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FBI Sought To 'Neutralize' John Lennon

Agents Feared Ex-Beatle Would Disrupt Nixon's '72 Convention

By *Roxane Arnold*

Los Angeles Times

IRVINE, Calif.—FBI agents, fearing that former Beatle John Lennon was about to lead a demonstration against Richard Nixon, followed the late British musician for months before the 1972 Republican convention, hoping to arrest him on drug charges or otherwise "neutralize" him so that he could be deported, according to previously unreleased government documents.

In a bizarre story of a widespread government effort to catch Lennon in some illegal activity, FBI agents monitored the singer's public appearances, kept tabs on his private life and strongly suggested at one point that Lennon "be arrested if at all possible on possession of narcotics charges" so "that he would become more likely to be immediately deportable."

Although no evidence exists of any Lennon plan to disrupt or even attend the political convention, the government's campaign was relentless, according to FBI and immigration files released under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act.

The files comprise a virtual log of Lennon's life in the early '70s, a time when his records, such

as "Imagine," were selling in the millions, his rhetoric was increasingly antiwar and he was fighting deportation because of a minor marijuana arrest in England four years before.

Included in the FBI file are some of Lennon's more controversial antiwar song lyrics, fliers from peace marches he attended, concert reviews, copies of counterculture publications that linked his name to 1972 Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern, and copies of secret memos and FBI reports that were distributed to bureaus across the country. Then-FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, Nixon White

House special assistant H.R. Halde-
man, immigration authorities, State
Department officials and the CIA
also received communications.

Much of the FBI material, which
was requested by University of Cal-
ifornia, Irvine, history professor Jon
Wiener for a book he is writing on
Lennon and the politics of the '60s,
is heavily censored.

Entire passages are blocked out
with heavy black ink for what the
FBI calls national security reasons.

Wiener also received 26 pounds of
immigration data detailing Lennon's
three-year fight with immigration
authorities to stay in the United
States.

But because the FBI material rep-
resents only about a third of the 300
pages believed to be in Lennon's file,
Wiener and the American Civil Lib-
erties Union filed a lawsuit yesterday
in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles
challenging the federal government's
right to keep its files secret.

"What is most disturbing in all of
this," Wiener said, "is the dimensions
of what the government was doing.
The government feared John Len-
non, and Nixon devoted an incred-
ible amount of government resources
to try and get rid of him."

An FBI spokesman in Washington
would not comment Monday specifi-
cally on the Lennon file but did say
investigations of such celebrities
were "not uncommon" during the
early '70s.

"People have forgotten the riots,
the burnings that transpired in those
days," said Jim Hall, chief of the
FBI's Freedom of Information office.
"Because of our concern for riots and
any similar related activity in 1970
to '72, we did have a considerable
number of those types of investiga-
tions going on."

Hall stressed that the decision to
withhold the bulk of the Lennon file
does not necessarily mean it holds
volatile information. He said the in-
formation may have been classified
simply to protect the identity of
sources and, in that way, national
security.

But Wiener calls the FBI expla-
nation "outrageous."

ACLU attorney Mark Rosenbaum
said the government appears to be
"invoking national security to avoid
political embarrassment," adding
that national security is not sup-
posed to be used "cavalierly."

"The case raises two sets of is-
sues," Rosenbaum said. "Why did
the [Nixon] administration keep sur-
veillance on John Lennon and indi-
cate it wanted to take action to neu-
tralize his political effect? And why
did this [Reagan] administration,
which is an outspoken foe of the
peace movement, shield the prior
administration's actions?"

Although Lennon's widow, Yoko
Ono, was asked to join the lawsuit,

longtime family friend Elliot Mintz
said Monday that the experience
would be too painful for her.

According to the files, the govern-
ment first took serious note of Len-
non as a potential security threat in
late 1971 after he attracted 16,000
people to a University of Michigan
rally to free political activist John
Sinclair. Sentenced to 10 years in
prison for selling two marijuana cig-
arettes to an undercover officer, Sin-
clair was freed two days later.

In early March 1972, deportation
proceedings were launched against
him, allegedly because of his mari-
juana conviction in England. But
subsequent press reports linked the
move to deport Lennon to a Feb. 4,
1972, memo written to then-Attor-
ney General John Mitchell by Re-
publican Sen. Strom Thurmond of
South Carolina.

By then Lennon was listed on FBI
documents along with antiwar activ-
ists Rennie Davis, Jerry Rubin and
others who were going to "direct
New Left protest activities during
the 1972 election year." All, accord-
ing to an FBI report, were associated
with a group known as the Election
Year Strategy Information Center
(EYSIC). The group's purpose was
to disrupt the Republican Conven-
tion, then scheduled for San Diego
but eventually held in Miami, the
report said.

With the August convention date
nearing, the FBI again urged a pos-
sible Lennon drug bust.

Although records show that copies of the memos were sent to Nixon aide H.R. Haldeman, he refused to comment Monday other than to say he "didn't remember it at all."

On July 27, 1972, a top New York FBI agent suggested that agents in Miami, where the Republican convention was to be held three weeks later, should be made aware of Lennon's drug use.

The agent said if Lennon was arrested in Miami, his immediate deportation was likely. But Lennon, involved in fighting his deportation, never went to Miami.