

# Smear campaign used to kill the underground press

Marc Epprecht

Have you ever wondered why the protest movements of the late '60's and early '70's faded out of existence so quickly? Why the youth of today is so conformist and apolitical compared to only the years ago? Is it simply because of the change in economic times?

*Unamerican Activities*, prepared by the Poets, Essayists and Novelists of American Centre's Freedom to Write Committee, shouts, "No!" to that question.

This book, with contributions by some of America's leading civil libertarians (including a foreword by Allen Ginsberg), claims that the entire protest movement was subjected to a massive, immoral and often illegal assault by various agencies of the government.

Their expressed purpose was, in the words of an FBI memo, "to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit and otherwise neutralize" dissidence in the USA.

It focuses specifically on the campaign against the voice of the protest movement, the so-called Underground Press, and though it deals primarily with American examples, it has grave implications for Canadians as well.

The author, Geoffrey Rips, faces a strong temptation to romanticize about the men and women who ran the more than 500 anti-establishment newspapers in Canada and the USA. They were motivated by their ideals, an end to war and racism, social and sexual freedom, and ran their papers on shoestring budgets.

Readership of 20 million

In spite of their amateurism and naivety, they attracted a readership of up to 20 million, spreading the word of disobedience and rebellion to a disillusioned population. They were perceived by the establishment as a danger to the morality and harmony of society and the campaign was launched, in direct opposition to the spirit and letter of the First Amendment to the U.S. constitution (the guarantee of freedom of speech) to suppress these papers.

The apparatus to silence the expression of 'radical' ideas had long been in place, notably in the hands of the FBI and local police 'Red Squads'. During the years of crisis in the 1960's the number of government agencies involved

was greatly expanded.

The CIA, the Army, Internal Revenue and increasingly private corporations (especially nuclear power companies) equipped themselves to spy and harass their critics. Agency memos, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, are reproduced to show that this is not groundless paranoia. They explicitly detail plan to conduct widespread espionage, harassment and terrorism against those considered to be threatening to the 'American way of life'.

Firebombing offices

Forms of harassment ranged from the absurd — spraying underground papers with "the scent of the most foul-smelling feces available" — to the criminal — firebombing offices and personal assaults. A favorite tactic was to lay trumped-up or fabricated drug and obscenity charges against papers which, although almost invariably resulting in acquittal, succeeded in bankrupting the papers with legal fees.

Rips describes case after case of underground media being silenced by government and police pressure or vigilante group action under their sponsorship and protection. It makes for grim and shocking reading.

Particularly relevant

The book is particularly relevant at this time, with the rise of the Moral Majority in the US and mounting pressure to restore and even increase government surveillance and censorship powers. Such is true in Canada as well. Both the recent disclosures about the RCMP and the recommendations of the Kent Commission suggest that our government is less concerned with real freedom of thought and speech than it is with maintaining a narrowly defined social control.

Rips' documentation of a systematic campaign to destroy alternate opinion media is very disturbing to the assumption that we do indeed have a free and responsible press. His conclusion on a note of apprehension about a return to 'McCarthyite' conditions, is a great antidote to any smugness one may have about living in the 'Free World'.

**Unamerican Activities: The Campaign Against the Underground Press**, by Geoffrey Rips, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1981.

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## Bob and Doug winner



So here it is, eh. Edo van Belkam and Fred Diana are winners in the Bob and Doug contest. So take off, eh.