

A break-in to end all break-ins

In 1971, stolen FBI files exposed the government's domestic spying program.

By Allan M. Jalon

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS ago today, a group of anonymous activists broke into the small, two-man office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Media, Pa., and stole more than 1,000 FBI documents that revealed years of systematic wiretapping, infiltration and media manipulation designed to suppress dissent.

The Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI, as the group called itself, forced its way in at night with a crowbar while much of the country was watching the Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier fight. When agents arrived for work the next morning, they found the file cabinets virtually emptied.

Within a few weeks, the documents began to show up — mailed anonymously in manila envelopes with no return address — in the newsrooms of major American newspapers. When the Washington Post received copies, Atty. Gen. John N. Mitchell asked Executive Editor Ben Bradlee not to publish them because disclosure, he said, could "endanger the lives" of people involved in investigations on behalf of the United States.

Nevertheless, the Post broke the first story on March 24, 1971, after receiving an envelope with 14 FBI documents detailing how the bureau had enlisted a local police chief, letter carriers and a switchboard operator at Swarthmore College to spy on campus and black activist groups in the Philadelphia area.

More documents went to other reporters — Tom Wicker received copies at his New York Times office; so did reporters at the Los Angeles Times — and to politicians including Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota and Rep. Parren J. Mitchell of Maryland.

To this day, no individual has claimed responsibility for the break-in. The FBI, after building up a six-year, 33,000-page file on the case, couldn't solve it. But it remains one of the most lastingly consequential (although

underemphasized) watersheds of political awareness in recent American history, one that poses tough questions even today for our national leaders who argue that fighting foreign enemies requires the government to spy on its citizens. The break-in is far less well known than Daniel Ellsberg's leak of the Pentagon Papers three months later, but in my opinion it deserves equal stature.

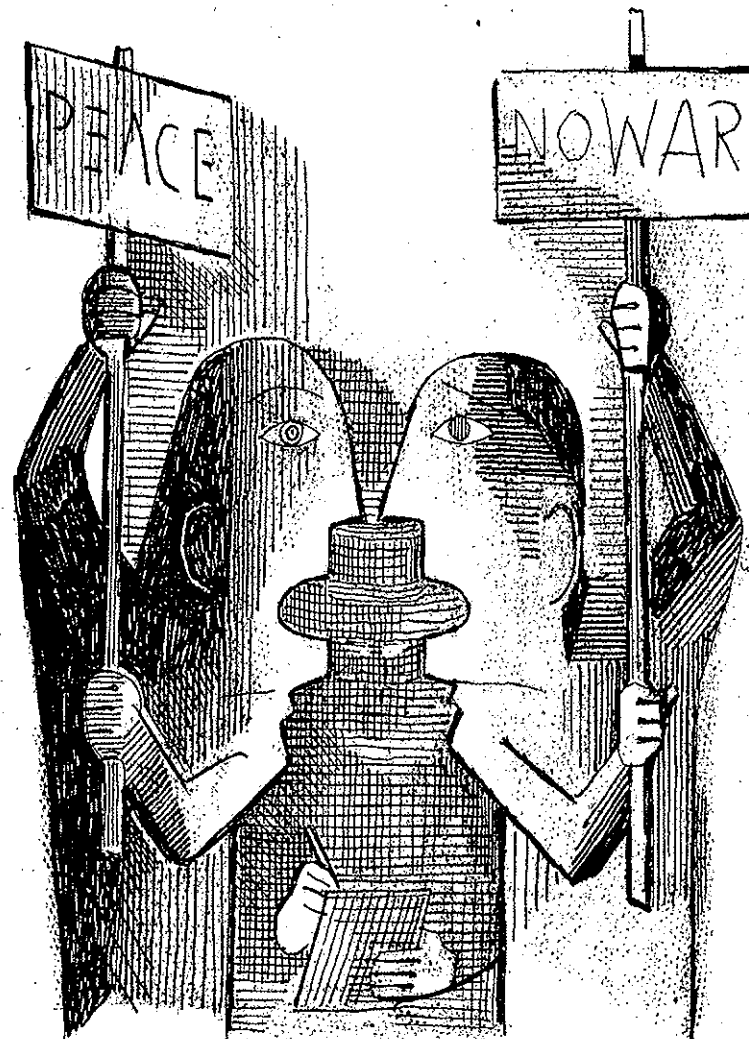
Found among the Media documents was a new word, "COINTELPRO," short for the FBI's "secret counterintelligence program," created to investigate and disrupt dissident political groups in the U.S. Under these programs, beginning in 1956, the bureau worked to "enhance the paranoia endemic in these circles," as one COINTELPRO memo put it, "to get the point across there is an FBI agent behind every mailbox."

The Media documents — along with further revelations about COINTELPRO in the months and years that followed — made it clear that the bureau had gone beyond mere intelligence-gathering to discredit, destabilize and demoralize groups — many of them peaceful, legal civil rights organizations and antiwar groups — that the FBI and Director J. Edgar Hoover found offensive or threatening.

For instance, agents sought to persuade Martin Luther King Jr. to kill himself just before he received the Nobel Prize. They sent him a composite tape made from bugs planted illegally in his hotel rooms when he was entertaining women other than his wife — and threatened to make it public. "King, there is one thing left for you to do. You know what it is," FBI operatives wrote in their anonymous letter.

Under COINTELPRO, the bureau also targeted actress Jean Seberg for having made a donation to the Black Panther Party. The fragile actress ultimately committed suicide after a gossip nugget based on a FBI wiretap was leaked to the L.A. Times and published. The item, suggesting that the father of the baby she was carrying was a Black Panther rather than her French writer-husband, turned out to be wrong.

The sheer reach of a completely politicized FBI was one of the most frightening revelations of the Media documents. Underground newspapers were targeted. Students (and their profes-



DAVID SUTER For The Times

sors) were targeted. Celebrities were targeted. The Communist Party of the U.S.A., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Non-Violent Organizing Committee, the Black Panther Party, the Women's Strike for Peace — all were targeted. "Neutralize them in the same manner they are trying to destroy and neutralize the U.S.," one memo said.

Eventually, the COINTELPRO memos — some from Media and some unearthed later — prompted hearings led by Rep. Don Edwards of California and by Sen. Frank Church of Idaho on intelligence agency abuses. In the mid-1970s, the wayward agency began finally to be reined in.

It is tragic when people lose faith in their government to the extent that they

feel they must break laws to expose corruption.

But a war that had been started and sustained by lies had gone on for years. And a government had betrayed its citizens, manipulating their fear to strengthen its grip on power.

Today, again, many people worry that their government may be on the road to subverting its own ideals. I hope that the commemoration of those unknown activists being held today in Media, Pa., will serve as a reminder that fighting for democracy abroad must remain more than merely an excuse to weaken civil liberties at home.

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