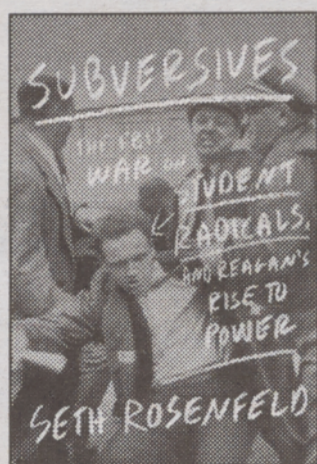


The FBI's spy vs. spy posture with counterculture

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

On Oct. 1, 1964, a student on the Berkeley campus of the University of California set up a table to distribute literature about civil rights. He was arrested by the police — there had been a ban on political activities on campus since



Subversives: The FBI's War on Student Radicals, and Reagan's Rise to Power
by Seth Rosenfeld

Berkeley campus in history. By the end of the school year, students had won the right to organize political events on campus in time to create the first massive protests against the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam.

The radical student movement had a powerful enemy: J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Bureau of Investigation since 1924; it became the FBI in 1935. Starting in the 1930s, Hoover used illegal and covert surveillance as well as dirty tricks against anyone the FBI suspected of being "subversive" — a wide-ranging category that included Communist Party members and many others. At one time about 10 percent of the members of the Socialist Workers Party were FBI informants. Anyone who questioned government foreign policy or racial segregation was likely to end up with an FBI file.

As Berkeley became an epicenter of the student movement, Hoover set out to contain, sabotage and repress the movement. Part of his solution was to facilitate the election of Ronald Reagan in 1968 as governor of California. One of the cornerstones of Reagan's campaign was repressing the movement on UC campuses.

Sound like a conspiracy theory? Author Seth Rosenfeld anchors "Subversives" in 300,000 pages of FBI files released after successive court cases. Among numerous revelations, the files document Reagan's

activities as an FBI informant from his days as president of the Screen Actors Guild in the 1950s. The FBI provided quid pro quo for his cooperation, such as investigating Reagan's estranged daughter, downplaying in public reports the Mafia involvement of Reagan's adopted son and feeding Reagan useful information for his political career.

The files also document Hoover's secret campaign to get Clark Kerr, the liberal head of the UC system, fired because Hoover saw Kerr as a compromiser who was only encouraging the protestors. Reagan engineered Kerr's dismissal at the first Board of Regents meeting after his election as governor.

The next year Reagan got the Board of Regents to reject a student proposal to turn a university-owned vacant lot into a People's Park. "Dorothy Walker, a Berkeley city planning commissioner, told the governor, 'The blood of the people of Berkeley will be on your hands.' 'Fine,' Reagan replied. ... 'I'll wash it off with Boraxo,'" referencing a soap advertised on "Death Valley Days," a TV show he hosted.

In the 1969 confrontation that followed, an innocent bystander was killed, another was permanently blinded and at least 50 other civilians — some protestors, some not — were injured by police shotgun blasts of birdshot and buckshot.

Rosenfeld follows three figures in the history of Berkeley protest: Reagan, Kerr and Mario Savio, a major leader of the first student protests in 1964. Each represents a different political current: Savio, the increasing radicalization of the student body and its alienation from the political process; Kerr, the mainstream liberal with a commitment to civil liberties but also an acceptance of what he saw as political reality; and Reagan, the conservative. Rosenfeld finds parallels in their personalities and interests, but the device can't quite hold the story together: Savio's intense involvement in the movement was short-lived, and he abhorred the idea of being a "leadership figure," believing it antithetical to participatory democracy.

Reagan went on to become president of the United States; Kerr immediately found another job with the Carnegie Foundation; and Savio, in part because of ongoing FBI harassment, had a hard time finding a job for a number of years.

The history is fascinating. Rosenfeld draws on many sources, not just FBI files, to give insight into the hows and whys behind the Berkeley movement alongside ongoing FBI surveillance. The reader can get lost in the complexity of the story. Rosenfeld often

Richard Aoki: Asian American, Black Panther or FBI informant?

BY MIKE WOLD
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It wasn't a great surprise when the FBI files reviewed by Seth Rosenfeld for "Subversives" showed that Ronald Reagan was an FBI informant: He'd been accused of that before. But a section in Rosenfeld's book about Richard Aoki, the only Asian American to have a major leadership role in



Richard Aoki at the height of his Black Panther involvement

the Black Panthers, had a more explosive impact: It appeared that Aoki had been a paid informant long before his involvement with the Panthers and also into his years as a respected teacher and community leader.

The initial reaction among Aoki's former comrades and colleagues was one of denial. Aoki was remembered as a militant, uncompromising revolutionary. Some people suggested that Rosenfeld had inflated the information in the files or misinterpreted it.

A few weeks after the book's publication, however, 221 pages of FBI files on Aoki were released to Rosenfeld. They seemed to provide indisputable evidence that Aoki had been considered an invaluable informant by the bureau. In 1972, the agent supervising him even reminded him to report the payments he'd received from the FBI on his IRS tax return.

Aoki sounds like the epitome of mid-1960s revolutionary cool: He wore sunglasses most of the time, even at night, and spoke the language of the black Oakland neighborhood where he'd grown up. He sometimes suggested escalation of protest actions. At one point, he proposed that students raid local National Guard armories to get weapons. He was one of the earliest suppliers of weapons to

the Panthers, furnishing them guns from his own collection. Before joining the Panthers, he had provided the FBI information on the youth groups of the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, among others.

There's nothing in the heavily redacted files to suggest that Aoki was an agent provocateur, nor is there information about exactly what he told the FBI. Nevertheless, his influence within the Panthers raises questions about whether the FBI knew what kinds of actions he was encouraging, and, if bureau members did know, how they reacted.

It could be that Aoki was spying on the FBI — a double agent of sorts. It's also possible that all the information he fed the bureau was garbage, although that contradicts the FBI's opinion of his information.

Fred Ho, a friend of Aoki's, suggested in August in the online newspaper San Francisco Bay View that Aoki's appearance in the released FBI files was disinformation intended to discredit the revolutionary movement. As quoted in International Examiner, a pan-Asian newspaper based in Seattle, Aoki's biographer Diane Fujino insisted that the files need to be studied more carefully. "Perhaps, and the jury is still out on this, Aoki was an FBI informant in the early '60s at a time when he was rather conventional. ... But he may have gotten changed in the process of reading and working with the Young Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Workers Party."

None of these explanations seems probable on its face, but at this point only the FBI knows. Or maybe no one really knows. Aoki committed suicide three years ago, two years after Rosenfeld let him know there was evidence he'd been an informer. Rosenfeld's report of that interview makes Aoki sound evasive: "'People change. It is complex. Layer upon layer.' When pressed further for a yes or a no, Aoki again replied indirectly, saying, 'I'm denying it. Or "no comment" is the standard response, I think.'"

introduces chapters with climactic events and then goes back in time to explain how they happened. The book could benefit from a chronological table showing the relationship of various protests and meetings.

The detailed revelations of FBI surveillance raise important issues about how police powers can be abused in the

absence of strong civilian oversight, especially since many of the safeguards enacted after Hoover's death have been eroded in the past 10 years. Still, the real interest of the narrative is the story of how a quiescent campus (or society) can come to challenge the foundations of power in the course of a very short time.

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