Life as a Terrorist

Uncovering my FBI file

William T. Vollmann

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VOLLMANN said that he is "an American first and would never do anything to hurt this country."

— Department of Homeland Security,
report of investigation, 2005

1.

In 1966, John Steinbeck completed a book called *America and Americans* — an appropriate subject for the writer I have always considered the most American of us all. Ruefully clear-eyed and sometimes furious about our national faults ("From the first we have treated our minorities abominably"), this brave, decent, sentimental man, a sincere thinker but not a deep one, a patriot who loved the idea of freedom — which for him included the proposition that a migrant farmworker deserves to hold his head up as high as any priest or president — will have my affection as long as I live. In *America and Americans,* he gently ridicules and sweetly praises the "home dream." Our national form of this archetype is predicated on memories of a log cabin or sod house in the wilderness, a place we built for ourselves according to our own free notions, ours to cherish or abandon, and, most of all, "a place to which a man could return with joy and slough off his weariness and his fears."

In Steinbeck's time, the United States was increasingly prosperous and triumphalist. Americans, he feared, might be

> on the verge of moral and hence nervous collapse ... we have reached the end of the road and have no new path to take, no duty to carry out, and no purpose to fulfill.

Not quite half a century later, I offer this modest epilogue to his essay. The subject remains America and Americans; but my immediate aim is to shed however feeble a light on a semi-invisible yet increasingly omnipresent class: the Unamericans.

2.

How can I begin to characterize these interesting creatures? First and foremost, they do not truly honor the American Way of Life. Perhaps they love it in their way and even imagine that they are protecting it. But when it comes to people like you or me, they are quite willing to limit or violate it, to monitor and snoop.

Before I continue, let me add (and not only for their benefit) that I have no wish to hurt their feelings. I like nearly everyone I meet. Therefore, I might well enjoy the company of the people who spy on me. The FBI operative in New Haven who wrote my forensic profile possessed some talent with words and turned his phrases with apparent pleasure. As you will see, I like to imagine him growing bemused by

