

# And Why They Let Anyone Be An Informant

by Steven Burkholder

You're young and energetic. You like to write. But your politics put you in deep right field. What do you do? Get your ideas disseminated through the FBI's clip service.

Lost in the media backwash over the FBI's stakeout of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) were several incidents showing bureau officials ready and willing to photocopy and pass along unsolicited right-wing manuscripts. That willingness to lend the FBI's imprimatur to unverified allegations probably didn't prompt any agent to go overboard. But when the FBI winks at even a little entrepreneurial spying, there may be cause for worry.

Take Michael Boos, former program director of an outfit called Young America's Foundation. He's young, smart, and apparently likes life in the covert lane. Boos slipped into a meeting of the Washington, D.C. chapter of CISPES in June 1984 looking for proof of terroristic criminal activity. He thought he found some. Boos wrote up his findings in a three-page article intended for *The American Sentinel*, a journal that once did business under the name *The Pink Sheet on the American Left*. He also sent a copy of his draft to Edward J. O'Malley, then the FBI's assistant director of intelligence.

Headlined "Group in Nation's Capital to Aid Left-Wing Terrorists," but printed without a byline for Boos, the piece made some strong charges. Boos wrote that documents he'd obtained revealed that CISPES would be raising funds "to provide direct military assistance to the Soviet-supported Marxist terrorists seeking to overthrow the recently elected government of El Salvador." In particular, he claimed that a shoe factory in El Salvador, slated for CISPES support, would be making combat boots for guerrillas. That was

"only one possible conclusion" he drew from the meeting. William Sessions, in testimony this fall, disagreed, admitting that the bureau's suspicions about CISPES proved unfounded.

But that was later. At the time, officials at FBI headquarters believed Boos's allegations merited being stamped "secret" and circulated to 33 field offices, according to a bureau memo that was released to CISPES and the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights under the Freedom of Information Act.

Oliver B. Revell, one of Sessions's top deputies, told the Senate Intelligence Committee last February that the dissemination of Boos's piece was an aberration. Boos's report "should not have been circulated as an FBI document." But an unsigned, handwritten note at the bottom of the FBI's cover note that accompanied the Boos letter suggests that Revell had been in touch with Boos—even sending him a letter acknowledging his efforts.

Boos acknowledges that Young America's Foundation sent the FBI copies of *Campus Intelligence Brief*, a publication that tracked left-wing political activity at universities. "I just consider it to be good journalism, good investigative journalism," Boos explains. Giving the FBI the benefit of his reporting is a "public service." "As a journalist," Boos says, "you like to believe your articles have some impact."

## Casey's brain and Soviet dupes

J. Michael Waller knows something about high-impact journalism. A former associate of Boos, the 26-year-old Waller also churned out material on CISPES that found its way into FBI files. In November 1983, while director of research at the United States of America Foundation (housed, at least at one time, in the Heritage Foundation's building in Washington), Waller produced a 21-page report, "CISPES: A Guerrilla Propaganda Network." Months later, Waller penned

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*Steven Burkholder is a Connecticut writer. This article was supported in part by a grant from the Fund for Investigative Journalism.*

the virtually identical "CISPES: A Terrorist Propaganda Network." (Note the altered wording—a subtle marketing decision?) for the Council for Inter-American Security. This group counts among its articles of faith the belief that World War III has already begun and that American determination is all that stands between our Latin neighbors and "communist conquest and . . . sterilization."

Though exactly how it happened is unclear, both these reports, along with a third brochure produced by Waller, "CISPES: Fiction and Fact," ended up in FBI files. Waller's work not only was kept in the CISPES file in Washington, two of the three documents were, according to a source, actually sent out to a dozen field offices as recommended reading.

Waller's worldview, incidentally, provides some tips for freelancers aspiring to hit the bureau's reading list. First rule: don't mince words. In 1987, Waller told a reporter for San Francisco's KRON-TV that William Casey's brain seizure was caused by "harassment" from liberals in Congress and the media. He co-authored "Congress's Red Army" for *National Review*, depicting Chris Dodd, Tom Harkin, and Pat Schroeder, among others, as Soviet dupes. (Waller did not return messages left by telephone.)

Given the FBI's apparent propensity to believe much of what it reads, it's no surprise that a dubious walk-in informant helped get the CISPES probe going in the first place. The bureau stated in a report last February that it relied on an April 1981 story in a publication called *The Review of the News* to justify its first (and first abortive) five-month investigation of CISPES. That article linked Farid Handal, the brother of El Salvador's communist party chief, with a number of U.S. citizens "sympathetic to the anti-government forces in El Salvador." The bureau's probe, however, turned up no evidence that CISPES was acting as an unregistered foreign agent.

*The Review of the News*, until it went defunct a few years ago, was the official organ of the John Birch Society. The author of the article is John Rees, described in court documents and published accounts as an FBI informant. Had someone at FBI headquarters looked into their files they might have found a memo dated September 27, 1968, describing Rees as "an unscrupulous unethical individual" whose information "cannot be considered reliable." (Rees said in an interview that he had never seen the memo.) Yet despite this characterization, in 1982 the FBI again depended on Rees's writings—this

time sending the State Department a book excerpt that its Office of Public Diplomacy relied on to officially label a women's peace group a "Soviet front organization." The label later was withdrawn.

