

The Burglary and COINTELPRO: How Citizen Action Exposed FBI's Covert, Illegal Program to Crush Dissent

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Forty three years ago, a group of brave activists clandestinely liberated documents from an FBI office that proved the existence of COINTELPRO, the government program to destroy the Freedom Movement. A new book recounts how most of the media refused to touch the story. Today, the chill is even deeper.

In 1971 eight anti-war activists calling themselves the Citizens Committee to Investigate the FBI plotted to break into an FBI field office located in Media, Pennsylvania. They knew that the government was conducting a massive spying effort against American citizens and they were determined to find and publicly present their evidence.

On the night of March 8, 1971, they succeeded in stealing nearly every piece of paper in that office and later sent copies of key documents to the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times. They also sent copies to two Democratic politicians, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota and Congressman Parren Mitchell of Maryland. The New York and Los Angeles newspapers both turned the files over to the FBI and so did the two supposedly left leaning politicians. The Washington Post, at the time a decent newspaper, was alone in standing up to White House and FBI pressure when they reported the story.

Five of the eight burglars came forward and are the subjects of a [newly published book](#), *The Burglary: the Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI*, written by former Washington Post reporter Betty Medsger. The late William Davidon, John Raines, Bonnie Raines, Keith Forsyth, and Bob Williamson chose to publicly reveal their identities for the first time and in so doing have done yet another service to the public. Because of their actions the world found out about the government's depth of hostility towards the left and black freedom movements and its determination to destroy them. By stepping forward so many years later they remind us that government surveillance is endemic to our political system and is not easily stamped out.

Betty Medsger revealed the lengths the government went to in order to [destroy the liberation movement](#) in particular. "Every FBI agent was required to hire at least one informer to report to him regularly on the activities of black people. In the District, every agent was required to hire six informers for that purpose. On one campus in the Philadelphia area, Swarthmore College, every black student was under surveillance."

FBI informers reported on every meeting, every word and every action of members of the

Black Panther Party, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other groups. FBI agents used informers to create dissension among activists and succeeded in weakening and destroying many organizations. Individuals were targeted for persecution and prosecution and some like the [Omaha Two](#), Mondo we Langa and Edward Poindexter, are still imprisoned. Forty years ago they were set up by the FBI and local police and charged in the killing of a policeman in one of the last COINTELPRO prosecutions.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover died peacefully in 1972, without having faced the investigations and scrutiny he ought to have faced in his lifetime. His power remained unchecked and the revelations of his worst acts were withheld from the public until after his death. Despite the document theft which took place in 1971 the word COINTELPRO didn't become public until late 1973 when a reporter successfully under took a Freedom of Information Act request.

Had it not been for the burglars, we would never have known about the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program, COINTELPRO. Hoover had a special animus against black people and left no stone unturned in his efforts to destroy the freedom struggle. Internal divisions, feuds and even murders resulted from COINTELPRO whose stated purpose was to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, and otherwise neutralize" activists across the country. Black panther party leaders [Fred Hampton](#) and Mark Clark were among those "neutralized" in 1969 by an FBI and Chicago police department assassination.

In time the rest of news media followed the Washington Post's lead and revealed more about Hoover's domestic surveillance and illegal activities. Senator Frank Church led congressional hearings in 1975 and 1976 which ultimately resulted in greater oversight of domestic and foreign surveillance programs.

It now seems that the media revelations and investigations were all for naught. Acquiescence and collusion among politicians, the judiciary and media have left Americans with fewer rights now than in 1971. Richard Nixon didn't have the legal right to designate citizens as terrorists or order them to be killed. Now forty years later, Barack Obama has the legal right to do those things and more. He has the right to hold anyone without charge or trial indefinitely and the NSA has given the government access to phone and internet records of ordinary citizens and foreign leaders alike.

The story of the 1971 burglary is fascinating on many levels but the central point is very simple. It was citizen action, not governmental decree which revealed the illegal acts committed by the government. Even 40 years ago when there was a stronger journalistic ethic, most of the corporate media chose not to cover this story. Politicians who were supposedly progressive were equally cowardly and even traitorous when handed information they were required to investigate and prosecute.

Times have changed and not for the better. The government has more tools as its disposal to use against activist citizens. The law has long ceased to be on our side. Burglary at an FBI office would now be difficult if not impossible to carry out.

The next time Melissa Harris-Perry says that Edward Snowden should turn himself in, remember the Citizens Committee to Investigate the FBI. They waited long past the statute of limitations to reveal themselves to the world. Had they given themselves up we would be even worse off today and decades of government criminality would have remained secret.

Long live the whistleblowers. We needed them in 1971 and we still need them in 2014.

Margaret Kimberley's *Freedom Rider* column appears weekly in BAR, and is widely reprinted elsewhere. She maintains a frequently updated blog as well as at <http://freedomrider.blogspot.com>.

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