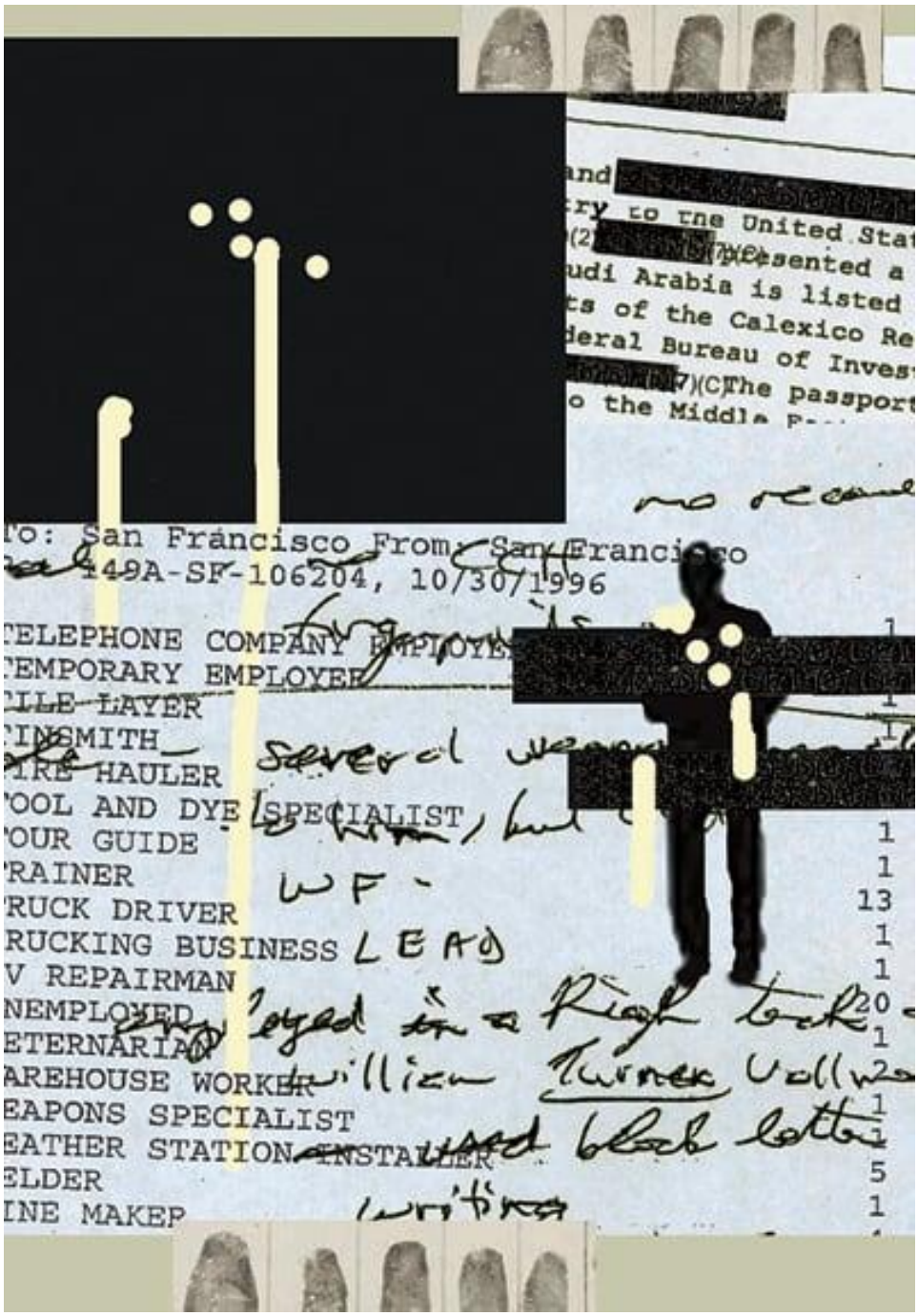

Illustration by Steven Dana

my life, and occasionally even tipping his hat, however wryly, to my experiences. His insinuations did pain me, but so does a bad review of my latest book.

I hereby imagine an attractive, thoughtful G-woman who from painstaking study of my Homeland Security file has come to realize that I love America; like her, I am a patriot and I am loyal; therefore she begs my forgiveness and comes to love me. If no such person were to materialize, I might well be satisfied with the following assurance: vollmann s-2047 cleared; surveillance terminated.

3.

My motives for writing this story are conventionally American. I value my freedom to be what others may not wish me to be. I am proud to read whichever book I want, from *The Satanic Verses* to S&M pictorials to the speeches of Saddam Hussein. Although I sometimes write about politics, I do not consider myself political — or is it in fact political to hold some degree of disrespect for whichever fellow citizens have been set in power over me? In this, if Steinbeck is to be believed, I am very American: "Americans almost without exception have a fear and a hatred of any perpetuation of power — political, religious, or bureaucratic." Yes, like my father, I am proud to be an American, at least sometimes. (Shortly before he died, in 2009, he told me: "I used to be proud to be an American. Now I'm ashamed.") I'm proud that when I'm ashamed I can say so without being hauled off to a secret prison. I must love any government that allows me to excoriate it.

I am an aging man, more or less satisfied with life, self-employed, able to turn down jobs that don't suit me, free to say no to almost anybody and accept the consequences. I have gotten out of the habit of being a "team player," if I ever was one. I am proud of this American Way of Life in which I am, at least in my own view, anyone's equal. These ideas that I have are predicated on the notion, common to my fading generation, that my private life is no one's business.

4.

This essay is mostly concerned with my FBI file. After a Freedom of Information Act request (the power of which act makes me proud again), an appeal, and a lawsuit, "*785* pages were reviewed and *294* pages are being released." I expect they hoarded more in their vaults, because "potentially responsive records were not in their expected location," and two attempts to find them "met with unsuccessful results." Also, "[i]n accordance with standard FBI practice, this response neither confirms nor denies the existence of your subject's name on any watch list." Gee whiz.

As for that other intelligence agency, please forgive me for having lost Civil Action No. 12–0939 (RLW) *William T. Vollman* [sic]*, Plaintiff,* v. *Central Intelligence Agency,*

Defendant. In their motion for summary judgment, that nest of Unamericans explained the following: "the CIA's Information and Privacy Coordinator asserted a Glomar response," which is to say that

> the CIA can neither confirm nor deny the existence or nonexistence of records responsive to [Plaintiff's] request [because] the fact of the existence or nonexistence of [such] records is currently and properly classified.

Or, in case you didn't get it, "the existence or nonexistence of responsive records is properly classified at the SECRET level." (My request for my NSA file is still pending.)

Fortunately, the FBI's pages, however redacted, do reflect, at least in places, personality and even opinion. Reading one's FBI file is rarely pleasant. The Unamericans do not snoop into our lives for the purpose of awarding us medals. There were a couple of things identified or identifiable people had said about me that I had not known they said, and that made me sad. These very few lines aside (along with such data as my Social Security number, the serial numbers of my guns, my private relationships with certain other subjects of investigation, and certain details of my friends' lives), I will now open my file to you.

But to make it comprehensible, let me first summarize my encounters with the bureau.

5.

