the potential for violence presented by the various groups connected with this movement as well as any possible threat they may represent to the internal security of the United States," Hoover wrote.

It was not until after Hoover's death in May, 1972, that the investigation was terminated. The file ended with a series of memos from field offices halting the probe. The last document was dated April 25, 1973.