

HOW THE FEDS MONITORED MIKE ROYKO The Internal FBI File of a Famed Chicago Journalist

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NEW YORK, N.Y. (APB) — He rankled politicians, outraged homosexuals, annoyed African-Americans, irritated feminists, and sparked Mexicans to protest. By the time he died last year at age 64, Mike Royko, the cantankerous Chicago columnist who became a household name, had rubbed a lot of people the wrong way.

The FBI didn't like him much, either. In Royko's 86-page FBI file, recently obtained by APBNews under the Freedom of Information Act, the bureau takes issue with three of the satirist's daily columns that — tongue-in-cheek or not — skewered the FBI.

In his heyday, the 1972 Pulitzer Prize-winning Royko wrote five columns a week for the Chicago Daily News, then the Chicago Sun-Times and later the Tribune.

An FBI spokesman said yesterday that agency policies had changed and that journalists were no longer monitored for what they wrote. "We under no circumstances keep records or files on journalists who write unflattering or negative pieces regarding the FBI," said Steven Barry, a supervisory special agent in Washington, D.C.

Barry characterized Royko's file as a relic of a bygone era. "It was a different time in the Bureau's existence and in the country's existence."

Newspaper responds to FBI pressure

The earliest column flagged in Royko's FBI file, and the one that drew the most ire, dates from his days at the Daily News. Published Dec. 24, 1964, "Fifth [Amendment] Was Popular The Day Justice Truly Was Blind" describes a pressroom open house in the then-new federal building.

"Reporters, judges, FBI men, government prosecutors, private attorneys and assorted federal officials were standing around drinking, bragging and fibbing to each other," Royko wrote in his trademark irreverent style.

M.W. Johnson, the special agent in charge in Chicago, immediately fired off a memorandum to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover — and contacted Royko's executive editor, Lawrence Fanning, the FBI file shows.

Johnson called the piece a "complete fabrication and unscrupulous reporting." So Fanning pulled all references to the FBI from subsequent editions of the paper.

This hardly soothed Johnson, who continued, "The bureau is well aware of the irresponsible reporting on the part of the Chicago press, and the enclosed column ... is typical ..., particularly as far as the Daily News is concerned. They are constantly seeking a sensational type of material which will sell their newspaper, often times having very little regard for the truth."

FBI memorandum slams Royko

Royko “is the type of writer who never has a good word to say about anybody or anything,” Johnson concluded — an assessment that pops up in another memorandum after Royko’s column of June 24, 1969.

In this missive, FBI section chief M.A. Jones brings Royko to the attention of Thomas E. Bishop, the assistant director of the crime records division, and Cartha DeLoach, the assistant to the FBI director. Royko had written about playing golf with an unnamed member of the bureau who, he alleged, spoke with Hoover about the contents of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s FBI file.

The information had been gathered through the bugging of King’s bedroom and the wiretaps of his phones, Royko said, and had been deliberately leaked to the columnist for purposes of discrediting the slain civil-rights leader.

‘Plain old mud slinging’

“None of the things this ex-FBI agent told me reflected in any way on Dr. King’s ‘loyalty,’ his ‘Americanism,’ or seemed to be remotely related to ‘national security,’” Royko wrote. It was “plain old mud slinging.”

He compared the bureau to Big Brother and added, “If that’s what Dr. King’s file was used for, then I’ll gladly second [columnist Carl] Rowan’s suggestion that Hoover be replaced. The scandal sheet business should be left to private industry.”

To his FBI superiors, Jones wrote, “It is not felt that [name deleted] or Royko deserves the dignity of a reply.”

The Welcome Wagon lady as FBI spy

The last column photocopied into Royko’s file passed without comment. Dated March 25, 1977, it tells the story of a Chicago woman who had been active in the peace movement and requested her own FBI file. According to Royko, the woman told him she learned that “the Welcome Wagon lady” — a neighbor who visited new residents bearing coupons and advice on local services — had spied on her for the FBI.

Although Royko kept the woman anonymous, she appeared on the Donahue show about a month later as part of a panel on “Stopping the Super Snoops, a Sober Look at U.S. Intelligence.”

Article linked congressman to mob

Correspondence from Democratic U.S. Congressman Frank Annunzio of the 7th District of Illinois to Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst also appears in Royko’s file.

Annunzio had addressed an article in the July 29, 1972, issue of Human Events claiming that Royko had revealed a secret Justice Department report. The report allegedly described how mob boss Sam Giancana had asked Annunzio’s predecessor, Roland V. Libonati, to step down and picked Annunzio to take his place.

Annunzio wanted to know if this report existed. “I have never engaged in any criminal activities,” he wrote, “nor to my knowledge been associated with any criminals in my entire life.”

Threats to Royko

Royko's pen also drew the attention of two vocal readers – one who remains anonymous to this day.

In 1971, Royko received a threatening, hand-written rant from a reader sarcastically calling him “a true patriot” after publishing a column on John F. Kennedy and his brothers. The FBI fingerprinted the letter but was not able to determine the sender's identity.

Another time, the bureau discovered that from 1973 to 1976, Royko had been hounded at the Daily News by a man named Francis Jude Blakely. Royko described Blakely as an escaped mental patient-and even wrote about him in July 1973.

Blakely apparently dropped by Royko's office often to chat, once asking the columnist for help in running his mayoral campaign. He frequently referred to himself as “Michael Corleone,” Royko told the Bureau. But when he sent Royko a letter with the mysterious message, “I won't be calling you any more, but you'll be hearing from me [in] other ways,” the FBI took him seriously enough to contact Assistant U.S. Attorney John L. Sullivan.

Richard G. Weld, the special agent in charge of the Chicago office, later reported that because the letter contained “no real direct threat to Royko,” Sullivan found that there was no reason to prosecute Blakely.

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