In 1990, without a warrant, the FBI raided the San Francisco home of the photographer Jock Sturges, whom it suspected of possessing child pornography. Jock's photographs hang in some of the greatest museums in the world. Among other property, including his address books, letters, and negatives — not to mention his copy of *Lolita* — they confiscated his computer, on whose hard drive dwelled a draft of an introduction he had asked me to write for a book of his. While they were at it, the task force also seized negatives belonging to the street photographer Ken Miller, who happened to be renting a basement apartment below Jock. The misery and anxiety that they caused both these friends of mine persisted for years. I went to give Ken moral support at his FBI interrogation, and although the Unamericans excluded me, they left the door open; I will never forget their remorseless, insidious voices. So I dedicated a collection of short stories to Jock, Ken, and the FBI, at least one of whose agents actually read it as far as page 200 — the exact spot where the book, according to my file, "describes an FBI investigation which possibly concerns INTERSTATE TRANSPORTATION OF OBSCENE MATTER (145C-SF-90516)."

By the time they got around to me, the FBI had returned Ken's coolers of negatives to him, on each one the scribbled letters no kp — no kiddie porn. I had moved to New York City, but one day my doorman warned me in a dramatically low voice that the FBI had been looking for me. I was invited, not required, to cooperate, so I dropped

by their office to tell them (not entirely without my own brand of humor) my opinions. I did feel slightly uneasy in their office, but Steinbeck would have been proud of me: I stood up for Jock and for myself, as is reflected in my FBI file.

> VOLLMANN believes that is innocent of all wrong doing and that the FBI being a conservative organization is on nothing more than a witch hunt concerning .

I was helpful, oh, yes; I even brought nineteenth-century French Impressionist nudes with which to dazzle them, but those failed to make it into my interrogation report.

> As far as the pictures focusing *on* a lude [sic] exhibition of the genitals, VOLLMANN advised that to this is art. It is only the FBI that feels these pictures are pornographic.

Best of all, "VOLLMANN suggested" (my poor interrogators sound a little garbled here, but they must have meant something) "that not all sexual encounters between adult men and pre-adolescent children is child pornography." Jock was eventually exonerated. My FBI interrogation barely intimidated me, since my cooperation was voluntary. "So you don't wish to cooperate any longer?" they said when I left. "That's right," I said, and that was all.

In 2002, immediately following my return from Yemen to report on that country's sometimes gleeful observance of the previous year's September 11 attacks on the United States, I went to Mexico to continue a long-term research project there. On recrossing the border into Calexico, California, I and my companion, an American woman with a Middle Eastern name, were detained. The Yemeni stamp in my passport disturbed the patrolmen. (As Steinbeck remarked, "We spend our time searching for security, and hate it when we get it." By the way, he was also investigated by the FBI.) They kept us for a couple of hours. I remember that my companion was thirsty, and that they offered her only hot water to drink from the faucet in the restroom; the cold-water tap was broken. One of them disliked my expression and repeatedly said so. The other agents in sight were less rude than indifferent, unfeeling. No doubt they were accustomed to separating families, to making children weep, as indeed they had to do in order to get on in the world. The Unamericans went about their desk work. We were nothing to them. When at last they got some information or other on me — at the time I assumed it was the list of my international comings and goings, but from my FBI file I now know better — a female agent said in awe: "It reads just like a novel!," at which I felt ingenuously proud of all my travels. When they released us, I imagined that they had made an honest mistake.

In 2005, at this same port of entry in Calexico, I was detained again, this time in the company of an American woman whose passport showed that she had been born in Saudi Arabia. This time the Unamericans were more unpleasant. They kept us for

nearly seven hours. After a while they prohibited us from speaking to each other. We had to sit against the wall, gazing forward, denied permission to read a book or write a letter. Having finished with my wallet, they stood flipping through her private diary and making remarks that humiliated her. When I needed to urinate, they escorted me to the bathroom and stood watching. They fingerprinted us, which I found offensive but submitted to in silence, and they telephoned the FBI, at which I thought: "Oh, they interrogated me once, so they know me. They'll come here and let us go." She and I sat there a long time while those petty bullies of the Border Patrol whiled away their greasy hours. Then we got interviewed separately in the back office. For some reason (perhaps because, as you might have noticed, I personalize authority), I liked the woman from the FBI who interviewed me, and I still do. Stranger still, I felt that she liked me, or at least respected me. She was a calm, straightforward, affable person of late middle age. As I always do in such situations, I described my activities freely and fully. The station chief and one of his henchmen also sat in the room. I felt grateful that they did not appear to count for much in her presence. When we were finally dismissed, the station chief walked us to our car, from which they had proudly confiscated the most dangerous contraband they could find, a single orange. I had expected the chief to apologize to us — silly me! He stood there, watchful and glum. I remarked that since his officers had detained me once before and found me innocent, perhaps he could put some note in my file to prevent this from happening a third time. He colorlessly informed me that it was their right to detain me as often as they liked. There did not seem to be much else to talk about, so I offered him my hand, and he stared for a long time before he resentfully shook it.

