

# Burglars Who Took On F.B.I. Abandon Shadows

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By [MARK MAZZETTI](#)

PHILADELPHIA — The perfect crime is far easier to pull off when nobody is watching.

So on a night nearly 43 years ago, while Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier bludgeoned each other over 15 rounds in a televised title bout viewed by millions around the world, burglars took a lock pick and a crowbar and broke into a [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) office in a suburb of Philadelphia, making off with nearly every document inside.

They were never caught, and the stolen documents that they mailed anonymously to newspaper reporters were the first trickle of what would become a flood of revelations about extensive spying and dirty-tricks operations by the F.B.I. against dissident groups.

The burglary in Media, Pa., on March 8, 1971, is a historical echo today, as disclosures by the former National Security Agency contractor Edward J. Snowden have cast another unflattering light on government spying and opened a national debate about the proper limits of government surveillance. The burglars had, until now, maintained a vow of silence about their roles in the operation. They were content in knowing that their actions had dealt the first significant blow to an institution that had amassed enormous power and prestige during [J. Edgar Hoover](#)'s lengthy tenure as director.



John and Bonnie Raines, two of the burglars, at home in Philadelphia with their grandchildren. Mark Makela for The New York Times

“When you talked to people outside the movement about what the F.B.I. was doing, nobody wanted to believe it,” said one of the burglars, Keith Forsyth, who is finally going public about his involvement. “There was only one way to convince people that it was true, and that was to get it in their handwriting.”

Mr. Forsyth, now 63, and other members of the group can no longer be prosecuted for what happened that night, and they agreed to be interviewed before the release this week of [a book](#) written by one of the first journalists to receive the stolen documents. The author, Betty Medsger, a former reporter for The Washington Post, spent years sifting through the F.B.I.’s voluminous case file on the episode and persuaded five of the eight men and women who participated in the break-in to end their silence.

Unlike Mr. Snowden, who downloaded hundreds of thousands of digital N.S.A. files onto computer hard drives, the Media burglars did their work the 20th-century way: they cased the F.B.I. office for months, wore gloves as they packed the papers into suitcases, and loaded the suitcases into getaway cars. When the operation was over, they dispersed. Some remained committed to antiwar causes, while others, like John and Bonnie Raines, decided that the risky burglary would be their final act of protest against the Vietnam War and other government actions before they moved on with their lives.

“We didn’t need attention, because we had done what needed to be done,” said Mr. Raines, 80, who had, with his wife, arranged for family members to raise the couple’s three children if they were sent to prison. “The ’60s were over. We didn’t have to hold on to what we did back then.”

### **A Meticulous Plan**

Keith Forsyth, in the early 1970s, was the designated lock-picker among the eight burglars. When he found that he could not pick the lock the front door of the F.B.I. office, he broke in through a side entrance.



The burglary was the idea of William C. Davidon, a professor of physics at Haverford College and a fixture of antiwar protests in Philadelphia, a city that by the early 1970s had become a white-hot center of the peace movement. Mr. Davidon was frustrated that years of organized demonstrations seemed to have had little impact.

In the summer of 1970, months after President Richard M. Nixon announced the United States' invasion of Cambodia, Mr. Davidon began assembling a team from a group of activists whose commitment and discretion he had come to trust.

The group — originally nine, before one member dropped out — concluded that it would be too risky to try to break into the F.B.I. office in downtown Philadelphia, where security was tight. They soon settled on the bureau's satellite office in Media, in an apartment building across the street from the county courthouse.

That decision carried its own risks: Nobody could be certain whether the satellite office would have any documents about the F.B.I.'s surveillance of war protesters, or whether a security alarm would trip as soon as the burglars opened the door.

The group spent months casing the building, driving past it at all times of the night and memorizing the routines of its residents.



Mr. Forsyth today. Mark Makela for The New York Times

“We knew when people came home from work, when their lights went out, when they went to bed, when they woke up in the morning,” said Mr. Raines, who was a professor of religion at Temple University at the time. “We were quite certain that we understood the nightly activities in and around that building.”

But it wasn't until Ms. Raines got inside the office that the group grew confident that it did not have a security system. Weeks before the burglary, she visited the office posing as a Swarthmore College student researching job opportunities for women at the F.B.I.

The burglary itself went off largely without a hitch, except for when Mr. Forsyth, the designated lock-picker, had to break into a different entrance than planned when he discovered that the F.B.I. had installed a lock on the main door that he could not pick. He used a crowbar to break the second lock, a deadbolt above the doorknob.

