

"FBI Surveillance in Bloomington-Normal: A Local Citizen's File"

by

Robert D. Sutherland

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Last August my wife and I decided to request whatever files the FBI and CIA had been keeping on us. Under the Freedom of Information (FOI) and Privacy Acts, any citizen has the right to request this information. Though the CIA claimed to have no files on us, we did receive some of our FBI files, and we thought we'd share what we learned.

Throughout the 1960s and early '70s the FBI collected information and kept files on thousands of citizens and organizations. Assuming that there would be files on us because of our political and social activism in this period, we decided to make our request before Ronnie Raygun succeeded in closing down the FOIA once and for all.

We both wanted to know the nature, scope, and duration of the surveillance we'd been subjected to; and my wife Marilyn wanted to know whether her file and mine were comparable, or whether, as she suspected, the FBI was so sexist as to spend most of its energy on me since I was a man and she was "just a woman."

We made our request on Aug. 22, 1984. By Sept., letters began trickling in from the CIA and FBI (a separate request went to each). Yes, they were searching their files; could we please be patient since they had so many requests to process? On Oct. 24, the CIA sent word that they could find nothing in their files pertaining to us. Not so the FBI. In early Oct. we got letters saying that references to us had been found. On Oct, 26, Joseph

E. Ondrula, Special Agent in charge at the Springfield Field Office, informed me that investigative material on me had been forwarded to Washington, and that, in addition, there was a two-page document in Springfield (in which my name was mentioned) which would be forwarded to me with the rest.

One month later, on Nov. 28, Mr. Ondrula changed his mind and decided to withhold the two-page document under loophole provisions in the FOIA, Sec. 552, which exempt from disclosure law enforcement records which would reveal the identities of confidential informants or information not public knowledge or available to the FBI through "overt" means. I appealed Ondrula's decision to an Asst. Atty-General in Washington, and my appeal was denied on Feb. 27, 1985. I could have challenged this in court, but it didn't seem to me worth the effort.

Finally, on April 2, 1985, our FBI files arrived. Out of the 348 pages claimed to be in mine, 201 pages were released to me; the other pages were withheld under the loophole already mentioned. As for sexist discrimination? Marilyn's file contained only 9 pages—all of them copied from pages in mine where her name was mentioned, usually merely identifying her as my wife.

So: what was the nature, scope, and duration of the surveillance contained in my file? The 201 pages they let me have covered 1967-74. These were the final nutsy-kookoo years of J. Edgar Hoover: of the smear campaign against Martin Luther King, the Cointelpro scheme to infiltrate and disrupt from within various progressive Movement organizations ranging from the Black Panther Party and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) to moderate civil rights and anti-Vietnam war groups. It was the period of the great showcase conspiracy trials (such as that of the Chicago 8 [7]), in all of which the government failed to obtain convictions. It was the height of the Vietnam protest and Hoover's paranoid vendettas against the "Communists" he saw under every bed.

In this period, I was working with many others in Bloomington-Normal for social justice and educational reform, racial equality and an end to the Vietnam War. The FBI took note of this but focused only on certain types of activity I was engaged in.

In the pages they gave me, and in the portions which aren't blacked out, I find that they were particularly concerned with my support of black students in their effort to name the ISU Student Union after the black leader Malcolm X, my presumed association with the campus SDS (I was never a part of the group, although I knew some of the people and attended some of the meetings), my involvement with the local chapter of American Civil Liberties Union, my supposed involvement with an organization in the high schools called the Student Freedom League (a short-lived group concerned with student rights—and not, as the FBI believed, a training ground to prepare students for SDS when they got to college).

Now, I don't know what's in the 147 pages they didn't let me have (I learned from a former FBI agent that it probably was stuff supplied by informants who were enrolled as students in my classes at ISU, and that to let me see those pages would have been a dead giveaway). Likewise, in the pages that I did get, there are many blacked-out sections—names, whole paragraphs, several pages that are nearly *all* black! But enough remains to give me a good idea of what the FBI was interested in, and a fairly clear picture of how they went about their operations. By no means are all of the names deleted.