Years later, when I was describing these two detentions to a private investigator, he inquired: Had I asked permission to leave? Surprised, I replied that I had not. The PI smiled and said: "When I was a police officer, I'd tell the suspect, 'Why don't you come with me?' I'd skate on the edge, make him think he had to come along but never actually say it. If he'd have asked me, 'Is this voluntary?,' I would have had to say yes. Next time you're detained, make sure you have to stay. If not, I wouldn't do it."

I have been detained, intimidated, and menaced by officials in other countries, but my emotions in those situations, although they sometimes approached true fear, did not leave me with any lasting resentments, because in each case I was merely on assignment, doing something I knew to be dangerous and of limited duration, in a place that was not my place. But the United States is my home, the place where I can return to slough off my weariness and fears. When I think of that station chief in Calexico and his staff, I feel rage. I begin to see how government haters are made. Then I pick up the newspaper and read about, for example, the filmmaker Laura Poitras, who was instrumental recently in leaking documents detailing the NSA's Prism surveillance program:

> She estimates she has been detained more than 40 times on returning to the United States. She has been questioned for hours about her meetings

> abroad, her credit cards and notes have been copied, and after one trip her laptop, camera and cellphone were seized for 41 days.

Her case boils my blood. Every now and then I remember the people my government detains at Guantánamo year after year without trial and I try to put myself in their shoes. This is not a thought experiment I enjoy.

My three encounters with the Unamericans would hardly justify this essay were they not, so to speak, the hoofprints of the interesting creatures I seek to track.

6.

Reader, would you be surprised to learn that you had been a terrorist suspect? Perhaps you remember that zealous environmentalist, the Unabomber, whose critique of our society was not entirely wrong but whose aims and methods were poisoned by a lack of empathy? I read his manifesto when it was published. Angry, pitiless, certain of its righteousness, intelligent but fatally incapable of proportionality and discrimination, it made a repellent impression. His mail bombs accomplished nothing but the creation of fear, grief, and hatred. When he was captured I felt far from sorry.

When I finally received my FBI file, such as it was — namely, two higgledy-piggledy batches of papers, out of order, padded with duplicates, some of which they had forgotten to redact — I learned that I had been Unabomber Suspect Number S-2047:

> S-2047 William T. Vollman. Predicated on a referral from a citizen. Investigation has determined that Vollman, a professional author, is widely travelled, however, existing travel records for him do not eliminate him as a viable suspect.

In addition, two subpoenas are called for, for redacted reasons. Aside from one line, its contents too garbled by redactions to make sense of, the rest of the page containing these morsels of information is blanked out paragraph by paragraph.

"Predicated on referral from a citizen": Yes, I was denounced by a fellow citizen, one who made his case in part by presenting the FBI with five of my books. Who might this patriot have been? As Steinbeck put it, "The desire and will to spy on, to denounce, to threaten, and to punish, while not an American tendency, nevertheless inflames a goodly number of Americans." This fellow, whom I will henceforth refer to as Ratfink, must have been very busy, for he "has begun a 'file' on VOLLMANN, which he provided to interviewers and which consists of the 27 enclosures herewith." Evidently Ratfink, like so many of his ilk, preferred to live in shadow:

> I MUST STRESS THAT I DO NOT WANT MY IDENTITY DISCLOSED FOR ANY REASON TO THE PRESS OR EVEN NONESSENTIAL MEMBERS OF THE FBI... I WILL REFUSE TO HAVE ANY OFFICIAL

> FUNCTION AT ALL TO DO WITH THIS CASE, SUCH AS COURT PROCEEDINGS, ETC.

At first, I do not mind admitting, I was thrilled to have something new to report to my friends. No other member of our circle had ever been mistaken for the Unabomber! Their expressions of astonishment flattered my vanity; I nearly mistook myself for someone important. But presently I began to feel offended, and when I learned that the Unamericans had watched me for years, indeed surveilled my house, I felt, as people say after burglaries, violated.

Why did Ratfink drop a dime on me, and why have the Unamericans spent your tax dollars observing me ever since?

A redacted person, either Ratfink himself or a functionary in the New Haven FBI to whom he tattled, "noted that anti-growth and anti-progress themes persist throughout each VOLLMANN work." This was news to me. In my historical novels about Amerindians and Europeans I certainly expressed my sadness about broken treaties and genocide, but was that being "anti-progress"? This may seem like a small matter, but Ratfink denounced me to the government on the basis of the content of my novels and short stories (no non-fiction appears among his offerings); in effect, his case relied on literary criticism. My mind boggled.

Throughout the file, the Unamericans grasp at literary straws:

> UNABOMBER's moniker FC may correlate with title of VOLLMANN's largest work, novel Fathers and Crows. That novel reportedly best exemplifies VOLLMANN's anti-progress, anti-industrialist themes/beliefs/value systems and VOLLMANN, himself, has described it as his most difficult work.

