

F.B.I. Followed Cesar Chavez, Paper Reports

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F.B.I. agents followed the farm labor leader Cesar Chavez for more than seven years, investigating reports he was a Communist or "subversive," The Los Angeles Times reported today.

Investigators kept a secret watch on Mr. Chavez in the 1960's and 1970's under the Johnson and Nixon Administrations and compiled a 1,434-page file on him, The Times reported. The newspaper obtained a copy of the file under the Freedom of Information Act, which provides public access to Government records.

Mr. Chavez, who died in 1993, led the first successful farm workers union and a national boycott of grapes. He pressed for a 1975 California state law that guaranteed farm workers union elections with secret ballots.

Last year, President Clinton called Mr. Chavez "a Moses figure" as he posthumously gave him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The Times said the rationale for the Federal Bureau of Investigation's intense interest in Mr. Chavez was unclear from his file. No evidence of Communist or subversive activities was found while hundreds of agents kept tabs on him and on the farm workers' marches, pickets and meetings.

In the first entry, dated Oct. 8, 1965, a bureau informer suggests to investigators that Mr. Chavez "possibly has a subversive background." Another person "has a file on Chavez allegedly showing a communist background," the file says.

Papers in the file show the bureau alerting the military, local law enforcement and the Secret Service about upcoming farm worker activities.

The F.B.I.'s director at the time, J. Edgar Hoover, was kept apprised of even mundane developments, the Times said.

Jerry Cohen, who was general counsel to the farm workers union and who reviewed the file, said of the inquiry: "It was a witch hunt and an exercise in guilt by association. I was just amazed at how dumb and what a waste it was -- and to what extent the abuse went on."

Asked to comment, the F.B.I. said the information in the Chavez file was "collected during an earlier era in our history when different concerns drove the government, the news media and public sentiment."

