
The FBI's Secret File on César Chávez

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by Richard Steven Street

ON OCTOBER 6, 1965, AN INFORMANT telephoned FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover about César Chávez and the strike he was leading against table grape growers in Delano, California. Claiming that Chávez "possibly has a subversive background," the informant went on to raise a very specific issue. What concerned him was a grant of \$267,887 which Chávez's union had received on the previous day. Ostensibly to assist in a self-help education project teaching citizenship and money management to migrant farmworkers in Kern, Kings, and Tulare counties, the grant seemed highly suspicious. Noting that the grant had caused an uproar in the Delano area and throughout the San Joaquin Valley, the confidential informant wondered about Chávez, who he described accurately as a former migrant organizer for Saul Alinsky's Community Services Organization (CSO), and leader of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). Could the FBI investigate, he asked?¹

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The following day, October 7, an FBI agent contacted the informant, who said there were several other individuals in the NFWA who allegedly had subversive backgrounds and were engaged in questionable activities. The informant identified them as: David Havens, a member of the California Migrant Ministry; Larry Itliong, and Ben Gines, organizers for the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC); Pete Manuel and Marcello Tansi, local union leaders; and Dolores Huerta, secretary of the NFWA. He also cited a recent issue of *The Worker*, a "communist publication," which carried a photo of Huerta standing on top of an automobile holding a large picket sign which exclaimed *Huelga* ("Strike"). On the basis of this request agents analyzed the FBI's bulfiles (central files maintained in Washington, D. C.) but found nothing on the NFWA, California Migrant Ministry, Havens, Tansi, Gines, or Huerta. Checking back issues of *The Worker*, the FBI reported: "No photograph of Huerta was found in any issue of *The Worker* received in the Bureau since the



Climbing to the top of a car, National Farm Worker Association secretary Dolores Huerta holds up a strike sign calling workers from the vineyards on September 24, 1965. When the image ran in the Communist Party publication *People's World*, the FBI counted it as evidence of subversive activities and initiated an investigation of the photographer, Harvey Richards. *Photograph courtesy Harvey Richards.*

first of August 1965." Turning to Chávez, FBI agents at first confused him with another César Chávez, born September 9, 1926 in Mexico, fingerprinted in 1945 and 1959 by the Immigration and Naturalization Service at El Paso, Texas for immigration violations and voluntarily returned to Mexico in October 1, 1959 in lieu of deportation. The FBI concluded its response by opening what became an ongoing file on Chávez and the farmworkers movement.²

Stimulated by little more than idle talk and unsubstantiated gossip, FBI surveillance of Chávez under the administrations of Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter continued over ten years, occupying the attention of dozens of FBI agents in California, a half-dozen other states, and even Mexico. When all related materials are added in—including parallel and cooperative investigations with other intelligence agencies—the FBI dossier on Chávez runs to over 1,500 pages, with new documents being disclosed regularly. Outlining J. Edgar Hoover's campaign to uncover communist infiltration and control the farmworker movement, the file emerges as an extended brief reiterating one central, overriding, and completely astonishing fact about Chávez. It is something that can not be said of Martin Luther King or Robert and John F. Kennedy after the FBI scoured through their lives and rummaged through their garbage. In fact, it is something which can not be said about most people after they have been subjected to years of surveillance by such a vaunted law enforcement agency as the FBI.³

What becomes abundantly clear in Chávez's FBI file is that after Hoover's men wrapped-up their spying, bound up their foot-thick

dossier, cross-referenced and indexed their material, and analyzed hundreds of reports, they came up empty. They found nothing on Chávez. No communist leanings stained his reputation. No ugly incidents detracted from his reputation. No misappropriation of funds marred his union administration. No extramarital affairs undermined his reputation as a family man. No subversive activities cast suspicion on the movement he championed. In all of his speeches, in all of his actions, and in all of his associations, Chávez never displayed even one iota of disloyalty. All that the FBI was able to show through its spying was a man with a single-minded devotion to farmworkers and ever-present vigilance against those who would harm his cause with their self-serving ideology and petty politics. Hoping to slander Chávez, the FBI elevated him. Intending to dig up dirt on the labor leader, Hoover only proved his integrity. Ready to bring Chávez down, informants ultimately wound up proving that he was among this country's few great selfless mass leaders. Perhaps never before or since in the annals of the FBI has an operation so completely flopped.⁴

But that is hardly the entire story. In proving exactly the opposite of what he set out to establish, Hoover created an unusual dossier not only on the farmworker movement and César Chávez, but also on himself and his agency. The peek inside his organization, particularly its surveillance methods and underlying attitudes, reveals a program that paralleled what Hoover did to the Black Panthers, Martin Luther King, and Southern Freedom Riders, only on a smaller scale, and without the nasty tricks, wire tapping, smear tactics, harassment, burglaries, extortion, and other blatantly illegal activities. The main surprise in the years of surveillance is the clumsiness of the attempts of the country's leading law enforcement agency and primary defense against subversion. Hoover and his special agents could not restrain their fury and suspicion toward a poor, small, and weak union whose membership challenged a powerful industry and whose leaders were for good reason suspicious of government and law enforcement. Less surprising, but more disturbing, is the almost ceaseless racism and groundless suspicion, often based on little more than rumor and innuendo, that appear in the FBI's everyday memorandums. The history of Chávez as perceived through these memorandums reveals much more about the value system of the FBI bureaucracy than the actual activities of Chávez's movement. Farmworkers forged a viable union, won industry-wide contracts,

pulled-off a nation-wide boycott of table grapes, and brought a measure of justice to the fields, and Chávez led it all. But the only analysis that interested Hoover concerned communist infiltration, and the only action the FBI initiated was to spy on Chávez rather than protect his civil rights or his life or the lives of his followers.

The reasons why Hoover compiled this dossier are hardly secret. Since joining the FBI after earning his law degree in night school at George Washington University in 1917 (the FBI was then known as the Bureau of Investigation, the word "federal" being added in 1935), Hoover had devoted his career to linking protest with disloyalty. As head of the Justice Department's Anti-Alien Radical Division he may have had his hand in suppressing some of the first farmworker organizers in California during 1918, when agents under his command cooperated with state and local authorities and arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to prison for wartime sabotage every farmworker organizer and activist belonging to the Industrial Workers of the World. Although Hoover had little contact with farmworker organizers during his first decade as Bureau director, beginning in the 1930s he kept track of every organizer, communist or otherwise, maintaining his surveillance well into the early 1960s. Consequently, upon receiving the initial call for an investigation into Chávez, Hoover wasted little time. Already preoccupied with communist influence on Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders including various mainstream political parties and supporting groups, and obsessed with shadowing such organizations as the Socialist Workers Party, he now placed Chávez in the same category, launched a COMINFIL program, and opened an infamous "100" investigation.⁵

COMINFIL was an acronym for "Communist Infiltration" and the "100" designation indicated communist and/or subversive activity. Targeting "legitimate mass organizations in the integration field," COMINFIL was designed to "expose, disrupt, or otherwise neutralize" and purge Communist Party members and other subversives from positions of power and membership. The FBI had no parallel program for other groups. There were, for example, no GRAPEGROWERINFIL or FARMERINFIL programs, no attempt to discover whether agricultural groups had penetrated or were in control of legitimate law enforcement organizations in order to turn them to their purposes. The FBI's surveillance was entirely one-

dimensional. As a solid rule, the Bureau did not even consider the other side of the farm labor question. Under no circumstances would it bring the Council of California Growers, the Associated Farmers, or the California Table Grape Commission under its net of surveillance operations. Nor would it explore undue grower influence over local police departments, grower-initiated violence, anti-union activities directed at undermining the legitimate rights of Chávez to organize, or the efforts of labor contractors to intimidate workers and scare them out of the NFWA.⁶

After Hoover reviewed the results of the preliminary COMINFIL report, he wrote to the Los Angeles offices instructing them to scan their files, contact the original informant, and further broaden their inquiry. Setting a deadline of October 21, he cautioned, "Los Angeles should exercise discretion in this inquiry, since each of the named individuals reportedly is involved in a current strike against grape growers in the Delano area, and under no circumstances should your contact imply an FBI interest in this labor activity." On October 15, FBI agent Milton A. Jones informed his superior, Criminal Records Director Cartha "Deke" DeLoach, that Chávez had a "clean background." However, upon interviewing a confidential informant within or close to the NFWA, the FBI discovered that the photograph of Huerta which supposedly ran in *The Worker*, actually appeared in the October 2, 1965 issue of *The People's World*, "a west coast communist newspaper," illustrating an article entitled "Eye-witness Account of Big Farm Strike." Somewhat confused about the meaning of the term *Huelga*, an FBI translator squashed the claim by the informant that the term meant "revolt," explaining that Chávez "told him it means more to the Mexican farm workers." Noting that the term *Huelga* commonly signified "strike," the translator added that it also sometimes suggested "leave the place vacant" and occasionally "get out," but nothing more. The FBI then checked on the photographer, Harvey Richards. Scanning public testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) an agent discovered that on June 18, 1957, Dr. Jack Patten identified Richards as having once been a member of the Communist Political Association county committee. He also discovered that when Richards had been subpoenaed to give testimony three days later at HUAC hearings in San Francisco he had invoked the 5th Amendment against self-incrimination when asked about his Communist Party affiliations. Furthermore, in testimony the same day

Dorothy Jeffers had identified Richards' wife as a Communist Party member from 1943 to 1951. That was all the FBI needed.⁷

Alerted by this "hit"—the term used in identifying a subject linked to a "subversive" background—FBI officials determined to continue their surveillance, broadening their investigation to include individuals and organizations not in the original probe. Soon they turned up two other "suspicious" individuals, Wendy Goepel and Sam Kushner. Of the two, Goepel was considered the less questionable. A sociology major at Stanford University she had worked for the California Department of Public Health and as a consultant to the governor's office on the Vista Program before joining Chávez at Delano, where she helped draw up the application which resulted in the \$267,887 grant to the NFWA. Listed in the FBI bulfile as Wendy Pangburn Goepel, she attracted attention because three years earlier she had considered attending the 8th World Youth Festival in Helsinki, Finland. Although there was no indication that she did actually attend the festival, her interest in what was considered a communist front group and her key role in obtaining funds for the NFWA furnished another reason for keeping tabs on Chávez.⁸

Sam Kushner was another matter. Well-known to the FBI, Kushner was the west coast editor of *Peoples World*. Working out of Los Angeles, he had arrived at the strike shortly after it began, and after spending three weeks on the picket lines photographing and reporting, had given 100 copies of his newspaper and \$50 to the NFWA. Listed in the bulfiles as residing at 144 South Bonnie Brae, Los Angeles, Kushner was described by one source as stating that the strike was big news in Los Angeles, and that he intended to give it full coverage. Arousing suspicions because of his connections to the Communist Party, Kushner was seen by the FBI as typical of numerous outsiders flocking to Delano from San Francisco, Berkeley, and Los Angeles. According to another FBI source, the outsiders belonged to Students for Democratic Society (SDS) and "members of the Student Non-Violating [sic] Coordinating Committee and the Congress on [sic] Racial Equality." Periodically appearing on the strike lines, they had been observed carrying NFWA picket signs. One confidential source claimed that one month into the strike they were "practically the only people still picketing."⁹