Difficulty having little to do, I would have thought, with my purported dangerousness, but never mind. It is perplexing to watch the Unamericans weave their web of suspicion around a novel set mostly in Canada in the seventeenth century. But I ought to forgive them, since the word "reportedly" implies that they, like many readers before them, never made it through *Fathers and Crows*. "UNABOMBER, not unlike VOLLMANN, has pride of authorship and insists his book be published without editing."

One of the most fascinating FBI documents, which thanks to redaction requires reading in the imaginative fashion of Sappho's fragments, might well be an "airtel" often mentioned in the file. Most everything in the airtel is in capital letters, after the style of that late-twentieth-century machine epoch, although the first page bears the following handwritten gloss, which appears to be no compliment to my complexion: "Per S[pecial] A[gent] [REDACTED], person seen by [REDACTED] had no acne scars." ("Poor Dad!" said my daughter. "I don't think your face is pockmarked at all.") The printed text, addressed from New Haven to Sacramento, San Francisco, and nine other American cities — as well as to the magnificent FBI director himself — precedence

Illustration by Steven Dana

PRIORITY, is fifteen pages long and includes assertions that the characters "in this book resort to terrorist activity and torture to drive out the French missionaries." There you have it: Iroquois torture (which I describe without great sympathy) is considered by the Unamericans as akin to terrorism! Of course the Iroquois were defending their homeland, which at that time not even crooked treaties had taken away from them; *no European* at this time laid claim to all those territories; furthermore, there was no United States of America.

The FBI did have one plausible point against me, or so they thought:

> While VOLLMANN's appearance varies over the years, New Haven notes strong physical resemblance to UNABOMBER composites. New Haven provided color video prints of book jackets to Sacramento via referenced airtel.

If I looked like their impression of the Unabomber, they had to check me out. How close the resemblance was, you may judge. I shaved only when I felt like it. In the famous composite sketch, he too is stubbly. He is wearing dark glasses. I sometimes wore sunglasses. So far as I can tell, that was the whole of their case — but, fortunately, the Unamericans' investigation might yet be saved by another "New Haven comment: Based upon a cursory review of the enclosures, behaviorists and forensic psychologists would have a 'field day' analyzing VOLLMANN through his writings and interviews." No doubt they would, for here goes: an informant, presumably Ratfink,

> suggests VOLLMANN has a death wish ... Reportedly, at age 9, VOLLMANN's younger sister (age 6) drowned in a backyard pond in New Hampshire while he was supposed to be watching over her. Guilt from that situation may have had a profound effect on VOLLMANN.

In a different version of their airtel, not in all caps, the Unamericans told my life story thus: "He was a meek pitiful boy tormented by bullies, perhaps now gaining his revenge." In their narrative excitement they forgot to redact the name of the woman with whom I lived ("perhaps this cohabitation precluded him from making bombs"), and they left whole the following familiar name, which was redacted in other versions:

> If the terrorist group FC does indeed consist of multiple persons, rather than a lone person, one might consider Vollmann's sidekick the photographer Ken Miller as an accomplice. This is pure supposition based on the fact that Vollmann reveres Miller and doesn't seem to do anything without him.

7.

The Unamericans noted that I attended Deep Springs, a selective junior college, and graduated summa cum laude from Cornell. Hence the New Haven comment: "Individuals this bright are capable of most anything, including eluding detection for 17

years." This made me glow, as did the following: "By all accounts, VOLLMANN is exceedingly intelligent and possessed with an enormous ego."

Having nothing better to do, the Unamericans circled and circled around my alma mater.

> VOLLMANN'S PHILOSOPHY IS BASED IN THE TEACHINGS AT DEEP SPRINGS, WHERE HE WAS TAUGHT TO BE AUTONOMOUS AND URGED TO BE A "TRUSTEE OF THE NATION" AND TO GO OUT INTO THE WORLD TO CHANGE IT. SAYS THE UNABOMBER: "WE WOULD LIKE IDEALLY TO BREAK DOWN ALL SOCIETY INTO VERY SMALL, COMPLETELY AUTONOMOUS UNITS."

I wonder how many agents dropped unsmilingly by my old college, and how many files and subfiles it now merits.

More jacket copy for my next book, courtesy of New Haven:

> He revels in immersing himself in the seamy, underside of life. He reportedly has used drugs (crack cocaine) extensively. He reportedly owns many guns and a flame-thrower.

(I would love to own a flamethrower.)

And I turned out to be still more sinister than that! After perusing catalogue copy I had written for some of my handmade artist's books, New Haven had deduced that

> VOLLMANN's meticulous nature, as described above, is consistent with manufacture of and presentation of UNABOM devices. Several witnesses have commented that UNABOM packages appeared "seamless" and "too pretty to open."

Moreover, the Unamericans guessed (wrongly) that I "would be familiar with chemistry and possibly explosives." Now for the grand finale: "How many challenges remain for WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN? Serial bombing, perhaps? As a means to change the world?"

