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F.B.I. Admits Planting a Rumor To Discredit Jean Seberg in 1970

By WENDELL RAWLS JR. SEPT. 15, 1979

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 14 — The Federal Bureau of Investigation acknowledged today that its agents plotted in 1970 to besmirch the reputation of Jean Seberg, the actress who committed suicide last week, by planting a rumor with news organizations that she was pregnant by high-ranking member of the Black Panther Party.

The action against Miss Seberg, part of the F.B.I.'s counterintelligence program COINTELPRO, was intended to discredit her support of the black nationalist movement.

According to a document dated April 27, 1970, the Los Angeles office of the F.B.I. requested permission from J. Edgar Hoover, then Director of the bureau, to publicize Miss Seberg's pregnancy, saying it was "felt the possible publication of Seberg's plight could cause her embarrassment and serve to cheapen her image with the general public."

Former Husband Assails Bureau

Romain Gary, the prominent French author and diplomat who was Miss Seberg's husband in 1970, said at a news conference in Paris last week that the baby was his and that the F.B.I. had destroyed the actress's life.

In releasing the documents today the bureau's Director, William H. Webster, said the F.B.I. no longer engaged in such activities. Nothing in the documents or in

Mr. Webster's statement indicated whether bureau officials believed the rumor to be true.

In their letter to headquarters, the Los Angeles agents suggested that the rumor be leaked to Hollywood gossip columnists by means of a letter from a fictitious person and assured headquarters that, "Usual precautions would be taken by the Los Angeles Division to preclude identification of the Bureau as the source of the letter if approval is granted."

The office suggested that the letter take this form:

"I was just thinking about you and remembered I still owe you a favor. So I was in Paris last week and ran into Jean Seberg who was heavy with baby. I thought she and Romain had gotten together again but she confided the child belonged to [name deleted] of the Black Panthers. The dear girl is getting around. Anyway, I thought you might get a scoop on the others."

Headquarters granted approval, with this caveat: "... to insure the success of your plan, Bureau feels it would be better to wait approximately two additional months until Seberg's pregnancy would be obvious to everyone."

Headquarters also said, "Jean Seberg has been a financial supporter of the BPP and should be neutralized. Her current pregnancy by [name deleted] while still married affords an opportunity for such effort."

Within two weeks after that memorandum was sent, Joyce Haber, whose gossip column appeared in The Los Angeles Times, wrote about a "Miss A." The column described Miss Seberg at length, then closed with:

"And now, according to all those really 'in' international sources, Topic A is the baby Miss A is expecting and its father. Papa's said to be a rather prominent Black Panther."

Column Sent to Headquarters

Two weeks after the column appeared, the F.B.I.'s Los Angeles office forwarded it to Washington with a notation that it related to the prior communications between the office and headquarters.

Upon releasing the documents today, Mr. Webster said in a written statement: "The days when the F.B.I. used derogatory information to combat advocates of unpopular causes have long since passed. We are out of that business forever."

"The collection and dissemination of information today is carefully regulated by privacy statutes and by Attorney General guidelines which will soon be embodied as

a part of a legislative charter for the F.B.I.," he said. "Criminal conduct is the key requirement for all domestic investigations of the F.B.I."

Miss Seberg was found last week in Paris, wrapped in a blanket and lying in the back seat of her automobile. She died of an overdose of barbiturates and left a suicide note. She was 40 years old.

Names Deleted From Papers

The bureau could not say today how many celebrities or others had been harassed or otherwise adversely affected by COINTELPRO activities similar to those directed at Miss Seberg. However, the bureau's animus toward the Rev. Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr. and its activities against him are well documented.

As with all documents released by the F.B.I., those relating to Miss Seberg were issued with names of all other living persons deleted. The Bureau would not name the "sensitive source" who provided the tip about the pregnancy nor the official who authorized the action on it, except to say that it was a headquarters supervisor.

Reaction to Baby's Death

Mr. Gary said at the news conference that his wife was seven months pregnant when she read articles about her and a Black Panther. He said Miss Seberg complained immediately of labor contractions and was hospitalized. The baby, a girl, was delivered by emergency Caesarian section and died three days later.

According to Mr. Gary, Miss Seberg attempted suicide every year thereafter on the anniversary of the child's death. Her husband at the time of her death, Ahmed Hasni, an Algerian actor, said she had suicidal tendencies.

Miss Seberg said in an interview in 1974 that she had "cracked up" after the baby's death. She took the child to her hometown of Marshalltown, Iowa, for burial.

"I did the whole deal," she said. "We opened the coffin and took 180 photographs and everybody in Marshalltown who was curious what color the baby was got a chance to check it out. A lot of them came to look."

When Newsweek magazine published in 1970 a short news article about Miss Seberg and her baby by "a black activist she met in California," she and Mr. Gary filed a libel suit and won \$10,000.

Miss Haber, who lost her job at The Los Angeles Times in 1975, said in a telephone interview today, "If I were used by the F.B.I., I didn't know it. To my knowledge, I didn't know anyone with the F.B.I. then and I don't now."

United Press International

Jean Seberg's son, Diego, places a rose on his mother's coffin at her funeral in Paris. At right is Romain Gary, the actress's former husband.

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