Although this was a meager haul, it did not stop the surveillance. The lack of communists and subversives only inspired FBI agents to



Helen Chávez, Robert F. Kennedy, César Chávez, and Juana Chávez (César's mother) as Chávez breaks his fast after twenty-five days. March 11, 1968, Delano, California. Such tactics, reminiscent of civil rights tactics used by Martin Luther King, Jr., infuriated FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. *Photograph courtesy John Kouns.*

search more diligently. The discovery that the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and other civil rights groups were becoming involved in particular served as a red flag to Hoover. Loathing Martin Luther King and his followers with a passion that knew no bounds, Hoover had since early 1959 systematically slandered, burglarized, wire-tapped, harassed, and spied on the Civil Rights movement, and when he learned that elements had turned up at Delano, he ordered agents to tighten their surveillance of Chávez. Responding to his directives, the Los Angeles FBI briefed its agents regarding Richards, Goepel, Kushner, SNCC, and CORE, then sent along the information to the San Francisco office. Notified of developments directly by teletype and indirectly through material forwarded by FBI Assistant Director Clyde Tolson, Hoover held back from launching a full-scale security investigation but nevertheless ordered his California agents to redouble their surveillance and keep him completely informed of every development. Monitoring events closely, the Los Angeles FBI took the lead, allocated substantial resources to the COMINFIL investigation, sent the names of those arrested to other FBI offices for further identification, and dispatched an agent to Delano to personally observe and report on Chávez. Alarmed by a confrontation he witnessed on the picket lines one day, his urgent teletype report to Hoover read:

ADVISED THAT FORTY FOUR PICKETS WERE ARRESTED IN DELANO ON OCTOBER NINETEEN, LAST FOR REMAINING PRESENT AFTER WARNING THAT UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY IN CONNECTION WITH STRIKE OF FARM WORKERS IN DELANO AREA. ALL ARRESTED, BOOKED IN KERN COUNTY JAIL, BAKERSFIELD, CALIFORNIA, AND LATER RELEASED ON BAIL. DURING CONVERSATIONS WITH SOME OF THOSE ARRESTED, . . . LEARNED THAT THESE INDIVIDUALS, AND OTHERS THAT ARE EXPECTED TO ARRIVE IN DELANO FROM SAN FRANCISCO, BERKELEY, AND LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, TONIGHT AND TOMORROW. WILL MAKE THEMSELVES SUBJECT TO ADDITIONAL ARREST THIS WEEKEND. NEW ARRIVALS EXPECTED TO BE COLLEGE PROFESSORS, STUDENTS, AND MINISTERS. SAID INDICATIONS ARE THAT DEMONSTRATIONS IN DELANO—TULARE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA AREA WILL CONTINUE INDEFINITELY . . . SAID SITUATION APPEARS TO BE CONTAINED AT PRESENT. LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIALS IN AREA FULLY COGNIZANT OF SITUATION, AND STATE IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO PREDICT POTENTIAL OF SITUATION AT PRESENT . . . RESIDENT AGENT, ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH INTC, UNITED STATES ARMY, REGION TWO, BAKERSFIELD, ADVISED OF ABOVE¹⁰

As the strike heated up, the FBI developed nine confidential sources close to the strike. At least one of these appears to have been an executive at Schenley Industries, a foe of Chávez, while another appears to have been within the Delano Police Department, which from the beginning of the strike clashed with farmworkers. At least four were close enough to Chávez and the NFWA to relate intimate details obtained through direct conversations and on occasion to quote briefly from Chávez. Several also cited incidents dating back to 1961, when Chávez was active in the CSO, described activities in meetings of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), citizens groups organized to channel food and contributions to Chávez, early organizing activities and meetings by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, and even local Communist Party organizations. These people, along with the personal observations of field agents, supplied all of the FBI's information. There is no evidence at this time or later that the FBI ever resorted to telephone taps, mail intercepts, undercover agents or other forms of clandestine surveillance, or that it engaged in any illegal activities, interfered in any way with the labor conflict, or went beyond the bounds of its stated purpose, namely the pursuit of subversive activities or communist penetration and control of Chávez or his union.¹¹

Through these and other sources the FBI in late October amassed considerable amounts of information on Chávez, Huerta,

Havens, Goepel, Itliong, Tansi, Manuel, Gines and another strike leader previously overlooked, Reverend Jim Drake, a minister from Visalia who had been active in earlier rent strikes and other actions by farmworkers in the Delano area. Besides identifying their addresses, dates and places of birth, marriage status, relatives, and in some cases their telephone numbers, FBI agents also compiled information on their daily routines, union affiliations and activities, and their roles or functions in the strike or in the NFWA. Their information even contained a fairly accurate physical description of Chávez as "a male Mexican . . . 135 pounds, straight black hair, brown eyes, dark complexion . . ." Also contained in the dossier was considerable new data on key associates, most important among them César Chávez's brother, Richard, a building inspector in Tulare County, whose address and telephone number were noted. For those who were Filipino immigrants, the files also specified their immigration status.¹²

Of those detailed in FBI reports, Dolores Huerta in particular was correctly singled out as "a driving force on the picket lines." But each strike leader was profiled in a synopsis of one or two paragraphs and received a specific label. Thus Itliong was described as "a former labor contractor . . . instrumental in persuading farm workers to leave the fields," Havens as a picket captain and leader of earlier farmworker rent strikes in the town of Linnel, Manuel as "an agitator . . . only out to make money for himself . . . not fighting for any particular cause . . . also known to be 'anti-police,'" Tansi as the "leader of the San Francisco people in Delano and adjoining Tulare . . .," and Drake as "a white male . . . who . . . has been a member of the Migrant Ministry since 1962, and assisted César Chávez . . . in setting up the NFWA." As in earlier preliminary reports, agents once again reiterated that there was not a shred of evidence indicating any NFWA leaders were members of, or sympathetic to, the Communist Party, or that they engaged in subversive activities of any kind. This in fact would become a persistent theme in their reports to Hoover and the FBI hierarchy, and as proof they clipped and sent along an article from *El Malcriado* (The Unruly One), official publication of the NFWA, offering a \$1,000 cash reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone referring to the NFWA, its leaders and officers, or *El Malcriado* and its representatives, as communists, communist led, or communist inspired.¹³

UFWA
anti-communism

Within one month, agents developed a comprehensive but

extremely biased and inaccurate picture of what was happening. Understanding the origins of the strike fairly clearly, they reported that it had begun spontaneously on September 8, when 72 Filipino members of AWOC had walked out of the fields, and had grown larger on September 19, when NFWA joined in the action. But while conceding that strikers were not revolutionaries and were basically seeking better wages and working conditions and union recognition, FBI field agents continually received and then fed to their superiors information questioning Chávez's sincerity, downplaying the effectiveness of his leadership, and asserting that he "seems to issue only ultimatums rather than any reasonable attempts to resolve problems . . . or to reach any solution." FBI agents were not far from the truth when they concluded that the strike initially lacked a wide following, and at the end of September encompassed only about 800 farmworkers out of 5,000 in the area, with no more than 40 pickets in the vineyards at any time, and many of them from outside the area. But in their analysis of violence, FBI agents were consistently misled by their sources. Despite almost daily clashes on the picket lines and well-documented violence initiated by contractors, foremen, and growers, FBI reports stressed that the opposite was true, largely blaming NFWA "dead beats" and "trouble makers" and "Filipino hoodlums from San Francisco" for provoking confrontations, while explaining away television and newspaper pictures of large numbers of strikers as unrepresentative scenes staged for the cameras with plenty of advance warning.¹⁴

By the winter of 1965, the FBI had concluded that the strike, while largely unsuccessful and failing to cut significantly into grape production, would be long and drawn-out. Noting that United Auto Workers Union President Walter Reuther had paraded with Chávez at Delano and pledged moral and financial support for a nationwide boycott of table grapes, the FBI kept track of Dolores Huerta as she went to Los Angeles with comedian Steve Allen to help launch the boycott outside an Encino supermarket. On the basis of these developments, the FBI in the winter of 1965 began to institutionalize its surveillance programs. FBI informants and agents across the country followed the grape strike and developing boycott, methodically assembling information on the activities of supporters, sifting information from sources in Delano, and having them report on any development that appeared significant. The informants infiltrated every racial advancement group and Mexican-American organization from

the moderate League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the somewhat more assertive Mexican-American Political Association to Chicano activists and student radicals supporting Chávez on various university campuses. In this way field agents controlling the informants knew whenever MAPA discussed Chávez, who led the discussion, whether or not communists were present, what the results of the discussion were, and to what extent and in what way MAPA determined to assist the grape strikers. Organizing this body of information, field agents then collected and forwarded salient details not only to Cartha DeLoach's Crime Records Division, but also to William Sullivan's infamous Domestic Intelligence Division (Division Five). This operation supposedly enabled them to detect in advance any subversive or dangerous developments¹⁵

Early in 1966 there seemed little reason to continue watching developments at Delano. With the strike faltering, Walter Reuther and the UAW late in delivering promised financial support, informants reporting that Chávez had allegedly called Reuther a "four-flusher," union members in desperate need of food and supplies, the boycott hardly functioning, the NFWA only able to muster a picket line for a few hours when an NBC Television crew came up from Los Angeles, and absolutely no evidence of communist infiltration, FBI agents concluded that the union was about to collapse. But just as Hoover verged on terminating his spying, something happened which not only forced him to continue his intelligence gathering operation, but in addition led him to make it permanent. An informant from within the NFWA told the FBI that Chávez was planning a mass march to be called *La Peregrinación* (The Journey). Designed to recruit more union members and spread the strike, and modeled on the civil rights marches of the past few years, it would take hundreds of farmworkers and their supporters 250 miles north from Delano through various San Joaquin Valley farm towns to Sacramento. Dozens of "questionable" organizations would participate, along with the Communist Party, labor unions and peace groups, even a contingent of SDS members from Chicago. Each night they would stay in a different farm town. Each day they would march along the backroads. At the end of the march on Easter morning they would gather with thousands of supporters on the steps of the state capitol for a huge rally and open air mass.¹⁶

It was almost too much for J. Edgar Hoover. And then it got worse. Compounding Hoover's dismay was a considerable amount



La Peregrinación, march on Sacramento, near Stockton, late March 1966. FBI agents compiled daily reports on the march as it moved 250 miles north from Delano to Sacramento. Photograph courtesy George Ballis.

of misinformation to the effect that the march was being sponsored by CORE, and that the Easter rally date had been chosen so that CORE and SNCC people could participate more fully. Another factor influencing Hoover was his discovery that Governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown was opposed to the march, which he believed might hurt his reelection chances, and that for this reason he had been pressuring Robert Kennedy to cancel his plans to participate in Senator Harrison Williams' Senate Sub-Committee on Migratory Labor hearings at Delano High School March 10-16. A sworn enemy of Kennedy since the days when Kennedy had been attorney general, and a devoted opponent of Martin Luther King and anyone purporting to be a civil rights activist, Hoover now

had a bundle of reasons not only for continuing his surveillance but also for becoming even more attentive to Chávez. Hoping to somehow sidetrack or embarrass Kennedy, he began feeding California U. S. Senator George Murphy information to use while questioning Chávez during the Senate Sub-Committee's hearings. More importantly, Hoover dramatically increased his intelligence gathering. Assigning "all pertinent informants and sources to continue to follow and report any developments . . .," Hoover deployed substantial resources to monitoring the farmworkers' march to Sacramento.¹⁷