And so, I got my very own suspect lead sheet, number Sub K 508, opened on May 11, 1995.

8.

There are times when New Haven takes on an avuncular quality, especially in my Unabomber period, and then I rather like him, as when he exclaims over how much I have experienced in my (then) short life; at other times, however, he delves into my private tragedies in what I consider an ugly way. I confess that I felt offended when I

read New Haven's account of my colleagues' deaths in Bosnia in 1994: "[I]mmediately after the attack he drags the bodies of the two dead correspondents onto the ground and takes graphic photographs of the corpses." In fact I pulled my friends out of the car first hoping that they were alive and could be saved, then thinking that should there ever be an inquiry into their deaths, for the sake of "justice" or perhaps to give their loved ones peace, photographs would be useful. (Later I did publish the least gruesome of those pictures; I was a war correspondent, and what I witnessed was an act of war.) I am proud that in the midst of my shock and grief I kept the presence of mind to do this. If you know combat veterans you may well know that an outsider's flippant summation of one of their personal calamities will not be appreciated. Indeed, it will be considered an insolent violation of their sorrow. Such was my reaction. After reading this passage, I found myself wanting to buy my New Haven spook a drink and say, "This is how it really was. I'll let you off this time, but try to be more considerate of your other suspects." But "spook," unfortunately, is all too appropriate a word for an Unamerican; he ghosts around, haunting my telephone and mailbox, but never becomes my living equal.

9.

So far as I can tell, I was not the hottest suspect they ever had. Squad 18, to which I belonged, had something like 2,406 suspects to sort through. At the end of October 1996, 111 out of that number were known to be female. My age group (thirty to forty) contained 707 people, second in number only to the group of people whose ages were unknown. As might be expected of Squad 18, which was based in San Francisco, 692 suspects "occurred" in my state, California; 845 could not be linked to any particular place. One suspect was Swiss, one French, four Canadian; presumably the rest were either American or of unknown nationality. The most common predication (that is, reason for referral to the FBI's attention) was "UNABOM DATABASE ANALYSIS," which had created 574 suspects. Next, at 496, came "DEVELOPED THRU INVESTIGATION," followed by my own category, "WALK-IN/WRITE-IN/OTHER CALL," which consisted of 490 fishy types. A toll-free hotline had led to 78 suspects. I was in the second most common known educational category: bachelor's degree (210 suspects). Like about 90 percent of their cases, I was not known to be in the military and not known to have a criminal record. The most common occupation for a Squad 18 suspect was airline employee (317 people) or "ELECTRONICS/COMPUTER WORKER" (122). One suspect was a farmer, one a winemaker, and one a mercenary; seven, including me, qualified as "AUTHOR/WRITER." Only forty-eight suspects received "SIGNIFICANT INVESTIGATION." I will doubtless never know whether I was one of those. One thousand eight hundred and fifty people in Squad 18 alone received some investigation.

10.

The Unabomber was captured in April 1996. Until then, my spooks twiddled their feelers around me and opened their claws, as evidenced first by New Haven's recommendation in 1995 (or before) that "discreet investigation of VOLLMANN be initiated"; second by the Investigative Information Request Form they dispatched to the FBI's Information Technology Center in Butte, Montana, to determine my Social Security number, which they failed to find because they spelled my name wrong (though some sweet soul did draw a smiley face over my middle name); third by a communication from Sacramento to San Francisco in September 1995 pronouncing me "ARMED AND DANGEROUS," the certificate of American health I have always longed for; and fourth by an executed grand-jury subpoena forwarded from an FBI special agent in Ithaca, New York, to San Francisco, dated December 14, 1995. Perhaps Cornell University, where I spent my last two undergraduate years, was subpoenaed to turn over my academic records, or else some former professor or classmate got summoned to be a good German. In November the canny Unamericans of the bureau's other Information Technology Center, in Savannah, Georgia, had already availed themselves of Info America's Wizard Directory ("All Geographies") to locate my professional licenses and assets; they'd also run checks on me with the three major credit agencies, TRW, TransUnion, and Equifax — who, I am pleased to say, knew very little about me then. The Unamericans did get my street address and the property parcel number of my home. A "security representative" for United Airlines in Elk Grove Village, Illinois, obligingly gave them records of twelve of my trips.

It was mildly interesting to descry the limits of Unamerican knowledge. On one occasion, I had flown to the Canadian Arctic by way of Toronto. As far as the Unamericans could tell, I had stopped at Toronto. Their summary: "VOLLMANN is known to have traveled to Beirut" (where I've never been), "Afghanistan and Pakistan during periods of unrest which, at the time, may not have been served by UAL or had suspended service."

