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WATCHING FOR COMINFIL

Even the Quakers Scared the FBI

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As, drawer by drawer, the files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation are pried open by the Freedom of Information Act, the truly formidable capacity of the agency to sense subversion in the seemingly most honorable segments of American society is gradually unfolding. Paranoia on this scale has a certain grandeur; and if it were not that a number of good people were hurt and that we all paid for it in our taxes, J. Edgar Hoover's crusade of panic against treason might well be the jest of the century. Attend now to the proposition that the Quakers required vigilant surveillance. —The Editors

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker service organization which was formed during World War I to do relief and rehabilitation work in war-torn countries and in 1947 received the Nobel Peace Prize, has been operating under the unblinking eye of the FBI for the past fifty-six years. Many thousands of pages of its FBI files, now emerging through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), are headed "Internal Security" (often with subheadings "Subversive," "Racial Matters," etc.)—and Cominfil, the FBI code word for Communist infiltration. This does not mean that AFSC has at any time been Communist-infiltrated; only that it has been *watched* for Cominfil.

The CIA and its predecessor the OSS, the State Department, IRS, Secret Service, Army, Navy, Air Force and the National Security Agency have also been keeping an eye on the Quakers for many years. And—as has become clear in these recent years of disclosures—the subject of this prolonged scrutiny is only one of hundreds of such groups, and some hundreds of thousands of individuals, spied on because of their dissenting views and/or their contacts with Communist or Socialist groups or countries. Like satellite pieces in Canada, the grim evidence of nefarious government surveillance keeps turning up.

Of course, Americans are not spied upon without "cause," just as people in the Soviet Union are presumably not put under surveillance or into mental institutions for no reason. Every state apparatus or governing regime has a tendency to regard expressions of difference, or friendliness with the people or policies of competing powers, as "subversive." Advocating relations with China, for example, was sufficient to start your FBI and CIA dossiers in the 1950s or 1960s—a file which would still exist after an approach to China became official U.S. policy.

People with files are, after all, suspected of *something*. Since the early 1920s, AFSC has engaged not only in providing relief for the Russians during their post-World War I famine but also in such suspicious things as helping refugees during the Spanish Civil War. It is noted in a House Un-American Activities Committee report, and

repeated in several FBI and other files thereafter, that AFSC's work with Spanish refugees in 1939 included aid to some Communists due to the committee's "failure to apply any political tests to needy persons who asked assistance."

In World War II, AFSC aided European refugees, conscientious objectors and interned Japanese-Americans. During the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the Quakers became more actively involved in anti-draft and anti-war activities, while continuing to provide medical aid to all sides in the conflicts. Throughout these decades, AFSC increasingly engaged in social action and social justice programs that attempted to expose and root out, rather than gloss over, the bases of conflicts. But anyone trying to get at roots is by definition "radical"—so all these activities were extensively reported in decades of governmental files.

In the 1950s it did not take much to make a group suspect. The Inspector General at Lowry Air Force Base, for example, reported his concern about a series of seminars in 1953 at the Washington, D.C. Lenten School of Christian Living, where "extremely controversial subjects" were discussed. One of these was "Segregation in Washington," at which an AFSC staff member expressed anti-racist views that shocked the Air Force officer. He suggested that AFSC be further investigated, especially as any group with the word "committee" in it was "likely to be a Communist Front."

In Oak Park, Ill., in the mid-1960s the Chicago AFSC joined with an interracial neighborhood group to present demands at real estate firms. This was watched closely (under "Internal Security/Racial Matters") by the FBI. Even when the little group failed to appear at one firm's office because it had decided to await a response, the FBI reported this nonevent to Washington and to the District Attorney General, Secret Service and the 113th Army Intelligence Unit.

Thus AFSC has had the effrontery to include in its work not only mopping-up programs after conflicts and disasters but efforts to prevent them. Through peace education, international seminars and work camps, community relations programs, etc., AFSC has increasingly stuck out its neck beyond simple relief work to probe basic causes. That's why, during the period of Vietnam, AFSC continued to try to root out racism, to expose poverty areas—and to initiate projects focused on such newly identified problems as sexism and the military-industrial complex.

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