Hoover possibly knew more about the marchers' agenda than either the press or the NFWA. From the very first day, he received reports from a source apparently traveling with the marchers. Condensed and forwarded through the Los Angeles FBI office, the first dispatch read:

MARCH GROUP AT NFWA HEADQUARTERS, DELANO, CALIFORNIA, AND AT ABOUT NINE AM CONFERRED WITH POLICE OFFICIALS ABOUT SUDDEN CHANGE IN MARCH ROUTE THROUGH CITY OF DELANO. THIS CAUSED DELAY SINCE ORIGINAL PLAN WAS TO GO NORTH OF DOWN-

TOWN AREA. MARCH BEGAN AT ABOUT TEN THIRTY AM, PROCEEDED THROUGH HEART OF DOWNTOWN DELANO, AND GROUP NOW IN TULARE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA HEADED FOR DUCOR, CALIFORNIA. DELAY WAS ALSO RESULT OF GROUP NOT FILING FOR CITY PARADE PERMIT MARCH GROUP BEGAN WITH ABOUT ONE HUNDRED PERSONS, ABOUT SEVENTY FIVE PERCENT MEXICAN-AMERICANS OR FILIPINOS, AND REMAINDER ANGLO AMERICANS EXCEPT FOR TWO OR THREE NEGROES. GROUP CARRIED NFWA FLAGS AND 'HUELGA' SIGNS, SANG AND SHOUTED 'HUELGA,' BUT WERE PEACEFU. NO ARRESTS OR INCIDENTS HAVE OCCURRED . . . AFFAIR WAS GIVEN PUBLICITY BY ALL NEWS AND WILL PROBABLY RECEIVE NATIONWIDE ATTENTION. CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY PATROL, FRESNO AND MERCED COUNTY SO'S AND LOCAL PD'S ALONG THE LINE OF MARCH ALERTED.¹⁸

Leaving Delano on March 17, the day after the Senate Subcommittee concluded its hearings, the marchers kept to the backroads. As they walked and camped along the way, a massive flow of FBI teletypes between field offices and headquarters described their every move. Informants provided details on logistics, such as the necessity for and lack of portable toilets, and how many were needed, the march routine, including starting and stopping times, nightly briefings for march captains, candlelight parades through each town followed by a rally and barbecue, and the locations of rest stops in town parks. Although a lack of housing and food in Chowchilla forced many people on March 27 to change plans and travel to Merced and spend the night, and police officials refused to allow marchers to camp in the Merced park the following day, few incidents occurred along the way. Consequently informants contented themselves with tabulating the numbers of marchers, identifying new groups which joined, and describing details right down to the call number of the two-way radio in the accompanying NFWA command car.¹⁹

As they monitored *La Peregrinación*, FBI agents also kept track of related activities, particularly the growing confrontation between union supporters and Governor Brown. Concerned about what union supporters would do after Brown refused to march with them or meet them on the steps of the capitol, FBI agents lurked in the crowd as NFWA members conducted a protest march in Palm Springs, where Brown was vacationing with Frank Sinatra. They were also present when *La Peregrinación* concluded on the steps of the state capitol. Monitoring behavior and correctly estimating that about 7,000 people had gathered for the Easter Day celebration, they had strangely failed to mention that Chávez, suffering from

painful blisters, running a temperature, and unable to walk, had left the march. Apparently able to slip away undetected, he traveled to Beverly Hills on April 6 and surprised the FBI by signing a contract with Schenley Corporation representative Sidney Korask. It was the opening wedge in his organizing drive and it so angered one Schenley official that five days later he wrote to Hoover stating that he had no hand in nor knowledge of how the agreement was concluded.²⁰

Back in Los Angeles, field agents continued to monitor Chávez as he directed his attention to the largest grower in the Delano area, the DiGiorgio Corporation, a family-owned company with extensive farming operations in California and Florida. Observing Chávez sending out thousands of pamphlets and letters to universities all over the U.S. in an attempt to recruit 2,000 students, teachers, professors, and other volunteers to come to Delano for mass picketing and boycott work during the summer of 1966, FBI agents could not resist quoting an informant's prediction that Chávez would be lucky to get 200. During July and August, when Chávez was arrested, tried, and convicted along with several other organizers and farmworkers for trespassing on DiGiorgio property near Borrego Springs in southern California, FBI officials concluded that this had been a "substitute for Chávez's failure in organizing . . ." Confident that they now knew Chávez well, they again concluded he was verging on collapse. Having found no evidence of communist infiltration or sympathies, they now recommended closing the COMINFIL operation. But once again just as agents were about to wrap up their investigation, something happened which caused them to broaden and deepen their probe, and continue it indefinitely.²¹

On September 13, as was her custom, Mildred Stegall, a special assistant to President Lyndon B. Johnson who served as the designated White House recipient of FBI reports, wrote to Cartha DeLoach requesting a "Full Field Investigation" of Chávez, who was supposedly being considered for a staff position. Such requests were routine matters in the Johnson administration, which so often sent the FBI's people into their files that Stegall, also known as "the sphinx" because of her quiet, shadow-figure role as keeper of "special files," thought the administration misused the arrangement. Two weeks later, when the *Washington Post* broke the story, United Farm Worker Union legal staff, as well as journalists and other concerned individuals, learned of the background check, which seemed

little more than a pretext to pursue an FBI inquiry. Trying to deflect the mounting wave of criticism, one administration official said Chávez's name had only come up as one of several prominent Mexican-Americans who were being evaluated, but that no presidential appointment was eminent. Joining the debate, an AFL-CIO official put a different spin on the matter by suggesting the story was being spread by the Teamsters Union, no friend of Chávez, as part of a campaign to discredit him. But these efforts hardly satisfied agribusinessmen and their allies.²²

Incensed by the fact that Chávez would even be considered for a White House position, David Fairbairn, chairman of the Kern County Board of Supervisors, sent a scathing telegram to Senators Thomas H. Kuchel and George Murphy, as well as several leading congressmen and the Council of California Growers. Along these lines, the *Delano Record*, in an editorial entitled "A Cruel Hoax," wrote:

The reports that César Chávez is being considered for appointment to a high federal post have been widely interpreted as a bid for the political favor of the Mexican-American community of California and the Southwest . . . Apart from Chávez's obvious lack of qualifications for such an appointment, it is this fact that is most disturbing in the shocking news that Mr. Chávez has been earmarked by President Johnson for a job in the Federal Government. Mr. Johnson obviously is the victim of bad information by his advisors. We agree with David Fairbairn . . . that this proposed appointment is an absurdity, but we go further. We submit this is a cynical and cruel hoax that in the long run can only undermine and make a mockery of the legitimate aspirations of our citizens of Mexican ancestry for the recognition by officialdom to which they are entitled . . . In the interests of good government, in the interests of citizens' confidence in their government and its leaders, this appointment must be stopped. Lyndon Johnson cannot build a Great Society by introducing the New Left into the foundations of the structure. If Mr. Chávez wants a federal job he must first renounce the New Left allies to whom his movement owes so much . . .²³

As criticism mounted, Chávez himself entered the fray. While the FBI was interviewing National Farm Worker Association officials at his Delano headquarters, he personally spoke with one of the agents. The FBI teletype on the contact reads: "CHAVEZ . . . ADVISED HE DID NOT KNOW OF ANY TENTATIVE APPOINTMENT AND WOULD

NOT ACCEPT ONE IF IT TOOK HIM AWAY FROM HIS PRESENT WORK AS HE IS DEDICATED TO WHAT HE IS DOING IN THE FIELD OF FARM LABOR ORGANIZATION. HE CONTINUED HE DID NOT INTEND TO LEAVE HIS WORK IN DELANO TO ACCEPT ANY APPOINTMENT OR ANY TYPE OF WORK OUTSIDE THE DELANO AREA." A strong indication of Chávez's thinking and the depth of his commitment to the farmworker cause, the statement effectively ended any possibility of working in the White House, if indeed that had been a real possibility. On the basis of his declaration the Los Angeles SAC (Special Agent in Charge) contacted Hoover and suggested that the FBI terminate the background investigation. At the same time the White House arrived at the same conclusion and Mrs. Stegall, telephoning the FBI on September 27, requested that the agency end its background check. Wasting no time, FBI Director Edgar Hoover the same day ordered all field offices to "hold the investigation in abeyance." By then, however, agents had compiled a 140-page so-called "Special Inquiry."²⁴

FBI personnel who compiled Chávez's White House staff position background check violated no laws and did not operate in secret. Conducting their work in the open and according to established procedures set forth in the *FBI Manual*, they fully informed people why they were questioning them, completely recorded their opinions, abstained from editorial comment, contacted everyone who seemed worthy of interviewing, and accurately characterized their opinions. For example, it was not unusual for agents to ask Chávez's neighbors, What kind of automobile does he drive? Any evidence that he might be living beyond his means? Ever see him lose his temper? Strike someone? Drink too much liquor? Who does he associate with? What did he read? And confidentially—just between the two of us and off the record—was there anything that suggested that he might not like America, that he had a chip on his shoulder, or a score to settle? It was all fairly standard.

Scholars seeking biographical material on Chávez will find this file to be a unique and richly revealing source of information on Chávez's early family life, military service, residence, friends, associates, and career. There is also a record of his first arrest on January 24, 1944, when just out of service in the Navy, he was booked into the Bakersfield jail for investigation of assault with a deadly weapon. However, the file supplies no further details on this matter. Curiously the FBI found no record of Chávez's marriage in Las Vegas to his wife Helena Sabela, despite searching the Las Vegas Marriage

License Bureau for the years 1947, 1948, and 1949. Besides this information, the background check contains interviews with dozens of neighbors, union members, Mexican-Americans, Anglos, police officers, government officials (including U.S. Representative Harlan Hagen), friends, enemies, citizens of Delano, and others who knew or had contact with Chávez as far back as the mid-1950s. This part of the background check is full of candid assessments, praise, and criticism of his personality, abilities, faults, associates, and is based on a wide sampling of often insightful comments. There is also a wealth of detail provided by people who knew Chávez when he worked for the Community Service Organization (CSO) in San Jose, Oxnard, and Los Angeles, and who had contact with him during the early days of the Delano grape strike.²⁵

Seldom reticent, the people interviewed by the FBI all agree that long before he became a farm labor leader Chávez displayed certain characteristics commonly identified with mass leaders. Those who worked with him in the CSO during the late 1950s supplied the most detailed descriptions. They repeat the same words and phrases. Chávez was "tireless" and "normally works 18 hours a day." He was patient and thorough, impressed one man as the "best organizer he had ever known," and another as someone who was "very dedicated to the migrant worker." People from outside the circle of activists, who also celebrated Chávez, described him as a "family man" who was "sincere," "honest," and "diligent." As to questions about Chávez's relationship to any possible subversive organizations, most people thought the notion ridiculous. In a common response, one man described Chávez as a "loyal American" who "detests communists, fascists, and extremist groups."²⁶