I freely admit to the existence of a few lines in my file that are not ludicrous. New Haven proposed that my travel to Afghanistan in 1982 with the mujahideen "could have enhanced any knowledge regarding explosives," a supposition I am willing to call possible, though in this case erroneous. (The mujahideen were carrying RPG launchers but never invited me to try one out. They were already very disappointed in my target-shooting abilities, not to mention my general uselessness thanks to bad eyesight, ill-preparedness, and amoebic dysentery.)

So the Unamericans kept busily doing what those creatures do best. On December 6, 1995, two special agents "conducted investigation at the residence of WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN." Our crime fighters describe the exterior of my house and note the California license-plate number of the "tan four-wheel drive Jeep Cherokee" parked on the street in front — evidently the vehicle of some stranger. Whether they snooped inside I cannot say.

11.

On May 22, 1996, the FBI office in Chicago discontinued background investigation pertaining to me. Does that mean that I was in the clear, or only that Chicago was done with me? The Unabomber had already been in custody for more than a month.

12.

Twenty-two years after the raid on Jock Sturges's home, I called him. He said: "I remember a moment down at the Hall of Justice (which is kind of an oxymoron) when I was getting my stuff back. They wheeled in this dolly. My prints were all crushed — I think I salvaged one — and my computer destroyed. And I was *pissed.* My lawyer had to restrain me and I wanted to get in the U.S. Attorney's face. He said, 'What's this guy complaining about? The system worked.' The system worked, okay, but the problem is you're damaged goods afterward. The bad dreams, the paranoia every time something gets lost in the mail ... It cost me a hundred thousand dollars to deal with all these lawyers. At one point they started interviewing everybody about me all over again. I said: 'Why are they doing this?' My lawyer said they probably spent a couple million bucks on me. It turned out they had lost my original file. Why did they lose it? Because it was exculpatory."

13.

When does legitimate investigation become harassment? Not in my case; at least not yet. But had the Unabomber's brother not turned him in, the Unamericans might never have caught him. (He had not been under FBI investigation.) Of course, he was eventually arrested, tried, and convicted (he pleaded guilty in 1998), whereas I am still out of prison. What does it mean to say the system worked?

As Steinbeck wrote about the Ku Klux Klan: "The totem has certain rules, almost natural laws. It must be secret, exclusive, mysterious, cruel, afraid, dangerous, and monstrously ignorant." To me, this does not describe the mentality of the previous documents nearly as well as it does the procedures to which my companions and I were subjected in Calexico in 2002 and 2005 — years after the Unabomber's capture and conviction.

I thought we had emerged from the Calexico incidents cleared of any suspicion. My file, which includes papers from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), tells the story differently. On January 14, 2005, the day after that seven-hour detention in Calexico, a special agent in El Centro, almost certainly the FBI woman who had somehow won my liking, sent a memo to Sacramento, San Diego, and San Francisco. The title was "TERRORISM RELATED INFORMATION." She noted that I had been a "Unabomber suspect," and after a redacted rectangle of blankness appeared the omi-

nous parenthesis: “Pending.” Since we had already been released, I can only conclude that the Unamericans had decided to spy on us and see what we did next. The files they gave me certainly bear no indication that they realized we were two harmless people and then closed the matter. Perhaps this explains the Calexico station chief’s disgust or reluctance, which at the time I interpreted as simple arrogance, when I offered him my hand to shake: to him, we weren’t innocent at all. It was from this TERRORISM RELATED INVESTIGATION memo that I learned that to be suspect, it is enough to have been formerly wrongly suspected.

14.

Accompanying the memo was a redacted scrap, dated January 13, 2005, the date of our detention. Beginning midsentence, it mentions a book of mine about my travels in Afghanistan with the mujahideen, after which it notes that a redacted female informant “stated that VOLLMANN was a very intense man, seemed very intelligent, well educated and traveled a lot including trips to Afghanistan, Europe and New York City.” On May 8, 2002, the case report continues, “I showed [REDACTED] a copy of a California DMV photograph ... She identified the person in the photograph as the same William VOLLMANN.” The rest has been blanked out. What is unnerving here is the date. The Unabomber had been put away six years earlier and my first detention in Calexico was six months away, which meant my assumption on the latter occasion that I was being held simply on account of my travel to Yemen had been naïve. In fact, it seems the FBI had continued to interrogate people about me. What could I have been a suspect for in May 2002 One possibility — that the Unamericans were assessing my potential responsibility for 9/11 — is not excluded, since among the other ICE files (printed by the Unamericans at 6:07 on the night of our detention) I find an indication that “[o]n May 1, 2002, Special Federal Officer (SFO) [REDACTED] interviewed [REDACTED] DOB [REDACTED],” and then a [REDACTED] all the way down to “William VOLLMANN.” The case I.D. number is redacted, of course, but the “title” has been left in: “AMERITHRAX MAJOR CASE 184.” So I had graduated from being a Unabomber suspect to being an anthrax suspect.

15.

