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COINTELPRO redux?

Has the Reagan administration stepped up domestic surveillance of political dissidents?

Those who say yes can point to cases of federal agents infiltrating sanctuary-movement church groups and a series of mysterious burglaries at the offices of organizations opposed to U.S. policies in Central and South America. Such incidents, they say, are reminiscent of COINTELPRO, the covert and illegal counterintelligence program against antiwar groups — and their publications — spearheaded by the FBI and the CIA during the 1960s and early 1970s. (See "Sabotaging the Dissident Press," *CJR*, March/April 1981.) Now, *Sojourners*, a monthly magazine published by the ecumenical Christian community of the same name, claims that it has obtained proof that its offices were under surveillance by federal agents.

Just before 6 A.M. on a Saturday morning in the fall of 1984, Ed Richardson, a *Sojourners* staff member, stopped by the magazine's Washington offices on his way out of town for the weekend. As he came around a corner to the building's back entrance, he saw four men peering into the offices. According to Richardson, the men were all in their late twenties or early thirties, white, and dressed in suits and ties. One carried a camera. Standing with their backs to Richardson, the men were visibly startled when he asked, "Can I help you?"

"Uh, is this *Sojourners*?" one of the men reportedly asked, sheepishly. Richardson said that it was the magazine's offices, and the man said that the four had come to visit the community. No one lives at the magazine's offices, Richardson told him, adding that Saturday morning just after dawn was a strange time to pay a visit. He then offered to give the man the name of someone who would arrange a visit at a more convenient hour. The man politely declined the offer; then, together with the other three, he headed toward the street. "All the while," Richardson recalled in a statement to the police a few days after the incident, "they acted as if they had been caught at something and just wanted to get away."

When they reached the street, Richardson says, the four men got into their car — a late-model dark-brown sedan with a long CB antenna attached to the left side — and sped away, tires screeching. Richardson took

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down the car's license: Virginia plate G-306, with a 1985 sticker in the corner. But because there was no evidence of burglary or any other crime having been committed, the District of Columbia police and the state of Virginia refused to identify the owner.

Last fall, however, after several attempts to trace the plate, the magazine was put in touch with a former government intelligence officer now working as a private investigator. In the February issue, *Sojourners* publisher Joe Roos wrote that the investigator had discovered that the car's license number was one of a block of numbers assigned to the National Security Agency, the highly secretive organization charged with handling the nation's communications intelligence. "Since government agencies often exchange license plates," Roos wrote, "we are not certain that NSA agents visited us that morning. However, it is clear that we were subjects of government surveillance."

When questioned about *Sojourners*' findings, NSA spokeswoman Carolyn Johnson replied that the agency was unfamiliar with the magazine and would neither confirm nor deny its allegations.

L.Z.