Not everyone praised César. As he did later in life, Chávez prompted strong reactions among people even at this early stage in his career. One Mexican-American who knew him in the Oxnard *barrio*, when Chávez ran a citizenship program, characterized him as a "sloppy" man, always dressed in turtle neck sweater and slacks, who urged Mexican-Americans to obtain citizenship for personal gain, such as Social Security benefits, not out of patriotic reasons or any love of country. Doubting Chávez's loyalty, he labeled him an "agitator" and "trouble maker." Echoing these sentiments, another who knew Chávez in Delano questioned his sincerity in helping farmworkers and believed he was "out for personal gain." Many asserted that Chávez was largely controlled by a surrounding group

of "left-wingers." In particular, they were suspicious of two individuals, Luis Valdez, a Chicano activist and founder of *El Teatro Campesino* (The Farmworker Theater Troupe), who one man described as an anti-Anglo revolutionary, and Alexander P. Hoffman, an attorney from San Francisco, who several critics identified as "the legal mind" behind the NFWA and an evil influence on Chávez. Several critics also mentioned suspicious incidents. One Mexican-American woman resident of Delano recalled a gang fight about April 1965 involving the son of Richard Chávez, César's brother, at Delano High School. According to this woman, Chávez and his brother behaved irresponsibly. Rather than assuming their responsibility and disciplining their children, they along with NFWA officials Dolores Huerta and Gilbert Padilla tried to exploit the situation and attack the school and police department. Their efforts to picket the school and police gained little public support and ever since the woman and many others had remained suspicious and "unhappy with the mess that César Chávez has created in Delano."²⁷

Ever alert for material to use against someone, Hoover employed this body of information to raise additional questions about Chávez and thereby maintain surveillance. But soon he would find other reasons to continue spying. One key justification originated in Chávez's decision late in the spring of 1966 to begin organizing outside of California, particularly in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, where melon pickers affiliated with the Independent Workers Association were considering a merger with Chávez's union. Arrested during a confrontation with Texas Rangers shortly after arriving to conduct discussions, NFWA organizer Eugene Nelson immediately became the subject of a background check by the San Antonio FBI. As usual, the check produced nothing suspicious on Nelson, Gilbert Padilla, and two other NFWA activists. But as so often happened, it started something not easily stopped.²⁸

When Nelson told the San Antonio *News* that he would oppose affiliation with the NFWA "until those guys in California clear their names of this communism," an FBI agent clipped the article and forwarded it to Hoover. Even though Nelson went on to say "I'm not a communist and don't know of any here . . .," his statement that "If there are communists in the Rio Grande Valley it is because there are conditions here that are conducive to their activity" was deemed suspicious and worthy of further attention. On these grounds Hoover asked to be kept advised of all developments. Faithfully fol-

lowing his orders, Texas FBI agents immediately infiltrated the union. Sending back daily reports that in July during the 450-mile march from Rio Grande City to Austin, they would shadow the NFWA's organizing activities, clip newspaper articles, identify people and organizations contributing large sums of money, attend rallies, report on Chávez's arrival and departure, document Huerta's activities, follow various strikes, scrutinize the involvement of the NAACP, identify other civil rights groups assisting the NFWA, and analyze the role of the Catholic Church, on and off, for the next eight years. So thoroughly would FBI informants monitor activities that on October 23, 1966 when Nelson and a group of union members were arrested at 5:15 in the morning for blocking the International Bridge spanning the Rio Grande River between Roma, Texas, and Ciudad Miguel Aleman, Mexico in a protest against Mexican nationals serving as strikebreakers, among those arrested was at least one FBI informant.²⁹

As they were keeping track of organizing activities in Texas, FBI agents also began watching NFWA boycott operations in various cities around the country. Although they appear to have initiated surveillance outside of California as early as May 1966, the first clear sign of this expanded surveillance did not surface until May 23, 1967, when FBI agents arrived to observe a demonstration by 60 pickets outside the S & W Food Co. warehouse in Chicago. As the initial phase of NFWA's boycott campaign, the effort naturally attracted considerable attention because the union was targeting DiGiorgio Corporation, S & W Foods, and other large companies. Over the next seven months—while the union built up its Midwest boycott apparatus, launched actions against Kroger Food Co., Jewel Tea Co., and various other large supermarkets, broadened the base of its support, obtained backing from SDS, CORE, the American Friends Service Committee, striking Public Aid workers, and various religious groups—FBI agents identified key leaders, located boycott headquarters, collected literature, alerted one another as to when Chávez was in town, and related everything to the local offices of the Secret Service and Military Intelligence. When picketing grew larger and more aggressive toward the end of the year, FBI agents conducted background checks on several boycott leaders. Except for one individual who had a record for inciting people on the West side of Chicago, the checks turned up nothing subversive or worth further investigation. But that did not end the surveillance.³⁰

Whenever the union set up boycott offices, FBI agents immediately began watching them. By fall of 1968 they were observing boycott activities not only in Chicago, but also in Washington, D.C., New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Georgia, Texas, Florida, and a half-dozen other states. Although picketing did not always trigger surveillance, the mere hint of a civil rights march involving blacks and anti-war groups sent FBI agents scrambling into action. Thus when a "reliable source" reported that boycott leader Albert Rojas had obtained a permit for a march to begin at Herron and Center Streets in Pittsburg on November 23 "IN THE NEGRO HILL DISTRICT OF PITTSBURGH" and proceed along Grant Street and Liberty Avenue ending near an area known as "The Point," the Pittsburg FBI fully mobilized as if expecting a race riot. "ROJAS HAS BEEN IN PITTSBURGH FOR SOMETIME . . . INDICATING CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE WOULD OCCUR DURING THE MARCH," advised one agent. But as usual, nothing of the kind happened. Only about 128 people, blacks and whites, walked three times around the Hendel Fruit Market at Forbes Avenue and Market Street protesting the sale of California grapes. Nevertheless, FBI agents listed out the speakers, including those from SDS and NAACP, and described in detail how during the demonstration Rojas had distributed to each marcher one envelope and a grape, then asked participants to mash the grape and mail it to president elect Richard Nixon, c/o The Pierre Hotel, New York City.³¹

Meanwhile, back in California, the FBI had been on a high state of alert since learning that Chávez had applied for a permit to parade through Delano on March 25, 1968. But while agents had led Hoover to believe this might be something on the order of previous mass marches and therefore pounced on it with a special fervor, the march turned out to be only a relatively minor parade involving a few hundred people. Despite his obvious overreaction, Hoover did not back off. Determined to uncover subversive activities, detect any security threats, and protect government property and officials, Hoover remained ever alert. His attentiveness paid off when a confidential informant reported that the union planned to picket and protest a speech that Attorney General Ramsey Clark would make at the San Francisco Hilton Hotel to about 2,500 delegates to the National Conference of Social Workers on May 29, 1968. According to the informant, this was designed to draw attention to the Agriculture Department's recent "anti-union" decisions allowing Mexican laborers issued green cards to work on several California farms involved

in labor disputes, despite regulations prohibiting such strike-breaking. Following the matter and pertinent developments, Hoover's men watched the union prepare for the protest, and as usual alerted the Secret Service and appropriate intelligence agencies, as well as Ramsey Clark. Checking out the union organizers involved in the protest, FBI agents came up with nothing, but took no chances. Meeting Clark at the airport, they escorted him to the Hilton Hotel without incident.³²

Outside the hotel, FBI agents counted 367 pickets encircling the Hilton and blocking every entrance. Carrying signs stating "Stop Drafting Strike Breakers," "U. S. Department of Injustice," and "Support Delano [Calif.] Farm Workers," the pickets chanted "Don't Buy Grapes." Orderly and well-dressed, they obeyed the police until about 9:15 p.m., when Clark began his speech on "legal rights for all." At that point FBI agents observed a group led by one picket captain force its way into the Hilton's Continental Ballroom and with the aid of a bullhorn interrupt Clark's speech. FBI and Secret Service agents immediately converged on the pickets and moved to protect Clark. But they did not arrest the picket captain nor silence him. Rather they allowed him to recite a pledge not to buy grapes. According to press reports on the incident, the majority of the audience resented the interruption, booed and hissed, and refused to participate in the pledge. Nevertheless, the action succeeded in disrupting the meeting and prevented Clark from finishing his speech. Returning to San Francisco International Airport at 10:30 p.m., he left for Washington, D. C. Despite the interruptions and civil disobedience, the FBI considered the matter closed and did not pursue any further surveillance of other boycott leaders.³³

A week after the Clark incident, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, and the FBI suddenly became concerned with Chávez's safety, and the safety of other union leaders as well. These fears grew stronger three weeks later, when Chávez received an anonymous threatening letter. Written in very poor Spanish, postmarked at San Jose on June 27, at Gilroy on June 28, and delivered to union headquarters on June 30, it was full of obscenities and threats. Bearing the obviously fictitious name of Tirso P. Mellosa, the letter read:

Mr. César Chávez: Little leader of fuck-offs who do not want to work or let other people work. I believe that very soon you will pass on to a better life. Why do you want better wages and better housing if very soon you will be fucking your little brother? This

is what you are looking for, and you will get it very soon, you billy-goat. Kenedi was foolish to give you 50 thousand dollars. You got to living as a rich man late and so you became the redeemer of the poor where there are not any because every man who works here in the fields earns from 15 to 20 dollars, which is enough and even more than enough, with something left over to go bugger old women. Thus, let us see which one of us—there is a hundred—will get to put an end to that association of little fuck-offs. This is to hope that we are allotted the more plump ones! See how you like grenades or mortars because the machine gun makes too much noise and you may pass on to your better life . . . scared.³⁴

Notified of the letter, the Delano postmaster asked the union to translate it, and after reading the translation, became alarmed and called in the FBI. Dispatched to Delano, agents from the Sacramento FBI interviewed everyone who had seen the letter. After quickly establishing the chain of custody in which Tony Oredain, office manager of the union's Delano headquarters, had first opened the letter, then showed it to Bill Whitman, union controller, and on the same day returned it to the Delano postmaster, agents took finger prints, and sent the letter to the FBI laboratory for further analysis. Although agents discovered latent prints that were not those left behind by union officials and postal personnel, they could not match them with any suspects. When the FBI finally wrapped up the case, many union members went away grumbling to themselves that the letter was highly suspicious. Some openly suggested that it was nothing more than a cynical FBI attempt to egg on a feud among farmworkers and create the appearance of a concern for protecting farmworkers when in fact the opposite was true.³⁵

As the FBI exerted this new presence, both the farmworker community and civil rights activists adopted a cynical wait-and-see attitude. The reason for the skepticism was clear. Up to this point FBI agents had never intervened to prevent violence or protect farmworkers. By the union's estimate that summer there had been dozens of attacks on union picketers. This in fact was emerging as a major issue in the grape strike. In particular Chávez cited the case of union picket Manuel Rivera, who had allegedly been beaten by a foreman on August 13, 1968. Chávez claimed that the Delano Police Department, District Attorney, and Tulare County Sheriff's Department refused to investigate the beating, and asserted that this was typical of biased law

enforcement. For these reasons, he telegraphed Attorney General Ramsey Clark demanding an investigation by the Justice Department, a protective force of Federal marshals, and intervention by the FBI. He also demanded that Congressman John Dent (D-Penn.) address the matter during hearings before his House Education and Labor Committee hearings at Delano High School on August 15. To emphasize this point, he set up a picket line of 200 protestors outside the Delano police station, remaining there until ordered to leave under threat of arrest. Unknown to Chávez, all of this was immediately reported to the FBI by the chief of police, and by several informants present on the picket line. So thoroughly had the FBI infiltrated the union that it knew what was happening down to the specific obscenities and exact dialog exchanged between pickets and police.³⁶