After packing the documents into suitcases, the burglars piled into getaway cars and rendezvoused at a farmhouse to sort through what they had stolen. To their relief, they soon discovered that the bulk of it was hard evidence of the F.B.I.'s spying on political groups. Identifying themselves as the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the F.B.I., the burglars sent select documents to several newspaper reporters. Two weeks after the burglary, Ms. Medsger wrote the first article based on the files, after the Nixon administration tried unsuccessfully to get The Post to return the documents.

Other news organizations that had received the documents, including The New York Times, followed with their own reports.

At The Washington Post, Betty Medsger was the first to report on the contents of the stolen F.B.I. files. Now, she has written a book about the episode. Robert Caplin for The New York Times

Ms. Medsger's article cited what was perhaps the most damning document from the cache, a 1970 memorandum that offered a glimpse into Hoover's obsession with snuffing out dissent. The document urged agents to step up their interviews of antiwar activists and members of dissident student groups.

“It will enhance the paranoia endemic in these circles and will further serve to get the point across there is an F.B.I. agent behind every mailbox,” the message from F.B.I. headquarters said. Another document, signed by Hoover himself, revealed widespread F.B.I. surveillance of black student groups on college campuses.

But the document that would have the biggest impact on reining in the F.B.I.'s domestic spying activities was an internal routing slip, dated 1968, bearing a mysterious word: Cointelpro.

Neither the Media burglars nor the reporters who received the documents understood the meaning of the term, and it was not until several years later, when the NBC News reporter Carl Stern obtained more files from the F.B.I. under the Freedom of Information Act, that the contours of Cointelpro — shorthand for Counterintelligence Program — were revealed.

Since 1956, the F.B.I. had carried out an expansive campaign to spy on civil rights leaders, political organizers and suspected Communists, and had tried to sow distrust among protest groups. Among the grim litany of revelations was a blackmail letter F.B.I. agents had sent anonymously to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., threatening to expose his extramarital affairs if he did not commit suicide.





The F.B.I. field office in Media, Pa., from which the burglars stole files that showed the extent of the bureau's surveillance of political groups. Betty Medsger

“It wasn't just spying on Americans,” said Loch K. Johnson, a professor of public and international affairs at the University of Georgia who was an aide to Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho. “The intent of Cointelpro was to destroy lives and ruin reputations.”

Senator Church's investigation in the mid-1970s revealed still more about the extent of decades of F.B.I. abuses, and led to greater congressional oversight of the F.B.I. and other American intelligence agencies. The Church Committee's final report about the domestic surveillance was blunt. “Too many people have been spied upon by too many government agencies, and too much information has been collected,” it read.

By the time the committee released its report, Hoover was dead and the empire he had built at the F.B.I. was being steadily dismantled. The roughly 200 agents he had assigned to investigate the Media burglary came back empty-handed, and the F.B.I. closed the case on March 11, 1976 — three days after the statute of limitations for burglary charges had expired.

Michael P. Kortan, a spokesman for the F.B.I., said that “a number of events during that era, including the Media burglary, contributed to changes to how the F.B.I. identified and addressed domestic security threats, leading to reform of the F.B.I.'s intelligence policies and practices and the creation of investigative guidelines by the Department of Justice.”

According to Ms. Medsger's book, "The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret F.B.I.," only one of the burglars was on the F.B.I.'s final list of possible suspects before the case was closed.



Afterward, they fled to a farmhouse, near Pottstown, Pa., where they spent 10 days sorting through the documents. Betty Medsger

### **A Retreat Into Silence**

The eight burglars rarely spoke to one another while the F.B.I. investigation was proceeding and never again met as a group.

Mr. Davidon died late last year from complications of Parkinson's disease. He had planned to speak publicly about his role in the break-in, but three of the burglars have chosen to remain anonymous.

Among those who have come forward — Mr. Forsyth, the Raineses and a man named Bob Williamson — there is some wariness of how their decision will be viewed.

The passage of years has worn some of the edges off the once radical political views of John and Bonnie Raines. But they said they felt a kinship toward Mr. Snowden, whose revelations about N.S.A. spying they see as a bookend to their own disclosures so long ago.

They know some people will criticize them for having taken part in something that, if they had been caught and convicted, might have separated them from their children for years. But they insist they would never have joined the team of burglars had they not been convinced they would get away with it.

“It looks like we’re terribly reckless people,” Mr. Raines said. “But there was absolutely no one in Washington — senators, congressmen, even the president — who dared hold J. Edgar Hoover to accountability.”

“It became pretty obvious to us,” he said, “that if we don’t do it, nobody will.”