As the years went by, they kept closing my file and then—when something else happened—opening it up again. The file contains much inaccurate “information”. They have me present at meetings I never attended. They have me as a member of SDS and then as the organizer of the Student Freedom League. They have my eyes brown (most people think they're blue). They credit me again and again with having one child (unnamed), when actually I have two, both *with* names.

In spot-checks they drove by my house to see what license plates were on the cars parked nearby. Though they claim not to have conducted electronic surveillance on me, they did at one point refer me to the Secret Service as a "dangerous person" (no specific reason mentioned). They had a local flunky perform a clipping service for them: on page after page I find *Pantagraph* or *Vidette* clippings where my name was underlined for giving a speech or being mentioned as a member of the ACLU steering committee.

In 1970, I and several others in town were receiving threats on our lives signed by the Ku Klux Klan and the Minutemen; a friend had a rock thrown through his living room window—with a note coming later, saying: "Commie, the hole in your window will be in your head next time." Marilyn and I had a small fire set in our garage—with a note coming later, saying: "Commie, the fire in your garage will be in your bedroom next." Irritated, we decided to call in the postal authorities and the FBI to stop the harassment and name some names.

The report of the agents who interviewed me is in my file (the one thing that *ought* to be)—and I'm pleased to say that their report is a straightforward, descriptive account of what I said—no inferences or judgments on their part. The names I mentioned of local people who might be responsible for the threats were not mentioned in the report. (But after this interview and one with Normal Police Chief Richard McGuire, the incidents of intimidation stopped, as we expected they would.)

Items of general interest: a copy of my birth certificate is in the file, obtained from Arkansas during the initial workup on me in 1968; they never did get my academic degrees straight; their informants weren't always well-informed (but were quoted nonetheless); I was called a supporter of the Black Panther Party—probably because I subscribed to their newspaper; the FBI was extremely cautious in dealing with university personnel (because I was a professor, the matter had to be handled with the "utmost discretion"); they felt that I was not good "informant potential"

(they're to be commended for having that much astuteness); and they didn't think a second interview with me was advisable, for it might "be embarrassing to the Bureau."

Conclusions? When you think that this kind of surveillance was being done on thousands of individuals and organizations during the '60s and '70s who were expressing themselves within the law and in accord with the Constitutional rights of freedom of speech and association, you're left with mixed feelings of humor (at how paranoid and ridiculous it was), anger (at the invasion of your privacy by snoops and spies and informers), and rage (at the enormous waste of resources and tax dollars).

It's grotesque to think of these armies of bureaucrats and clerks taking themselves, their "work," and *you* so very seriously—yet performing their jobs in so perfunctory and slipshod a manner that they simply record hearsay as fact and compound inaccuracy upon error.

But, at bottom, it's not funny at all. There's something stinky and low about it: dirty business—not at all in keeping with the professed principles of a democratic society. While the FBI can be said to have a legitimate function in investigating certain types of criminal activity, there is nothing legitimate about massive spying on law-abiding citizens suspected of "subversion" because they dissent from government policy, protest social injustice, and dare to question "authority." Whether the result of excessive zeal, a pedestrian "following of orders" to earn their pay, or a compulsive desire to know everything in the interest of power and control, the compilation of exhaustive dossiers on non-criminals is not a legitimate activity in a nation that prides itself on being a "free society."

The file I've shared dates from the 1960s and '70s. Unfortunately, the mindset that produced this massive spying on U.S. citizens is still very much alive. Not only will surveillance activity continue, it will, in all likelihood, increase. The machinery is in place.

Through executive order, Raygun has already broadened the CIA's functions to encompass domestic spying. As the '80s move into the '90s and militarism is whipped into a patriotic frenzy and the Cold War grinds on (because governments don't put a stop to it), as the economy worsens for large numbers of American citizens, as the anti-nuclear movement gains strength and social protest increases in response to Raygun's domestic policies, as protests on campuses and elsewhere escalate over South African apartheid and American investment in that system, as opposition grows over American military involvement in Central America (and possibly the Philippines), as policy makers increasingly need to find scapegoats to blame for their reverses (and to distract the population and provide a focus for their discontents), as non-dissent becomes the litmus-test for patriotism, and governmental repression increases in the name of stamping out "terrorism," the surveillance and harassment of citizens—individuals and groups—will move into high gear.

—R. D. Sutherland

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