Meanwhile, a series of anonymous death threats telephoned to the Delano union office led FBI agents to fear that an assassination plot might be developing. This seemed to be confirmed in mid-September, when Chávez entered O'Conner Hospital in San Jose for treatment of back pain, and the hospital reported receiving a telephone call at 2:00 in the morning requesting Chávez's room number. As Chávez's physician began shuffling him between rooms so that no one could learn of his whereabouts, the FBI redoubled its investigation, and in October identified a suspect and interviewed him. But that did not end the threats. "Crank calls are received . . . almost on a daily basis from unknown individuals," reported a San Francisco FBI agent in an October 30 memorandum. There was no way to stop them without conducting telephone taps, a tactic the union adamantly opposed. Despite these obstacles, agents followed leads until January 20, 1969, when the U. S. Attorney concluded nothing more could be done and terminated the investigation.³⁷

While field agents finished their investigation into threats against Chávez, Hoover became concerned with other union activities. As usual, Hoover's men kept track of any large demonstration. Soon they grew alarmed upon learning that the union had chosen Washington, D. C. as the location for its "Fourth Anniversary Pilgrimage." Through further intelligence reports, Hoover discovered far in advance of public announcements that more than 5,000 people would march across the Potomac River Bridge, assemble for a commemorative program at Sylvan Theatre, and proceed from there down Independence Avenue to Tenth Street, concluding their activi-

ties at L'Enfant Plaza. Fearing that the event might grow into another March on Washington, he thoroughly probed the event, discovering its sponsors, and even identifying government officials including representatives from the U.S. Congress who would participate. When the march began, FBI agents were among the 200 to 300 people at the Sylvan Theatre. As usual, they noted who was present and described in great detail how the crowd departed at 3:30, walked "in an orderly fashion" to L'Enfant Plaza, and dispersed about 4:45 p.m. after several short prayers. Their teletype to Hoover, also disseminated to the Secret Service and various FBI field offices, read: "NO INCIDENTS OCCURRED AND NO ARRESTS WERE MADE . . . WASHINGTON FIELD OFFICE INFORMANTS AND SOURCES, FAMILIAR WITH VARIOUS PHASES OF SUBVERSIVE AND RELATED ACTIVITY IN THE WDC AREA, WHEN CONTACTED DURING SEPTEMBER . . . WERE UNABLE TO FURNISH ANY INFORMATION PERTAINING TO THE POSSIBLE SUBVERTING OF THE LEGITIMATE PURPOSES OF THIS DEMONSTRATION . . ."38

Failing to uncover anything sinister in the Washington, D.C. march, Hoover did not abandon his surveillance. On January 25, 1969, FBI agents observed 300 Chávez supporters, most of them high school students and activists affiliated with a Democratic Party coalition from Long Island, holding a demonstration along Fifty Second Avenue in New York City. Protesting the Defense Department's increased purchase of table grapes, they were the opening salvo in Chávez's campaign to expand the grape boycott and link it with the movement against the Vietnam war. Realizing that Chávez was accusing the Nixon administration of attempting to offset the boycott and incensed at the appearance of union protestors outside the entrance to the Pentagon, Hoover now took the familiar position that there was a close connection between the anti-war and civil rights movements, that communist subversion lay at the heart of the problem, and that Chávez, in one way or another, was fomenting subversion and disloyalty.³⁹

Directing his agents to closely follow picketing activity outside military bases and government offices, as well as protests against high government officials, Hoover's men cooperated with the Secret Service and other intelligence agencies, identifying anyone from SDS, clipped articles from alternative newspapers, collected pamphlets, and filed dozens of reports. They had plenty to do. Over the next six months the union accused grape growers of excessively using pesticides, began picketing the Washington, D. C. govern-

ment offices of the Food and Drug Administration, and labeled Dow Chemical an oppressor of the American consumer and Third World peoples. Viewing these claims as nothing less than a direct attack on the government itself, and on the very people and institutions which made it great, Hoover now intensified his surveillance of Chávez and his boycott activities.⁴⁰

FBI agents tailed Chávez so closely during 1970 that they knew where he was having breakfast and who he was staying with while visiting Cincinnati to inaugurate a campaign against Kroger Food Company. Over the next two years agents pursued him into Mexico when he visited a Mexican communist who was running a union-financed health clinic, kept tabs on him when he was arrested in Salinas, California for violating an injunction against boycotting Bud Antle Inc. lettuce, and compiled a large file of clippings describing Mrs. Ethel Kennedy's visit to him in jail. Once again, Hoover's men found nothing alarming. Except for a few arrests for trespassing and blocking access to stores and some detention while protesting Defense Department purchases of lettuce outside major military bases, Hoover's agents witnessed no violence. Reporting on hundreds of actions, they invariably described them as well-organized, full of "hippie types," and "EXTREMELY ORDERLY."⁴¹

But at least one FBI operation centered on a matter that was neither orderly nor non-violent. This was the bizarre case of Larry Shears, a 32-year-old arsonist, small-time criminal, sometime mechanic, and undercover informant for the Kern County Sheriff's Department and California State Bureau of Narcotics. Interviewed on a Bakersfield television station news special and then in a series of news conferences between December 1971 and January 1972, Shears unraveled an incredible story. Hoping to earn a \$500 bounty that summer, he had supposedly been setting-up for arrest a 26-year-old narcotics-dealer, Richard Pedigo, when during the course of this work, Pedigo offered Shears a contract to torch a slide concession at an amusement park. Although Shears claimed to have declined the offer, the park slide later burned down, the park operator collected a large insurance payment, and Pedigo soon allegedly offered Shears another arson deal. For \$5,000 he was to steal certain records from Chávez's office in Delano, deliver them into the possession of the amusement park owner, then burn the union office. In addition, he was to hire someone to make a "hit" on Chávez. Toward that end he claimed to have received detailed diagrams of Chávez's office.⁴²

Claiming to have cooperated with authorities until his cover had been blown, Shears explained that he then contacted the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF), hired on as an informant, wore a wire, engaged one of the plotters in a conversation about the plot to kill Chávez, and secretly tape-recorded everything. As a result of this information, BATF agents arrested several of the conspirators, thereby saving Chávez's life. For these services BATF supposedly agreed to pay Shears \$10,000. But when he asked for his money, BATF refused to pay him what he had been promised. Furthermore, BATF refused to take action against the grower who financed the operation, as well as several key conspirators. Angry at the turn of events and at what he regarded as a double-cross, fearing for his life, hoping to get the money he believed he had earned, and intending at worst to embarrass BATF, Shears resorted to his only course of action. He went public.⁴³

To the press and to the local police it all seemed incredible. Chávez himself did not believe the story. However, those responsible for his safety were not so dismissive. Death plots hardly seemed so far-fetched to farmworkers who had experienced violence first hand on the picket lines, and who knew the depth of hatred growers felt toward Chávez. Worried about his safety, union leaders insisted that he leave headquarters at La Paz. For a month after the story broke, Chávez remained incommunicado. Wandering from one safe house to another surrounded with bodyguards, his whereabouts were kept a closely guarded secret. This was to have a profound effect on him, even years later, when he could not go anywhere alone. For some in the union it seemed to mark the beginning of a long period of isolation from the public and led Chávez into some strange alliances, for example with Synanon, the well-regarded drug therapy cult which for a time furnished him with a blue van full of ever-present bodyguards.⁴⁴

While Chávez hid out, union officials devised a plan to get to the bottom of the case. Enlisting the support of the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) General Counsel Stephen Schlossberg, farmworker lawyer Jerry Cohen, together with other UAW officials and Larry Shears, all appeared at the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department's Washington, D. C. headquarters at 4:00 on January 26, 1972. Arguing that local authorities in California were too closely tied to Delano farmers to conduct a fair and thorough investigation into the

United Farm Worker Union
mass rally in support of an
organizing drive in Salinas,
summer 1970. *Photograph*
courtesy Clay Peterson.



alleged plot on Chávez, they criticized BATF for mishandling the entire affair, withholding evidence, and letting murder suspects off the hook possibly to strike at Chávez at some time in the future. Shears himself claimed that he was now in danger and had recently discovered sticks of dynamite wired under the dashboard of his automobile. On these grounds, union leaders demanded that the Justice Department direct the FBI to launch an immediate inquiry. To bolster their case they obtained support from U. S. Senator Edward M. Kennedy. To further support their demand they offered a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the conspirators. Finally the union disclosed that it would furnish the FBI various documents in the possession of Shears, including 20 cassette tape recordings of conversations allegedly between Shears, BATF agents, local police, various alleged conspirators, and others involved in the plot.⁴⁵

The pressures on the FBI were enormous. Caught in the swirl of publicity, it had no choice but to act. In fact, largely unknown to the public, the FBI on July 31, 1971, had secretly warned union officials that agents had reason to believe someone was planning to assassinate Chávez. After sifting through the Shears file, agents remained even more certain that the plot was very real, that what Shears claimed was largely true, that BATF had failed to go after the masterminds behind the plot and not handled the matter competently. Advised of this, David Norman, Justice Department Attorney General in charge of the Civil Rights Division, interviewed Cohen,

obtained copies of the tape recorded telephone conversations and other documents, and proceeded with a criminal inquiry. Upon learning of this, Cohen then disclosed that the union had additional cassette tapes of interviews that freelance writer Jacques Levy conducted with Shears while in the process of analyzing the death plot. After reviewing the interviews and approximately 374 pages of other typed material, FBI agents remained even more convinced of the assassination plot. However, they were unable to find the kind of evidence required to arrest and prosecute the growers involved.⁴⁶

FBI agents continued to monitor death threats against Chávez throughout the summer. On September 5 an incident at the Phoenix *Arizona Republic* newspaper again spurred them into action. Four days earlier, in an article highly critical of Chávez, staff writer Ralph De Toledano quoted an anonymous individual as saying, "If we had killed him, then he wouldn't be taking the bread out of our mouths today." Concerned for Chávez's safety, a group of 25 union supporters led by spokesman Richard B. Cook stormed the newspaper offices demanding that the FBI question De Toledano and determine the identity of the person who made the threat. Declining on the grounds that such an interrogation violated protected communication and reporter's sources, the FBI nevertheless did not stand idly by. Besides redoubling its surveillance of Chávez, the Phoenix FBI office contacted all local authorities advising them to immediately forward any information concerning threats to harm Chávez. This heightened concern continued for two years, until in a last ditch effort to get to the bottom of the matter, the Justice Department offered Pedigo immunity from prosecution in exchange for the names of the growers who financed the assassination. But he declined, and the Justice Department dropped the case. Although Chávez would always believe that Hoover had rigged the investigation, the FBI in fact had simply gone by the book.⁴⁷

Much like its role in the Shears case, FBI surveillance of Chávez and the farmworkers movement outside of California during 1972 was hardly sinister. Much of it centered on developments in Arizona. At the root of the FBI's involvement was Chávez's struggle against a state law, passed by conservative Republicans, which attempted to prevent unionization by outlawing boycotts and granting growers a ten-day injunction against harvest strikes. To build opposition and mobilize farmworkers, Chávez attempted to recall

