

COINTELPRO: The Burglary That Opened the Files

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A secret FBI program sought to disrupt domestic organizations through infiltration and discrediting tactics. Stolen files helped expose it, and official investigations later condemned abuses of the rights of people under scrutiny.

STATUS	Documented covert disruption and civil-rights abuses
CLASSIFICATION	STR
MATERIAL	United States
DISPOSITION	PUBLIC / SOURCED STORY
CATEGORY	Strange Files
RECORD TYPE	Secrets & conspiracies
STORY HISTORY	1956-1971

THE ACCOUNT

In 1971, a burglary at an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, carried a different kind of evidence out through the door. The stolen documents helped expose COINTELPRO, a classified campaign aimed at disrupting domestic organizations. Its methods went beyond observing a group from the outside. Infiltration, planted distrust and efforts to damage reputations could turn an organization's ordinary internal tensions into an instrument used against it.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

The FBI's own historical account acknowledges agents sowing discord and attempting to discredit groups even where there was little or no evidence of unlawful activity. The program began in 1956, expanded to several political targets and formally ended in April 1971. Congressional criticism and later safeguards followed. The archive establishes specific historical operations; it does not automatically verify claims that any present disagreement is secretly orchestrated.

WHY IT STAYS WITH US

The unease is intimate. An apparent quarrel, damaging rumor or unreliable ally could be part of an outside intervention. That possibility was real in this documented program, which makes its individual records more valuable than a generalized suspicion of everything. The case also reverses a familiar pattern: a crime against an investigative agency helped reveal abuses within that agency.

WHERE THIS TELLING COMES FROM

And Justice for All, 1954-1971

Federal Bureau of Investigation

<https://www.fbi.gov/history/history-of-the-fbi/and-justice-for-all>

COINTELPRO records

Federal Bureau of Investigation

<https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro>

RETURN TO THE STORY

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