

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Federal government suddenly probing two 1970s political crimes
By A.C. Thompson

Apparently buoyed by the success of the recent prosecution of former Symbionese Liberation Army members, the federal government is dredging up more ghosts from San Francisco's radical past. Local criminal defense lawyers say the feds have quietly convened a grand jury to reinvestigate a pair of unsolved political crimes dating back to the early 1970s.

According to lawyer Stuart Hanlon and others I interviewed, the U.S. Department of Justice is giving renewed scrutiny to the 1970 bombing of the Park Police Station, which killed one officer and wounded eight others, and a 1971 shooting at the Ingleside Police Station, which left one officer dead and injured another department employee.

Hanlon and other attorneys say the grand jury – a secretive body that works at the direction of the Justice Department – has subpoenaed a number of people from across the country, many of them former New Left cadres and black-power militants.

Perhaps the feds are employing new technologies that can help them analyze old evidence collected at the crime scenes, or maybe they've stumbled onto fresh leads. But with the Bush administration waging a so-called war on terrorism, and John Ashcroft calling the shots at Justice, it's hard not to be at least a little suspicious about the timing of the probe. To be blunt: Is the government angling for a show trial with high propaganda value? After all, there are plenty of unsolved homicides in San Francisco, most of them involving African American victims and many of which could be – from a jurisdictional standpoint – investigated by the folks over in the Federal Building.

Hanlon, for one, is skeptical of the feds' motives. "Why are they doing this now? Why are they trying to solve a case they couldn't solve for 30 years?" the lawyer grumbles. "It's hard for me to understand the motivation. It seems like we've got enough problems in this country right now without reliving the '60s and '70s."

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The crimes took place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, which was turning Southeast Asia into a napalm-scorched charnel house and provoking massive unrest at home.

The explosion at the Park Police Station came at a critical moment in the epic trial of the Chicago 7, the antiwar protesters arrested during the Democratic National Convention of 1968.

It was Feb. 16, 1970, the day Judge Julius Hoffman charged the seven – along with their lawyers, Leonard Weinglass and William Kunstler – with contempt of court.

In Berkeley a riot broke out. "A big Safeway store on Shattuck Avenue was raided by a band of 20 young men, who hurled shopping

carts through plate glass windows and overturned shelves," the San Francisco Chronicle reported. A front-page photo captured three guys chucking bricks and rocks at the supermarket. In San Francisco a fiery protest took place at the Federal Building.

And that night, somebody ignited a bomb that decimated the Park Police Station. The next morning the Chron informed readers that "A crude bomb exploded with a powerful blast at Park Police Station beside Kezar Stadium last night, injuring six police officers in a deadly spray of steel fragments and glass. The heavy blast cut down the officers without warning shortly before 11 p.m."

Further accounts would put the number of people wounded at nine and describe the bomb as a sophisticated device.

But one thing was certain: riddled with shrapnel, Sgt. Brian McDonnell died two days later at San Francisco General Hospital – just as the first sketchy stories about the My Lai massacre were hitting newspapers.

Eighteen months later somebody cut a hole in the chain-link fence surrounding the Ingleside Police Station, busted into the building, and gunned down 51-year-old desk sergeant John Young and wounded a young civilian clerk.

Retired police officer Ray Shine was on duty the night of the ambush. "It was pretty chaotic. I'd only been out of the academy for five days," Shine recalls. "I remember there was blood everywhere."

While organizing a memorial marking the 30th anniversary of Young's death, police captain Marsha Ashe did a lot of research into the sergeant's life in uniform. "When you talk to anyone about John Young, they tell you what a fine man he was. Even before 'community policing' was a term, he was committed to community policing," she says.

In Ashe's opinion, "he was very much the wrong target" for anticop guerrillas to take down.

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There were a lot of armed gangs running around at the time – and one them was led by J. Edgar Hoover.

With Hoover at the helm, the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1969 unleashed COINTELPRO, a secret operation aimed at infiltrating and disrupting dissident groups. The program would later be linked to an array of horrors, including the assassination of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in Chicago and the wrongful imprisonment of Panther Geronimo Pratt, not to mention the surveillance of thousands of political activists, many of whom had no connection to anything more felonious than a peaceful sit-in.

The bureau worked in concert with local Red Squads, police department units assigned to handle political crimes, and it was two San Francisco cops – Frank McCoy and Ed Erdelatz – who eventually pulled in a suspect for the Park station bombing.

That suspect, Ruben Scott, a supposed member of the Black Panthers

and the Black Liberation Army, allegedly confessed to the bombing after Erdelatz and McCoy tracked him to New Orleans in 1974. But Scott's statement was tossed out by judges at both the state and federal level who said it had been "unconstitutionally" obtained. Charges against Scott were dropped.

Erdelatz and McCoy are intriguing characters. In 1976 they sued famed investigative journalist Lowell Bergman, reporter Raul Ramirez, and the Hearst Corp. for libel after the San Francisco Examiner ran a series of stories suggesting the officers had coerced testimony from a witness connected to a Chinatown slaying. The cops prevailed at trial, winning \$4.5 million, but the state Supreme Court eventually reversed the decision.

Sources familiar with the current grand jury proceedings claim Erdelatz, now a detective with the Alameda County D.A.'s Office, is working for the FBI in a special capacity on the federal probe.

Erdelatz wouldn't confirm or deny involvement in the ongoing investigation. "I can't comment on that," he told me.

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Attorney Charles Bourdon is a gray-haired, cautious man who operates out of an office just across Bryant Street from the Hall of Justice. Bourdon represents somebody who's been contacted by the grand jury, and he has developed a sense of the broad dimensions of the probe from speaking to other attorneys whose clients have been subpoenaed. "We believe they're seeking an indictment," Bourdon says. "They've asked a number of people, including my client, to produce fingerprints and palm prints."

According to Bourdon, the federal agents are taking a "scattershot approach," contacting numerous figures once associated with the Weather Underground, the Black Panthers, the Black Liberation Army, and other groups. The lawyer claims the agents are laying the same line on all the suspects they talk to: We know you were involved, tell us everything.

The tactic bothers Bourdon. From his perspective, he says, "They're trying to scare people. They're instilling fear in people who were dissidents in the 1960s and '70s. I don't know what they're hoping to get out of this."

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