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## Deep Pockets and Determination

STEPHEN R. MACKINNON

*Gimme Some Truth: The John Lennon FBI Files*, by Jon Wiener. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. 312 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 0-520-22246-6.

**T**he narrative in *Gimme Some Truth* runs a slim and trim 104 pages. The story is familiar and well told: the FBI and CIA were put to political use in 1972 by President Richard Nixon (at the suggestion of Senator Strom Thurmond) to safeguard Nixon's reelection. Not startling news. The new twist is the case study involving the greatest pop culture celebrity icon of the 1960s and early 1970s—John Lennon of Beatles fame. For a while, engineering Lennon's deportation before the Republican National Convention seemed to be the Haldeman-Nixon-Hoover goal. The more interesting and original subtheme is the way Wiener shows in painstaking detail how the declassification and discovery of the CIA/FBI paper trail under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) dragged on for fourteen years of litigation under four presidents. Supported by ACLU lawyers, Wiener sued the government to recant deletions and release suppressed documents—an effort that few scholars can afford to make. The process began after Lennon's death in January 1983 in the shadow of the Carter presidency and ended in 1997 under Bill Clinton.

Part II of the book reproduces over 150 pages of contested documents with key parts first blacked out and then unveiled after laborious litigation. For the uninitiated to see what the FBI typically produces under FOIA is certainly instructive. As Wiener points out, the documents reveal just how confused, inefficient, and paranoid the FBI was in its investigation of the Lennon matter. Over time, declassification policies were interpreted by generations of FOIA bureaucrats and lawyers in wildly inconsistent ways. Protecting sources and national security were the reasons most often invoked for the censorship of what usually proved to be quite innocuous information. The

FBI's own investigation showed Lennon to be innocent of the charge of intending to disrupt the Republican National Convention. The CIA's involvement was blatantly unconstitutional and suggestive of dirty tricks.

None of these points are new; they have been well documented by scholars like Athan Theoharis since the 1970s. What is impressive is the tenacity of both sides during the fourteen-year struggle to expose the documents in which the deep pockets and determination of Wiener and his ACLU colleagues were pitted against the normally effective stalling tactics employed by the FBI. An interesting sidebar which in the end made no difference to the outcome was the sad story of FBI informant Julie Maynard, who ultimately cooperated with Wiener in the case as a "protected" source who wanted to be revealed. The key factor in producing the settlement in 1997 was the partial liberalization of FOIA guidelines and practices under Clinton. Hurray for Senator Dennis DeConcini of Arizona for pushing liberalizing legislation through Congress.

However, from the point of view of scholarly editing, there is a more distasteful and less scholarly side to the volume. The book has a clear political purpose. It represents Wiener's crusade in print against U.S. government secrecy. Except of course when lives are at stake, a democracy must not tolerate government secrecy. Wiener's hope is that an exhaustive study of the Lennon case will spotlight the issue. But just as Nixon used the FBI and the CIA politically in 1972, Wiener is using Lennon from the same period to make a political point. He also tediously documents every scrap of national publicity given to the Lennon deportation story and to his own effort to revive it. Highlighted are Wiener's interviews in the national media through the 1980s and 1990s. The editor-scholar Wiener and the ACLU lawyers are heroes—righteous knights in shining armor—and the reader needs to know this. Wiener (the author of a 1994 biography of the great man) seems to be trying to attach himself to the celebrity cult surrounding John Lennon.

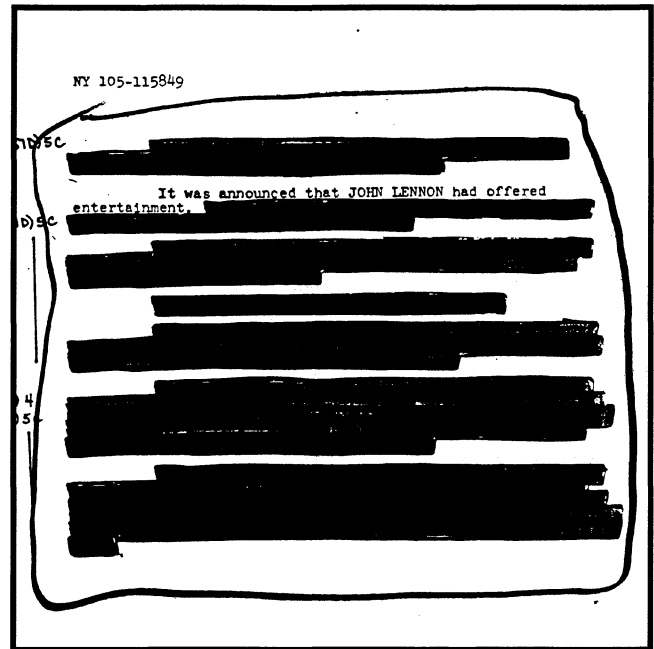
At another level, none of the above is surprising, considering that Wiener is an active editor of the liberal-left *Nation*. The book reads much like an extended op-ed column from this esteemed journal. Personally, I agree with

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Stephen R. MacKinnon, professor of history at Arizona State University, is the author of several books on China. He used the Freedom of Information Act in researching the biography of Agnes Smedley that he wrote with Janice R. MacKinnon.

Weiner's politics and stance on government secrecy, having dueled myself less successfully with the FBI over FOIA records. But like *The Nation* itself these days, Weiner's book is too caught up in the celebrity cult of Lennon. Adding to the book's polemical qualities are the redundancies spread throughout, especially between the annotation of the documents (part II) and the narrative of part I.

In short, despite the fact that two-thirds of the volume reproduces documents, what Wiener has written is too polemical, redundant, and distasteful for a scholarly audience. One wonders why the University of California Press published it, unless of course because of the martyred celebrity appeal of Lennon and the promise of boosted sales. Left unexamined in scholarly terms are major questions such as why and how rock music wielded real political force in North America in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead Wiener has chosen to beat to death with documents the Lennon deportation case of 1972 in order to highlight his ongoing battle against government secrecy, the hypocrisy of FOIA, and the legal strategies employed by combatants on both sides of the struggle.



*Before and after: An informer's report as first released by the FBI (above) and as it was released after litigation*

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A March 1 or 4th action date was proposed. The SWP people called for a mass demonstration.

It was announced that JOHN LENNON had offered entertainment. One route proposed was a march from Columbus Circle to Bryant Park, or Central Park.

Someone suggested that all British people, and all British organizations be harrassed, as the Jewish Defense League does with the Soviets.

A boycott of British goods was proposed.

It was suggested that the Irish ask the Chinese in the Hotel Roosevelt (Red Chinese) to talk to NIXON when he is in Peking. This idea was strongly put down.

Three members of the SWP (if not more) were named to the steering committee: RAY "MARKY" (1930-local of the New York Public Library System), GENE "BERTINE" of Local 1199, and NAT LONDON, formerly of the Peace Action Coalition. In all 28 names were accepted for the committee.

The Irish Republican Clubs are aware of the presence of SWP people, and they are watching them. MARY COTTER was a spokesman for the Irish group, and she's a SWP person (this occurred at a BOAC demonstration previous to this meeting), and as such served the interests of the Irish group rather than the SWP.