



When Richard Nixon and Spiro Tefanos  
were still young politicians.

A Year in History

# 1971

THE YEAR OF THE FIVE-DIGIT RECORDING TAPE

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## F I L M

1971

Maximum Pictures • 2014

Reviewed by Douglas M. Charles

For decades, dating from the 1930s, J. Edgar Hoover's FBI maintained a carefully crafted public image. Eventually rising to the level of mythology, this image touted the professionalism of FBI agents, the employment of scientific investigative techniques, and the above-reproach nature of the Bureau. The reality, of course, was markedly different. Hoover's FBI after 1936 all but abandoned criminal investigations as a priority in favor of non-criminal intelligence gathering and instead focused on radical political activity, increased its own bureaucratic power while trying to influence American opinion and events, and protected American culture from what Hoover saw as un-American forces. Hoover's long-maintained, if fictitious, public image was shattered in 1971 after a group of otherwise ordinary, publicly spirited citizens broke into an FBI office and pilfered then leaked FBI documents that confirmed the reality of the FBI's activities. The film *1971* successfully details this break-in and the resulting public exposure of FBI activity.

*1971* is a documentary film that effectively employs historical reenactments of the break-in. While this technique often fails to impress professional historians, because it is so well done in *1971* and inserted alongside interviews with actual break-in participants, I think the format works well. The film also includes interviews with former *Washington Post* journalist Betty L. Medsger, one of the journalists originally offered the stolen FBI documents and who published excerpts of the documents in the *Post*. (In 2014 she published a book, *The Burglary*:

*The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI*, in which she revealed for the first time the identities of the burglars and their stories.) Further boosting the film's documentary credentials, *1971* includes commentary from the dean of FBI historians, Athan Theoharis. All of these elements, together, make this a strong and compelling documentary.

The Media burglars—who styled themselves the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI—were a collection of young activists led by Haverford College physics professor Bill Davidon and also included John C. Raines, a professor of religion at Temple University. Motivated by the tragedy of the Vietnam War and the momentous events of 1968 (the Tet offensive, the My Lai massacre, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy) and inspired by draft-resistance activists who burgled local draft boards and stole documents to disrupt conscription, Davidon concluded that some sort of nonviolent disruption tactic was needed to expose the FBI's suppression of dissent.

Davidon's group avoided security-heavy FBI field offices and focused on an FBI resident agency, a small office with minimal security staffed by only a dozen or so agents and located in a suburban Philadelphia apartment building. One member of the Commission who had studied locksmithing picked the office door; the group then stuffed about one thousand documents into suitcases and then departed. They sorted the documents, wearing gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints, and copied them on Xerox machines at Haverford and Temple. The group leaked the documents

to three newspapers and two politicians. Only the *Washington Post* decided to publish the documents, which proved the FBI had engaged heavily in monitoring and suppressing political dissent; all of the other recipients, including Sen. George McGovern, returned the stolen documents to the FBI.

The revelation of nefarious and illegal FBI activity was a watershed moment. For the first time the public had hard evidence—actual FBI documents—that shattered the FBI's mythic image. The documents allowed others to uncover the FBI's illegal and extensive COINTELPRO disruption program, which subsequently led to congressional investigations of the American intelligence community. The break-in also made it possible for scholars to study FBI primary documents. The film *1971* details all of this, and more, in an engaging and compelling way. The Media break-in was a central event in the exposure of controversial government activity in the early 1970s, and this important film brings these never-before-known and compelling details to the broader public. ■■■

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