Governor Jack Williams. He also initiated a fast, going without food for twenty-four days, while living in a small room in Saint Rita's Center in the Mexican barrio in Phoenix. FBI agents monitored the entire campaign, from the first mass vigils outside the state capitol through the letter writing campaigns directed at state representatives. But once again, they detected nothing alarming. The recall campaign fell short by 108,000 signatures, and the loathsome law eventually passed. Throughout all of this, the worst that FBI agents could report was an incident in which farmworkers packing the gallery of the state senate had been asked to leave when they became loud and angry as the new law was being debated.⁴⁸

Outside of Arizona and California, the FBI kept tabs on Chávez while fulfilling one of its most important assignments—that of protecting members of the government, and in particular, the President and Vice President of the United States. This particular role grew out of Chávez's battle against a strange National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruling that threatened his boycott. That ruling, by an NLRB packed with recent Nixon appointees, held that farmworker strikes were illegal because Chávez was conducting a secondary boycott in violation of NLRB policy prohibiting such activity. Since farmworkers had always been excluded from the benefits of the NLRB and had resorted to the boycott for that very reason, the ruling seemed an obvious attempt by the Nixon administration to undermine farmworkers by removing their one point of leverage over California agriculture. Understandably angry, Chávez responded by launching a campaign to confront the Republican Party and Nixon administration anywhere and everywhere its representatives and candidates appeared. And so, whenever and wherever farmworkers protested—whether it was against a speech by Vice President Spiro T. Agnew or a meeting of Republican women—FBI agents shadowed the union, reporting everything to Hoover.⁴⁹

It is not exactly clear when the FBI stopped watching Chávez and the farmworkers movement, who ordered it to end, or why. The change probably began that fall, when FBI Director L. Patrick Gray initiated a general house cleaning operation following Hoover's death. During the summer of 1973 the change picked up further momentum when, as the result of massive arrests of farmworkers in Kern County and violent conflicts between Chávez's followers and Teamster Union thugs in the Coachella Valley, U. S. Congressman Don Edwards

joined Chávez and criticized the FBI for failing to protect civil rights and deploy adequate numbers of Spanish-speaking agents. Confronted with these charges, William L. Gardner, Deputy Chief, Criminal Section, Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, met Chávez in Kern County to discuss the situation. Although he refused to commit additional agents, the issue was not so easily dismissed. Soon thereafter Clarence Kelley, former police chief of Kansas City, replaced Gray as FBI Director and immediately reversed Gardner. Assigning several Spanish-speaking agents from the Sacramento FBI office, he put them to work handling the resulting Kern County civil rights cases. Although nothing much resulted from this move, it did signal at the very least that the FBI's relationship with Chávez had changed dramatically. For the first time in ten years, it had overcome its long ambivalence and apparent refusal to take sides in situations where right and wrong were easily seen. No longer would the FBI sit idly by, to all appearances allied through its neutrality with the enemies of farmworkers, while devoting its resources to searching for subversives and rooting out communists. From this point forward the FBI would investigate violence and pursue violations of federal civil rights laws.⁵⁰

Perhaps as part of wrapping up its work, cleaning house, and reorganizing, the FBI on July 2, 1974 prepared a 26-page document entitled "Correlation Summary: Subject: César Chávez." Indexing various "see" references in the FBI bulfiles, the document identified Chávez's contact with such groups as CORE, the Black Panthers, Brown Berets, prison rights advocates, and various subversive and suspicious individuals. Like the background check conducted for President Lyndon B. Johnson eight years earlier, this dossier is particularly valuable as an historical document referencing among other things, Chávez's travels, the nature of his speeches, and who he attempted to reach while developing support for his boycott.⁵¹

Following completion of the index, FBI agents submitted just two other reports on Chávez. Both dealt with his struggle against Gallo winery, largest winery in the world, which two years earlier had signed a "sweetheart" contract with the Teamsters Union. The first report, written February 28 by an agent present when Chávez led 15,000 people on a march to Gallo's Modesto headquarters, described details right down to activities at the farmworker's rally at Modesto National Guard Armory and songs sung by Joan Baez at a



Mass arrests in the vineyards, Arvin, California, August 1973. Violations of farmworker civil rights during the strike, coupled with FBI Director Hoover's death, caused the FBI to stop spying, send several Spanish speaking agents into the fields, and begin protecting the civil rights of farmworkers. *Photo courtesy of Bob Fitch.*

picnic in Graceland Park. The second and last report, written on August 10 when Chávez addressed 1,200 farmworkers at the Merced County Fairgrounds, details an incident that went unreported in the press. According to the agent:

Chávez spoke entirely in Spanish and the speech that he gave was reportedly the same one he had been giving during the course of a 1,000-mile walk through California. A Merced Police Department permit for this gathering was issued for the fairgrounds from 1:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. The band refused to stop playing at 7:00 p.m. and . . . Police Sergeant [deleted] declared the gathering . . . illegal after the 7:00 p.m. deadline and ordered the crowd to disperse. César Chávez mounted the fairground bandstand and ordered the band to continue playing. Chávez told Sergeant [deleted] that the gathering was a private party and the officers had no right to break it up. After Chávez ordered the band to continue, electrical connections for the musical instruments were discontinued and police reinforcements were called to the fairgrounds to disperse the crowd. During the time the crowd was being dispersed at the fairgrounds, police officers received notification that approximately 60 to 70 United

Farm Workers were gathering and demonstrating in the lobby of the Merced police department. During this time, a brick was thrown into a window at the Police Station and, in addition, a glass door was broken.⁵²

So ended J. Edgar Hoover's surveillance of Chávez, and his efforts to use the formidable resources of the FBI to pin a communist conspiracy on the farmworker movement. In the end, what did he accomplish? When the sweeping investigation finally whimpered to its conclusion, Hoover knew nothing more than what he understood almost from the beginning—that Chávez was not a communist, or even a radical, that California's farmworkers were loyal Americans, and that they were simply struggling for basic rights long denied them. Fully aware of these facts, Hoover nevertheless demonstrated an almost pathological commitment to the status quo. No champion of the powerless, he preferred the familiar business of dossier collecting to the difficult challenge of civil rights law enforcement.

Any examination of such conduct and its consequences necessarily raises questions of values and strategy that extend well beyond Hoover's stated reasons for what he did, eroding the national security justifications that purportedly underlay his behavior. Personal, bureaucratic, political, and ideological choices shaped FBI actions, misinformation distorted and perpetuated those actions, and racist values from the highest levels insured that they would remain unchanged. Regardless of occasional positive contributions individual FBI agents made to the farmworker struggle, or the few times when Hoover's men actually did something other than spy on Chávez, Hoover's perceptions, values, and vision always triumphed, giving rise to law enforcement policies which cannot be held legitimate or acceptable on legal, ethical, or moral grounds. Hardly reinforcing the official portrait of Hoover's G-men, as represented in Don Whitehead's *The FBI Story* and its authorized movie adaptation starring Jimmy Stewart, the FBI's relationship with California farmworkers was neither a "stirring American adventure" nor a "struggle to achieve incorruptible enforcement of the law by professionals trained to protect civil rights." To the contrary, the FBI's surveillance of César Chávez projects a disturbing story of a celebrated hero, J. Edgar Hoover, who upon close reflection turns out to be a villain, high government officials abrogating their responsibilities, a law enforcement agency wasting huge amounts of time, money, and

personnel, and a supposed subversive, César Chávez, who was far more inspiring and truer to American values and ideals than the man who dogged him for ten years.⁵³

NOTES

¹Memorandum, Milton A. Jones to Cartha DeLoach, October 8, 1965, *Declassified Federal Bureau of Investigation File* (hereafter *DFBIF*) 100-444762. The first request for information on Chávez and Havens was made by an unknown government official on June 3, 1965 to the Attorney General for "any information indicating communist or subversive affiliations on the part of Chávez . . ." and on David Ward Havens born 12-17-35 "a white male residing at 3706 Robin Lane, Visalia." The letter was referred to the FBI and a check "revealed no identifiable data on Chávez or Havens." A second query came in on September 19, 1965 from an FBI special agent, after Chávez had applied to establish a credit union. Neither resulted in a file. Alan Miller, "FBI Spied on César Chávez for Years, Files Reveal," *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 1995, inaccurately reports that the FBI first looked at Chávez on October 8, 1965. He also inaccurately reports that two informants contacted the Bureau.

²Quotes from Jones to DeLoach, October 8, 1965, *DFBIF* 100-444762. See also DeLoach to Jones, October 15, 1965; and Airtel, Jones to SAC, Los Angeles, October 8, 1965. *Ibid.* Under rules governing Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, the file was available only to César Chávez himself while he was alive and did not become accessible to scholars until after Chávez died on April 23, 1993. I made my request that evening and received the file on September 28, 1994.

³Miller, "FBI Spied," incorrectly claims the surveillance continued for seven years, inaccurately reports it concluded during the administration of President Richard M. Nixon, miscalculates the file size at 1,434-pages, inflates the number of agents into the hundreds, and claims on the basis of no evidence that the surveillance involved extensive public cost. Entirely predictable and deleting several key episodes, limited by constraints of space, excessively condensed, and written for a popular audience, Miller's account is full of minor errors of fact, and contains at least one mistake that would be comic if it were not so silly. For these and other reasons, the story of the FBI's investigation of César Chávez is too important to be left to superficial journalistic treatment. Additional FBI, CIA, and military intelligence documents are described in Magda Ortiz to Richard Steven Street, June 15, 1994; J. Kevin O'Brien to Street, April 14, 1995; and Margaret Ann Irving to Street, August 23, 1995, author's possession.

⁴Tim Chávez, "Let Us Praise César Chávez and What He Stood For," *Utica Observer-Dispatch*, June 8, 1995.

⁵For Hoover see Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* (New York, 1992), pp. 63-74. A somewhat laudatory account is Ralph de Toledano, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man in His Time* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1973), p. 40. Max Lowenthal, *The Federal Bureau of Investigation* (New York, 1950), pp. 43-45, is more critical. For Hoover and civil rights see David Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "SOLO" to Memphis* (New York, 1981), pp. 54-55, 127, 133-134, 271; Paul Kimball, "The History of *The Nation* According to the F.B.I.," in *Looking at the United States* (New York, 1986), pp. 399-426; Nelson Blackstock, *Cointelpro: The FBI's Secret War on Political Freedom* (New York, 1975), pp. 3-26; and Kenneth O'Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America 1960-1972* (New York, 1989), pp. 9, 355-359. For FBI surveillance of the farmworker movement between 1919 and 1965, see the declassified FBI, Central Intelligence Agency, and Military Intelligence files on Carolyn Decker Gladstone, Dorothea Ray, Pat Chambers [Williams], Upton Sinclair, Carey McWilliams, A. L. Wirin, Leo Gallagher, John Steinbeck, Associated Farmers, Paul S. Taylor, Dorothea Lange, Norman Krainock, and Ernesto Galarza. I obtained these between 1977 and 1994. Evidence of Hoover's early involvement in Anti-Radical Division operations is implied in Homer Cummings and Carl McFarland, *Federal Justice: Chapters in the History of Justice and the Federal Executive* (New York, 1937), p. 429, which cites an "in house" history of the FBI suppressed by Hoover.