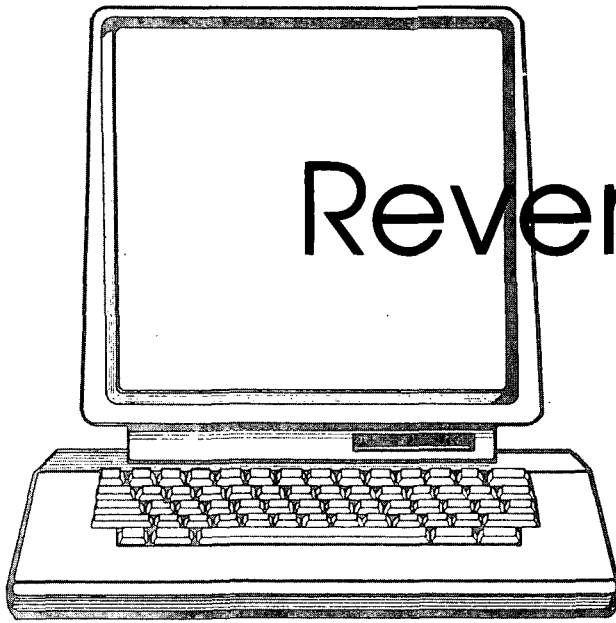
## Better answers

As suspect as all this may seem, it gets worse. Another more serious episode involves Frank Varelli, whom the FBI called its key informant in the CISPES counterterrorism probe and on whom the bureau placed "undue reliance," as Sessions told Congress. (Court and other documents described in *The Boston Globe* and elsewhere seem to bolster views voiced by FBI critics that Varelli is a scapegoat for FBI mistakes.) Where did Varelli get his information? At a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing in September, Chairman David Boren asked Sessions about reports that Varelli prepared memos for his FBI handlers by cribbing from Mexican magazine articles written by Roberto D'Aubisson, the suspected Salvadoran death squad conspirator. Sessions did not quarrel with these revelations, adding, "The source of those materials should have been very clearly checked out."

For his part, Varelli—who is suing the FBI for back wages—and his former lawyer also charged that the agents in Dallas were supervising him to fill his reports with tidbits from far-right sources, steering him to particular writings if he ran dry.

Senator Boren was not alone in his concerns. On the House side, Don Edwards, the California Democrat who chairs the judiciary subcommittee entrusted with oversight of the FBI was bothered by all this. "The problem is not in private groups or individuals lawfully collecting information on other groups or individuals," he wrote Sessions in November 1987. "Our concern is with the bureau receiving and filing such information if it does not pertain to criminal activity."

After several months, Sessions answered with a brief letter and 11 pages of FBI responses to questions from Edwards. "There is no easy formula for the FBI to use when deciding to accept information," read one response. Another, pertaining to the Rees documents relayed to the State Department, stated: "The decision of the credibility of such a public document in most circumstances is left to the reader." After the CISPES debacle, the FBI knows it must come up with better answers. □



# Revenge of the Nerds

The real problem with computer viruses isn't genius programmers, it's careless ones

by Nicholas Martin

It was with admiration rarely applied to saboteurs that the media presented us Robert T. Morris Jr., the 23-year-old "whiz" who brought the 60,000-computer Advanced Research Projects Agency network (Arpanet) to a halt in November. *Time* called Morris's creation "one of the most sophisticated and infectious computer viruses the world has yet seen." *The New York Times* referred to Morris's virus as a "programming *tour de force*," and quoted, without comment, one Harvard graduate student's analogy that, "It's as if Mathias Rust had not just flown into Red Square, but built himself a stealth bomber by hand and then flown into Red Square."

Morris fit—or was made to fit—the image of the Diabolical Supergenius Computer Nerd: Glasses. Frequent late-night sessions with the computer terminal. Slightly crazed look. He probably learned to read at age three and was doing calculus in seventh grade. His teachers all called him "brilliant," but bored with normal adolescent preoccupations and unchallenged by school work, he was drawn to the one deed that required all of his staggering intellectual prowess: breaking into the most powerful computer system on earth. Or something like

that. In the movies we usually end up at DefCon Two.

Of course, many people in the computer business only helped encourage the notion that it took a one-in-a-million genius to pick this lock. A group of programmers working to counteract Morris's program told the *Times* they were "impressed with its power and cleverness." But then again, they would look sort of silly being outsmarted by your generic computer-literate 23-year-old.

In fact, a great deal of what Morris did was frighteningly simple. As Eugene Spafford, a Purdue computer science professor, wrote in a recent technical report on Morris's program, "The [program] was apparently... done by someone clever but not particularly gifted. In general, [it] is not that impressive and its 'success' was probably due to a large amount of luck rather than any programming skills possessed by the author." Morris didn't pick the lock to the Arpanet computers, so much as find the key someone had left under the mat. Or as it turned out, on top of it.

## The key on the mat

The computers Morris invaded were part of the Arpanet, an international grid of telephone lines, buried cables, and satellite hookups established by

*Nicholas Martin is the production manager of The Washington Monthly.*