

1971 - SYNOPSIS

On March 8, 1971 eight ordinary citizens broke into an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, a town just outside Philadelphia, took hundreds of secret files, and shared them with the public. In doing so, they uncovered the FBI's vast and illegal regime of spying and intimidation of Americans exercising their First Amendment rights.

On the night of the "Fight of the Century" boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, the activists, calling themselves the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI, picked the lock on the door to the small FBI field office. They took every file in the office, loaded them into suitcases, and walked out the front door.

Mailed anonymously, the documents started to show up in newsrooms. The heist yielded a trove of damning evidence that shattered the wall of secrecy that had previously enveloped the FBI. The documents proved that the FBI was deliberately working to intimidate civil rights activists and Americans nonviolently protesting the Vietnam War. The most significant revelation was an illegal program overseen by lifelong FBI director J. Edgar Hoover known as COINTELPRO - the Counter Intelligence Program.

Despite searching for the people behind the heist in one of the largest investigations ever conducted, the FBI never solved the mystery of the break-in, and the identities of the members of the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI remained a secret.

Until now.

For the first time, the members of the Citizens' Commission have decided to come forward and speak out about their actions. **1971** is their story.

Told through a combination of exclusive interviews, rare primary documents from the break-in and investigation, national news coverage of the burglary and dramatic re-creations, the story of the Citizens' Commission unfolds, with haunting echoes to today's questions of privacy in the era of government surveillance.



The film opens deep inside the heart of the Philadelphia anti war movement in 1970, with our main subjects: John and Bonnie Raines, a couple with small children; Keith Forsyth, a cab driver; Bob Williamson, a social worker; and Bill Davidon, a Haverford College physics professor and anti-war activist. All are politically active in protesting the ongoing war, but of late they have begun to feel the specter of intimidation. Bill, in particular, is deeply concerned that the FBI is spying on antiwar and civil rights activists - is the Bureau is out to prevent the exercise of First Amendment rights? Is dissent is being criminalized?

Bill knows that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover is untouchable in Washington. The President, Attorney General and members of congress will never investigate him or the FBI without hard evidence of wrongdoing. So he decides to organize

a break-in. It's a last resort, but as a scientist he knows he needs empirical evidence to prove his spying hypothesis. To really make his case, he'd have to find it in Hoover's files.

1971 - SYNOPSIS



Bill sets about recruiting his team -- handpicking a group he has come to know through the anti-war community, including John, Bonnie, Keith and Bob. They all know the risks if they are caught. Over the course of a few months, they train as amateur burglars, meticulously gathering information and planning the raid.

The Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier fight on the night of March 8th, 1971, serves as a dramatic backdrop to the burglary. It provides noise in the building and serves as a major distraction for police and FBI agents who might have been tempted to stay late in the office. After the break-in is successfully executed and the group has filled suitcases with hundreds of files, they retreat to a farmhouse to look over the contents. Within the first hours, they discover a directive that encourages agents to step up interviews with activists to “enhance the paranoia endemic in these circles and further serve to get the point across there is an FBI agent behind

every mailbox.” After careful triage they set about mailing selected documents to the press and two Congressmen.

Journalist Betty Medsger picks up the story. She is the first reporter to receive the stolen documents, mailed to her anonymously, at the Washington Post. She works furiously to meet her usual 6pm deadline for what she knows will be a controversial and groundbreaking story. She is oblivious to the heated debate occurring between Ben Bradlee, the Post’s editor, Katherine Graham, the paper’s publisher, and Attorney General John Mitchell over whether or not they should publish. It is the first time the Nixon administration demands Graham suppress a story. The Post publishes the next day – the story runs on the front page above the fold.

FBI Special Agent Neil Welch explains the magnitude of the fallout within the Bureau. Xerox comes under major scrutiny as the FBI tries to find the copy machines the activists used to reproduce the documents.

The FBI comes down hard on Philadelphia, flooding the area known as Powelton Village, well known for being home to many members of the counterculture movement and strong political activism; our subjects are hunted by 150 FBI agents.

National outrage follows the initial media reports. There is harsh criticism of Hoover and the FBI but no official investigation is launched. It is Carl Stern, an NBC journalist covering the Justice Department, who is the final lynchpin in this story. On a chance visit to the Senate, he is given one of the Media documents with the heading “COINTELPRO – New Left.” He asks the Department of Justice what the term means. After a protracted legal battle, 50,000 pages of documents emerge detailing the scope of COINTELPRO and the FBI’s dirty tricks.

These revelations, along with Watergate, now make a Congressional investigation inevitable. The Church Committee is formed; it is the first-ever congressional investigation into American intelligence agencies. F.A.O. Schwartz Jr., chief counsel to the Church Committee, explains how the Committee’s findings lay bare the inner workings and extent of COINTELPRO, together with the impact that it had on America. Ultimately, the committee passes legislation curtailing surveillance powers of intelligence agencies.

The Citizens’ Commission to Investigate the FBI has won—real oversight over the FBI and a national conversation about privacy rights have begun.

The Citizens have disbanded and gone on living their lives. The film ends with our characters and their families explaining why, after 40 years, they have decided to break their silence.