⁶Besides Jones, DeLoach, and Hoover those in the FBI following Chávez at this time included Assistant Director Clyde Tolson, Domestic Intelligence Director William Sullivan, and Special Agent Alan Belmont.

⁷Quotes from Director to SAC, Los Angeles, October 11, 1965; DeLoach to Jones, "Communist Infiltration of the National Farm Workers Association, Delano, California, Internal Security - C," October 15, 1965; and Hoover to SAC, Los Angeles, October 18, 1965, *DFBIF* 100-444762. Besides discovering Richards' home address at 14 Flood Circle, Atherton, California, the FBI noted that he drove a 1965 Oldsmobile station wagon, California license S75763. For later concerns with Richards see A. Jones to Robert Wick, March 11, 1966. One informant supplying information on Richards was apparently close to Chávez, as he "asked" Chávez about the photographer and was "told" he was a freelance photographer. The front page of *People's World*, October 2, 1965 carried the *Huelga* photograph, as did *El Malcriado*, Number 21 [no date]. Paul Richards, *The Harvey Richards Film & Video Collection* (Oakland, 1991), p. 11, dates the photograph September 24, 1965. See also Paul Richards, *Critical Focus: The Black and White Photographs of Harvey Wilson Richards* (Oakland, 1987); and interview with Harvey Richards, Atherton, March 15, 1979, author's possession.

⁸DeLoach to Jones, "Communist Infiltration . . .," October 15, 1965, 2, *DFBIF* 100-444762.

⁹Quotes from SAC, Los Angeles FBI, October 20, 1965, "Communist Infiltration . . .," 3, *DFBIF* 100-444762.

¹⁰Urgent teletype, Los Angeles SAC to Director, October 22, 1965, *DFBIF*, 100-444762. For the practice of sending out names of arrested strikers and union members see SAC, Cincinnati to Director, November 2, 1965 [listing people arrested on October 19]; and Airtel, SAC Los Angeles to Director, October 25, 1965. See also Airtel, SAC, Los Angeles to Director, October 20, 1965. From this point on the U.S. Army Military Intelligence Division, Region II, Bakersfield, was kept continually advised of the entire strike situation. I have not yet been able to obtain the Army Military Intelligence files.

¹¹There are references to sources and clues to their identities throughout the Chávez file. Queried by the FBI, California Congressman Harlan Hague advised that the individual who had an extensive file on Chávez was James Woolsey, vice president, Schenley Industries, San Francisco. Woolsey may have been the individual who first contacted the FBI regarding Chávez. See memo, James H. Dillon, September 27, 1966, Washington, D. C., *DFBIF* 161-4719. Typical of the FBI's sources within the NFWA, one confidential informant advised that "he personally asked Donna Sue Haber, Office Secretary for the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA)" various questions. See Memorandum, "Proposed March . . .," March 14, 1966, *DFBIF* 100-444762. The file is full of many such references citing conversations with Chávez and other NFWA officials. For more information on four of the FBI's "reliable" sources inside the NFWA see Los Angeles to Director, September 13, 1966. Typical of declassified FBI files, the list of nine sources in Airtel, SAC, Los Angeles FBI to Director, October 20, 1965, has all of the names censored.

¹²Quote from SAC, Los Angeles FBI, October 20, 1965, "Communist Infiltration . . .," 2, *DFBIF* 100-444762.

¹³Quotes from "Communist Infiltration." See also Confidential memorandum, SAC, Los Angeles to Hoover, October 25, 1965; and newspaper clipping, issue 22 of *El Malcriado* (this publication was not dated), both in *DFBIF* 100-444762. Ironically, it was Huerta who first initiated contact with the FBI during the late 1950s when she asked the San Joaquin County Sheriff's Department to "check out" CSO organizer Fred Ross, who she thought was a communist. Interview, Dolores Huerta, July 2, 1986, Del Rey, California.

¹⁴Quotes from SAC, Los Angeles to Hoover, January 21, 1966, *DFBIF* 100-444762.

¹⁵Sullivan was the author of the infamous letter to Martin Luther King urging him to commit suicide.

¹⁶Teletype, Los Angeles SAC to Hoover, March 1, 1966; Confidential memorandum, March 9, 1966; and Airtel, SAC Los Angeles to Hoover, March 11, 1966, *DFBIF* 100-444762. For the lack of communist involvement see Confidential memorandum, March 9, 1966. The conflict with Reuther is never mentioned in accounts of the Delano strike.

¹⁷Quote from Hoover to Los Angeles SAC, March 6, 1966, *DFBIF* 100-444762. See also

Memorandum, "Proposed March Sponsored by Congress of Racial Equality, Delano to Sacramento, California, March 18, 1966 to April 10, 1966, Information Concerning," March 11, 1966; A. Jones to Robert Wick, March 10, 1966; and Airtel, Los Angeles SAC to Hoover, March 17, 1966.

¹³Quote from Teletype, Los Angeles FBI to Director, March 17, 1966, *DFBIF* 100-444762. See also Memorandum, March 17, 1966, "March Sponsored by the National Farm Workers Association from Delano to Sacramento, California, March 17, 1966 to April 10, 1966, Information Concerning."

¹⁹Memorandum, "Protest March . . ." March 28, 1966; Memorandum, "Protest March . . ." April 1, 1966; Memorandum, "Protest March Sponsored . . ." April 13, 1966. *DFBIF* 100-444762.

²⁰Memorandum, "March Sponsored by . . ." April 4, 1966, with clipping from Chicago *Sun Times*, April 4, 1966; Memorandum, "Protest March Sponsored . . ." April 4, 1966; Memorandum, "Protest March Sponsored . . ." April 5, 1966, clipping Riverside *Daily Enterprise*, April 5, 1966; Memorandum, "Protest March Sponsored . . ." April 7, 1966; Memorandum, "Protest March Proposed . . ." April 8, 1966; Memorandum, "Protest March Sponsored . . ." April 11, 1966, clipping Riverside *Daily Enterprise*, April 11, 1966; and Anonymous to Hoover, April 11, 1966, *DFBIF* 100-444762.

²¹Quote from Memorandum, "Communist Infiltration . . .," June 15, 1966, *DFBIF* 100-444762. See also Memorandum, M. A. Jones to Wick, April 13, 1966; Director to SAC Houston June 10, 1966; SAC Los Angeles to Hoover on July 13, 1966; San Diego *Union* July 1, 1966; William Ovitt, "Special Inquiry: César Estrada Chávez," San Diego Field Office, September 28, 1966; and clippings, San Diego *Union*, July 1, 30, September 7, 1966.

²²Mildred Stegall to Cartha D. DeLoach, September 13, 1966, *DFBIF* 161-4719 set in motion the background check. For an example of a "routine" request requiring 50 FBI agents in an all night check of a list of 400 names see Mildred Stegall to Marvin Watson, October 1, 1965, White House Central Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, Lyndon B. Johnson Library. Stegall's "special files" are inventoried in a memorandum prepared by the Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

²³Quote from newspaper clipping Delano *Record*, September 27, 1966. See also Washington *Post*, September 26, 1966; and Director FBI to Sacramento, Washington, and Los Angeles SAC, September 15, 1966; Washington FBI to Honorable Marvin Watson, September 22, 1966; and Teletype, Sacramento SAC to Director, September 23, 1966, *DFBIF* 161-4719.

²⁴Quote from Teletype, Los Angeles SAC to Director, September 21, 1966, *DFBIF* 161-4719. See also Radiogram, Director to Los Angeles SAC, September 27, 1966; and Washington FBI to Honorable Marvin Watson, September 28, 1966.

²⁵Marriage search in Robert J. McKinley report, September 27, 1966; arrest record, biographical outline, police, FBI, and sheriff's identification numbers and other information in Airtel, Sacramento and Los Angeles FBI to Director FBI, September 17, 1966, *DFBIF* 161-4719. The background check also delineates Helena Chávez's police record.

²⁶Biographical material and quotes on Chávez's character from "Special Inquiry: César Estrada Chávez," October 11, 1966, *DFBIF* 161-4719.

²⁷Miller glosses over this material. Failing to adequately inform the reader of the nature and extent of the White House staff position inquiry, he is free by this sleight of hand to lump the material into his overall page tally. In doing so, he mixes very desperate material, considerably inflates the "voluminous" size of the surveillance operation, distorts the composition of the Chávez file, and most importantly ignores information which does not fit the exposé style and overall thesis of a federal agency run amuck under J. Edgar Hoover. Nowhere does Miller mention that there was nothing unusual about the White House staff position background search. Nor does he explain that the background search amounts to at least ten percent of the information he cites.

²⁸Airtel, San Antonio SAC to Director, June 28, 1966; "Proposed March from Rio Grande City . . .," and various enclosed newspaper clippings, *DFBIF* 100-444762. See also "Proposed March . . .," June 29, 1966.

²⁹Quotes from newspaper clipping, San Antonio *News*, June 28, 1966, in Airtel, San Antonio

SAC to Director, June 28, 1966, *DFBIF* 100-444762. See also Airtels and Teletypes, San Antonio SAC to Director, July 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 1966; Memorandum, Los Angeles SAC to Director, July 13, 1966; Houston SAC to Director, August 5, 10, 16, 17, 1966; Director to San Antonio SAC, October 25, 1966, enclosing newspaper clipping, *Valley Morning Star*, October 26, 1966; and Teletype, San Antonio SAC to Director, October 31, 1966; and "National Farm Workers Association Caravan, Houston, Texas, to Rio Grande City, Texas . . .," December 15, 1966.

³⁰Teletypes, Chicago SAC to Director, May 23, 24 1966, and enclosures of boycott fliers soliciting help; Memorandum, "Re Farm Workers Association Sympathy Demonstration at S & W. Food Company . . .," May 23, 1966; "National Farm Workers Association Demonstration at Zimmerman's Liquor Store," December 17, 24, 1966; "National Farm Workers Demonstration at Parkway Liquor . . .," January 21, 1967; and Airtel, Chicago SAC to Director, January 23, 1967; and SAC Chicago to Director, May 31, 1967, *DFBIF* 100-444762.

³¹Quotes from Teletypes, Pittsburgh SAC to Director Nov. 15, 23, 1968, and "Demonstration March, November 26, 1968 by United Farm Workers Organizing Committee," November 26, 1968, *DFBIF* 100-444762. The FBI followed Rojas at least until October of the following year. See also Pittsburgh FBI to Director, October 25, 1969.

³²Memorandum, "United Farm Workers Organizing Committee . . .," March 14, 1967; Teletypes from San Francisco SAC to Director, May 23, May 30, 1968; Director to the Attorney General, May 24, 1968; and Sacramento SAC to Director, May 28, 1968, *DFBIF* 100-444762.

³³Quotes from Memorandum, "Picketing of U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark," May 31, 1968, *DFBIF* 100-444762; and San Francisco *Chronicle*, May 29, 1968.

