

New York Newsday Jan 27, 1988

'What we're dealing with is an illegal FBI campaign. It is clear that this is just the tip of the iceberg, nationally and in New York.'

— Ron Kuby, consulting attorney for the Center for Constitutional Rights

FBI Spied on Groups Opposed To U.S. Central America Role



William Webster

By Vivienne Walt

The FBI used wiretaps, physical surveillance and informers to spy on hundreds of groups opposed to the Reagan administration's policy in Central America, according to FBI documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.

The targets of the FBI probe nationwide included the Maryknoll Sisters and the United Auto Workers. In New York, the investigation concerned the National Council of Churches, the North American Congress on Latin America, two Manhattan travel agencies specializing in tours to Nicaragua and Cuba, and two companies that distribute political films about Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, a civil liberties group, obtained about 1,320 pages of FBI Telexes and inter-office communications, as well as pamphlets from the

On the List

Here are the organizations in New York City that were found to have been under surveillance by the FBI during the years 1982 to 1985:

- Icarus Films
- First Run Films
- Agricultural Missions
- Infant Formula Action Coalition
- May 19th Communist Organization
- November 12th Coalition
- Council of Churches
- Molina Lara Tour
- Clergy Laymen Concerned
- Fellowship of Reconciliation
- Marazul Tours
- El Salvador Alert
- North American Committee on Latin America
- U.S. Latin America Justice Committee

SOURCE: Center for Constitutional Rights

investigated groups. Much of the material was blacked out by the agency.

The documents showed a nationwide investigation, beginning in 1981, of organizations opposed to Reagan administration policy in Central America. The probe, which has not yet resulted

in any prosecutions, was described yesterday as an "illicit campaign to stifle dissent" by the center's attorney, Margaret Ratner.

"What we're dealing with is an il-

Please see FBI on Page 29

FBI Spied on Central America Activists

FBI from Page 5

legal FBI campaign," said the center's consulting attorney, Ron Kuby. "It is clear that this is just the tip of the iceberg, nationally and in New York. We have only received about one-third of the documents that exist, and the parts blacked out we can assume contain information that is much more damaging to the FBI."

The documents were obtained from the FBI through a lawsuit filed by the center relating to an FBI probe of the Committee in Solidarity With the People of El Salvador, an activist group.

Kuby said the center would consider a lawsuit against the agency for "unconstitutional activity," including the use of wiretaps without a court order.

FBI spokesman Gregory Jones said in Washington that the "predication for and focus of these investigations is alleged criminal activity, rather than the motives and beliefs of those being investigated."

According to the documents, surveillance of New York groups appears to have begun in January, 1982, when the FBI asked its agents in the city to check on the El Salvador committee. By August, 1983, the New York office was still unable to report information hinting at illegal activities by the group and was prepared to close its investigation.

But former FBI Director William Webster's office kept the New York agents on the case, widening the investigation to several church groups and political organizations, the center's Ann Mari Buitrago said yesterday, citing the documents.

Jones refused to comment in detail

about the investigation, "because of a pending FBI inquiry regarding allegations that have been made concerning the CISPES investigation."

"The field officers would write [to the director] saying, 'There are no terrorists here,'" Buitrago said. "And the FBI headquarters would reply saying, 'Before you close the investigations, these people might be running front or-

ganizations.' Well, there was no end to that. Anything could be a front group."

In addition, FBI agents gathered as evidence scores of pamphlets from the organizations in New York before a rally in Washington in November, 1983, to protest U.S. policy in Central America.

In all, the center requested FBI documents amounting to 3,756 pages as a result of a lawsuit it filed in federal

court in Dallas two years ago, when FBI informant Frank Varella told the press that the agency was gathering information on CISPES. At the time, the center believed that the FBI investigation was confined to CISPES.

"There is nothing in the files to suggest that there has been an end to the investigations," Buitrago said. "The FBI has informed us that they have lost the last file in the investigation."

Response from First Run's President Seymour Wishman in USA Today, February 4, 1988



USA TODAY • THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 1988 •

SEYMOUR WISHMAN

Guest columnist

This kind of probe is outrageous waste

NEW YORK — I would have assumed that even FBI agents were smart enough to know that, when a reviewer called one of our films "explosive," he was speaking metaphorically rather than providing grounds to open a file on us.

When people in the film business refer to "bombs," they are talking about financial failures. The lawyers and accountants who become FBI agents should be taught this early in their training. Certainly, President Reagan should understand the vocabulary.

I was outraged to learn the FBI had been spying on First Run Features. My company is one of the largest in the business of selling and renting social/political issue films to universities, libraries and religious, labor, women's, veterans' and community organizations. Our films have won hundreds of awards from educators, librarians, film festivals, even Academy Awards.

Some of our films deal with Central America: *Roses in December* tells the story of lay missionary Jean Donovan and the three nuns who were murdered in El Salvador; *Witness to War*, which won an Academy Award for best documentary, describes the journey of Dr. Charlie Clements from pilot in Vietnam to physician behind rebel lines in El Salvador; *Fire from the Mountain* follows the life of Nicaraguan writer Omar Cabezas from student activist to guerrilla fighter to a central position in the government.

These and many others in our collection were made by serious film makers, patriotic Americans who wanted to share the ideas and images in

Seymour Wishman is president of First Run Features.

their films with as many citizens as possible so that informed opinions and decisions could be made. They often worked under hardship conditions, at times under very real personal risks, and always under terrible financial sacrifice. I am proud to be associated with their work. One may disagree with the content or inferences to be drawn from the films, and distributing them may be difficult as a business, but it is hardly subversive.

My outrage over being spied on is not diminished by learning we weren't the primary target of the probe. The potential chilling effect on uninhibited dissemination of ideas is just as real. People have a right to learn about Central America from as many sources as possible, not just the official government version and not even just from the three TV networks.

We deal in films, not bombs; that may explain why the FBI is suspicious of us. The fact the FBI is watching companies like mine, and not criminals, might explain our high crime rate.

We now have a right to know who the incompetents in the FBI are who authorized out-of-control investigations, who was supposed to be supervising them, and why it took so long to realize they were wasting our tax dollars. I spent 18 years as a criminal lawyer; I would assume the investigation by the FBI in this case cost millions. I want an accounting.

The FBI should either fight crime or give the money to cancer research or some other worthwhile endeavor.