'The Burglary' details a daring break-in at an FBI office in 1971

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

On March 8, 1971, while Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier were fighting for the heavyweight championship of the world in Madison Square Garden, eight anti-Vietnam War protesters broke into an FBI office in Media, a small town west of Philadelphia.

They made off with every file in the office and, within weeks, sent copies of hundreds of documents to journalists and members of Congress. The public disclosures that ensued revealed a secret FBI that used deception, disinformation and violence against people, including Martin Luther King Jr., who director J. Edgar Hoover deemed subversives -- to (in the language of one directive) "enhance the paranoia [to] get the point across there is an FBI agent behind every mailbox."

Despite a massive manhunt, the burglars, whose leader was a physics professor at Haverford College, were never caught and remained silent about what they did. Until now. Seven of them have been found by Betty Medsger, a former professor of journalism at San Francisco University, who, not coincidentally, was the first reporter to receive a packet of Media office documents and write about them (for The Washington Post).

In "The Burglary," Ms. Medsger tells their story -- and, with Edward Snowden's recent NSA revelations very much on her mind -- celebrates them as American heroes. An often suspenseful narrative of the break-in, the book also tracks the response of the FBI and, most important, reviews the impact of the revelations (which brought to light the unconstitutional and illegal COINTELPRO operations) on the reputations of Hoover and the FBI.

The Media documents, Ms. Medsger demonstrates, laid bare an FBI that did not spend most of its time fighting crime but, instead, used its virtually unchecked power to monitor and harass people on the basis of their opinions, appearance, lifestyles and associates (devoting two cases to conservative individuals or organizations and 200 to liberals and radicals).
And the bureau collected rumors and nasty shards of information on the personal lives of politicians that Hoover used to remain in office. Ms. Medsger endorses the recommendation of Judge Laurence Silberman, who was appointed to the U.S. Circuit Court in Washington, D.C., in 1985 by President Reagan, that Hoover's name be removed from the headquarters building of the FBI in the nation's capital, thereby repudiating "a very sad chapter in American history."

"The Burglary" is well-researched, informative and often compelling. The book would have benefited, however, from the services of a skilled copy editor. Awkwardly written and repetitious, it could have been considerably shorter. And its organization is, at times, idiosyncratic.

Ms. Medsger doesn't describe the backgrounds, formative experiences and motives of the burglars, for example, until the latter part of the book. And she decides to begin her analysis of Attorney General Harlan Fiske Stone's decision in 1924 to appoint Hoover acting director of what was then called the Bureau of Investigation, on page 522.

That said, "The Burglary" succeeds in making a strong and timely case against government agencies, shrouded in secrecy, that threaten the constitutional rights of American citizens. Set in motion by the Media burglary, she acknowledges, the FBI was subjected to its first major overhaul since 1924.

The most important and enduring reform, she points out, was Congress' amendment of the Freedom of Information Act, which required agencies to respond to requests to supply records. But the tide of reform receded, she argues, and in the 1980s Ronald Reagan began to "turn the clock back at FBI headquarters to the Hoover days."

Following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, "a tyranny-ready technology surveillance infrastructure" -- the National Security Agency -- was put in place by President George W. Bush and "expanded" by President Obama, who, Ms. Medsger writes, had "promised unparalleled transparency at the start of his first administration."

Collecting massive amounts of data from the "private" communications of Americans, she insists, "has led to minimal benefit regarding the discovery of terrorists' plans." J. Edgar Hoover, it seems, may have had the last laugh. Paranoia (or, more precisely, evidence-based fear) now exists, Ms. Medsger concludes, that a government agent is behind every mailbox, Skype conversation, Internet search, and Facebook message. And she wonders whether someone, like her burglars, will come forward to help restore a proper balance between freedom and security.