³⁴FBI translation contained in FBI Laboratory to Sacramento FBI, July 31, 1968, *DFBIF* 9-48291. Original letter and a slightly different translation by David Fishlow, editor of the union newspaper *El Malcriado*. The union translation changes the words "fuck-offs" to "lazy ones." This was not the first threat brought to the attention of the FBI. On June 14 union attorney Jerry Cohen advised the FBI that on or about June 9, during the John F. Kennedy memorial march in Delano, Juan Martínez was overheard to say that Chávez was "going down soon" and that Chávez and President Johnson "are the only two left and they would be gotten." These statements were reportedly overheard by Porferio Montion, a resident of the Pete Valasco Camp in Richgrove, and Al Vasquez, both UFW (United Farm Worker Union) members. Cohen made the information available to the FBI, Kern County Sheriff's Department, and the Delano Police Department. See Sacramento FBI to Director, June 14, 1968, *DFBIF* 105-157123.

³⁵Chávez told the FBI that he had not been in favor of making an issue of such threats to his safety but had been overruled by union attorneys insisting that such threats had to be reported to the proper authorities. See Sacramento SAC to Director, July 13, 19, 31, August 7, 8, 11, 13; and San Francisco SAC to Director, September 16, 30 1968, *DFBIF* 9-48291. The case file fills 60 pages. On June 11, when the FBI had interviewed Chávez about Kennedy's murder, Chávez said that he last seen and personally talked with Kennedy in March, and had not met him on June 4 as planned. He did not know Sirhan Sirhan, and at no time had he had an argument with Senator Kennedy or the Kennedy organization. Chávez added that he could furnish no information regarding the assassination, although Bill Chandler, who was affiliated with Chávez, had commented to Chávez on June 10 that he knew Sirhan Sirhan and Chandler had been at the Ambassador Hotel when Kennedy had been shot. See "Correlation Summary—Subject: César Estrada Chávez," February 13, 1975, *DFBIF* 105-157123. Union doubts about the authenticity of the threat are expressed in Confidential Interview with UFW Executive Board Member, La Paz, May 23, 1982, author's possession.

³⁶Memorandum, "United Farm Worker Organizing Committee," August 16, 1968; Airtel, Sacramento SAC to Director, August 10, 19, 1968; newspaper clipping, *Delano Record*, August 15, 1968, all in *DFBIF* 100-444762.

³⁷Quote from San Francisco FBI to Director, October 30, 1968, *DFBIF* 9-48291. Telephone threats in Fred Vinson to Director, October 3, 1968. Identification of the suspect in Sacramento FBI to Director, October 17, 1968. O'Conner Hospital episode in San Francisco FBI to Director, January 28, 1969. Termination of the investigation in Extortion report, San Francisco FBI, January 28, 1969.

³⁸Quote from Teletype Sacramento, WDC SAC to Director, September 7, 1969, *DFBIF*

105-157123. See also "Proposed Commemoration Program Sponsored by César Chávez . . ." August 13, 1969; Director to SACS, WFO, Alexandria, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego, and San Francisco, August 14, 1969; "Proposed Commemoration Program Sponsored by César Chávez . . ." September 4, 1969; and Teletype SAC WFO to Director, September 5, 1969.

³⁹For surveillance of protests at the Pentagon see Teletype, Alexandria, Va. FBI to Director, December 23, 1970. For Pittsburgh surveillance see Teletypes, Pittsburgh FBI to Director, April 29, May 1, 1970. For Maryland see Teletypes Baltimore SAC to Director, April 30, May 1, 2, 1970. For New York City see Teletype New York SAC to Director, January 25, 1969, *DFBIF* 100-444762. For Ft. McPhearson see Atlanta SAC to Director, October 23, 1969; Teletype Atlanta SAC to Director, October 25, 1968; "Demonstration at Fort McPhearson, Atlanta, Georgia, October 25, 1969 . . ." November 5, 1969. For Chicago see Teletypes Chicago SAC to Director, April 15, 16; Memorandum, "National Farm Workers Association Picket Demonstrations, October 18, 1969;" and "National Farm Workers Association," November 12, 1969 enciphered memo, SAC Chicago FBI to Director, November 12, December 20, 1969, all in *DFBIF* 100-444762.

⁴⁰For Skokie see Airtel, Chicago SAC to Director, December 24, 1969; and Memo, "National Farm Workers' Association," December 24, 1969, *DFBIF* 100-444762. For surveillance of Chávez in Cincinnati see Teletype, Cincinnati SAC to Director, November 28, 1970, "Appearance of César Chávez in Cincinnati, Ohio, on November 27-28, 1970, Regarding Kroger Company's Refusal to Buy Union Picked Lettuce," Cincinnati SAC to Director, December 28, 1970, *DFBIF* 105-157123.

⁴¹Quote from "March to and Demonstration at Department of Agriculture," May 4, 1970. For surveillance of Chávez in Mexico see Memo, "United Farm Worker Organizing Committee . . . Internal Security," June 20, 1972, *DFBIF* 444762. For Fort Lewis, Washington see Teletypes Seattle SAC to Director, January 14, February 2, 1971; and Memorandum, "United Farm Workers demonstration at Fort Lewis, Washington, January 14, 1971," February 24, 1971, all in *DFBIF* 100-444762; and newspaper clippings, *New York Times*, December 24, 1970; *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 19, 1971; *Examiner*, January, 26, 1971, in *DFBIF* 105-157123.

⁴²"Ex-Agent Sees Plot To Kill César Chávez," *Washington Post*, December 24, 1971. Miller, "FBI Files," omits this story, even though it comprises a large chunk of the Chávez file.

⁴³"Informer Says He was Part of Coast Plot to Kill César Chávez," *New York Times*, January 1, 1972; interview, confidential source, Kern County Sheriff's Department, March 15, 1995. Pedigo's mother claimed the money in the refrigerator was hers and the police, unable to prove otherwise, allowed her to keep it.

⁴⁴Not until the Watergate conspiracy broke during the following year and made clear that the civil liberties of all Americans were at stake would Chávez take death threats seriously. Interview, confidential source, United Farm Workers legal staff, May 24, 1987, La Paz, California, author's possession.

⁴⁵FBI Director to David Norman, February 7, 1972; Airtel, SAC Sacramento to Director, January 27, February 11, 1972, *DFBIF* 44-51593.

⁴⁶Memorandum, "César Chávez - Victim," in SAC, Sacramento to U. S. Attorney General, January 18, 1972; Airtel, SAC, Sacramento to Director, January 27, 1972; Memorandum, Director FBI to Assistant Attorney General, January 28, 1972; C. L. McGowan to Mr. Bates, Feb. 9, 1972; "Interference with Rights, Civil Rights, Unknown Subjects," in Airtel, SAC, Sacramento to Director, February 11, 1972; "Note," contained in Airtel, Director to SAC, Sacramento February 28, 1972; Airtels, Director to SAC, Sacramento, March 3, 10, 11, 13, 15, 1972, *DFBIF* 44-51593. The BATF Report by William J. Vizzard is dated September 23, 1971. Reviewing the same material, California State Attorney General Evelle Younger entered the fray, and produced an instant and cursory investigation which the union labeled a whitewash.

⁴⁷Airtel, Director to SAC, Phoenix, September 12, 1972; newspaper clipping, *Arizona Republic*, September 1, 5, 1972, *DFBIF* 105-157123. See also Jacques Levy, *César Chávez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York, 1975), 445-6; Transcript of preliminary hearing in the Pedigo narcotics case, Sept. 14, 1971, UFW legal files, La Paz, California; and *Sacramento Bee*, March 31, 1973.

⁴⁸Teletype, SAC, Phoenix to Director, April 8, 1972; Memorandum, SAC, Phoenix to Director, April 8, 1972; Teletype, SAC, Phoenix to Director, April 12, 1972; "Demonstration at Arizona State Capitol Building . . ." April 7, 1972; Teletype, SAC, Phoenix to Director, April 6, 1972; Teletype, SAC, Phoenix to Acting Director, May 4, 6, 1972; Teletype, SAC, Phoenix to Director, May 11, 12, 1972 *DFBIF* 100-444-762.

⁴⁹Informative Note, Domestic Intelligence Division, March 16, 1972; Teletype marked "confidential," Director FBI to President, Vice President, U. S. Secret Service, and Acting Attorney General [By Messenger], March 17, 1972; Teletype, SAC, New York to Director, Domestic Intelligence Division, March 17, 1972, *DFBIF* 100-444762. According to Miller, "FBI Spied," when Vice President Spiro T. Agnew spoke on March 17, 1972 at the Americana Hotel on Seventh Avenue in New York City "a force of no fewer than 72 FBI agents descended on the Americana Hotel to watch and gather information." Miller characterizes this as "almost comic," and it might seem so if Miller's account bore even the slightest resemblance to what happened. But it is nonsense. Contrary to what Miller reported, there is no evidence that 72 FBI agents were involved. It appears that no more than a handful were present. How then had Miller arrived at this fantastic figure? Perhaps out of sloppiness, perhaps under deadline pressure, Miller confused the year of the report with the number of agents. This was easy enough to do. FBI teletypes at this time used only letters of the alphabet in reporting times and dates and other figures, typically dropping the first two digits from the year of the report so that teletypes invariably list only the last two numbers. Holding to this policy, the FBI agent assigned to the Agnew case began his report to Director Hoover: "AT APPROXIMATELY SIX P.M. MARCH SEVENTEEN, SEVENTY TWO SPECIAL AGENTS OF THE FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION OBSERVED APPROXIMATELY SEVEN INDIVIDUALS FORMING A PICKET LINE ACROSS THE STREET OF THE AMERICANA HOTEL . . ." This is a typical beginning. Complete with a grammatical error omitting the comma after SEVENTY TWO, it is characteristic of a pattern repeated hundreds of times in the first sentence of reports throughout the Chávez file, in teletypes preceding and following this particular entry, and thousands of times in other FBI teletypes. It is a distinct stylistic feature so common and predictable that Miller should have easily noted it while scanning the Chávez file. But for some reason he failed to detect it and confused the date of a report with the number of agents involved in an operation. However, even if he had ignored this quirk he should have been alert to the absurdity of what he was asserting. Imagine 72 FBI agents lurking about the sidewalks of Seventh Avenue observing 7 farmworker protesters! The imbalance of forces would have been so great as to have attracted press attention to an FBI presence outnumbering protestors ten to one. Even at the height of the anti-Agnew picketing activity, when no more than 50 farmworker protestors were present, deployment of 72 FBI agents would have been both unwarranted and beyond the capabilities of the New York FBI office.

⁵⁰For Clarence Kelley's memorandum and the FBI's heightened concern with civil rights violations as a result of the Kern County and Coachella Valley strikes and confrontations with the Teamsters Union see Memorandum, "United Farm Workers and Teamsters Union Confrontation in Kern County," C. L. McGowan to Mr. Gebhardt, August 28, 1973 and enclosures, *DFBIF* 44-59048-3, in J. Kevin O'Brien to author, April 14, 1995, author's possession.

⁵¹"Correlation Summary: Subject: César Chávez," February 14, 1975, *DFBIF* 105-157123. See also newspaper clipping, Frank del Olmo, "Illegal Grower Payoffs to Teamsters Charged," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1972; and "César Chávez Activities, February 12-13, 1973, Kansas City, Missouri," February 16, 1973.

⁵²Quote from Sacramento FBI, "César Chávez," August 11, 1975, *DFBIF* 105-157123. See also Teletype, SAC, Sacramento to Director, February 28, 1975.

⁵³Quote from Don Whitehead, *The FBI Story: A Report to the People* (New York, 1956), pp. vii, 396, 403.