The Amerithrax incidents occurred not long after the September 11 attacks. Five people died and seventeen grew ill. At that time one friend of mine worked himself into a near panic because the antidote, ciprofloxacin, was in short supply. He longed for a family-size bottle, just in case. I remember believing, as did my neighbors, that Al Qaeda must have sent these poisoned letters. Apparently I should have suspected myself.

Thanks to my FOIA lawsuit I eventually obtained further information on the matter. Compelled by a district court to respond, the FBI delayed until the very last minute and then, like the CIA, moved for summary judgment against me "with prejudice." Unlike the CIA, however, the FBI could not simply refuse to show me whatever Vollmann data it might be hoarding. The section chief of the Record/Information Dissemination Section of the Records Management Division in Winchester, Virginia, a certain David M. Hardy, formerly of the Navy, was obliged to file a thirty-nine-page "declaration" relating to what he was withholding from me and why. Among this document's few interesting particulars was the news that years after Ratfink denounced me, some other good citizen telephoned the television show *America's Most Wanted* to do the same, after which "the FBI followed up with an interview to obtain additional information." I suppose the person interviewed was the woman whom they quizzed about my Afghanistan book and who "identified the person in the photograph as the same William VOLLMANN." I am pretty sure who she is. I am disappointed in her, since I would have thought she knew me better than that, but I forgive her: "This source believed plaintiff's handwriting resembled the anthrax letters."

16.

At any rate, the Unamericans are on to me now. That or the U.S. Postal Service has become very, very bad. For years, my international mail has often arrived opened. Sometimes it never arrives at all. Books from my French publisher once came with each copy's spine neatly slit. I threw them in the garbage. A draft of this article arrived with the envelope cut open and taped shut.

I am not, as it turns out, the easiest suspect to surveil. Rebecca Jeschke, the media-relations director of the pro-privacy Electronic Frontier Foundation, in San Francisco, once told me: "I suspect that there's a lot less data out about you than there might be about some other people. When you think about the data trail that you leave in the world, by not using a credit card, you're going a really long way, and by not having a cell phone."[1]

But the write-up of my 1995 New York FBI interrogation, dated three days after it took place, notes that "VOLLMANN contacted [REDACTED]'s attorney yesterday and informed him that the FBI now wanted to interview VOLLMANN." In other words, for an unknown period of time in July 1990 the FBI was bugging my phone, or else Jock's attorney's. I have no FBI-confirmed proof that my conversations have been listened to at any other time, although the hollow noise I hear nowadays is peculiar. For the past several years there have been various clicks and echoes, which I never used to hear in the United States, and which I have heard in Belgrade, Kabul, Baghdad. It is certainly possible that the decay of landlines is exclusively responsible for these

[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Jeschke and to my FOIA lawyer, David Sobel.

phenomena. It's *possible* — but as the private investigator explained to me: "Once you're a suspect and you're in the system, that ain't never goin' away... Anytime there's a terrorist investigation, your name's gonna come up."

17.

The lawyer who sued the FBI and the CIA on my behalf, David Sobel, has this to say about my file:

> Vollmann's writing and professional associations were the sole reasons for the FBI's interest in him, leading to the creation of a Bureau dossier that tells us a lot about the factors that often drive law enforcement and national security investigations... While the documents released by the FBI indicate that its ensuing investigation of Vollmann was extensive, the full scope of the examination of his activities and relationships cannot be ascertained, as almost 500 pages ... remain withheld in their entirety...
>
> In reviewing the released material, I found one of the clearest examples I've seen of how far we've come from the lessons of the mid-1970s, when the Church Committee investigation and the Watergate hearings provided stark examples of the danger to democracy posed by ideologically-driven surveillance of lawful activity. One of the key reforms of that era was the Privacy Act, passed in 1974 to rein in the investigative powers of federal agencies. One of the Act's key restrictions is its command that an agency may "maintain no record describing how any individual exercises rights guaranteed by the First Amendment." This restriction, however, is not absolute; it permits the collection of such information if it is "pertinent to and within the scope of an authorized law enforcement activity." As the Vollmann file demonstrates, that's a loophole that's easy to pass through when the "rights guaranteed by the First Amendment" are exercised by those deemed to "think like" or "write like" the wrong people.

18.

At about the same time Steinbeck's *America and Americans* was published, the journalist Luigi Barzini served up a polemic called *The Italians,* in which he remarked:

> A moment of revelation comes, it must be admitted, practically to everybody and not to Italians alone. A day comes when men of all nations understand that life can be pitiless and ugly. Each has his own way of reaching maturity... [I]t may be a great event that awakens him: he sees

> his country defeated and humiliated, and his leaders revealed as loathsome fiends or irresponsible imbeciles; he discovers that some of the principles he was taught as eternal were but empty words ...

This day came for me, belatedly, after America's leaders remade the nation in response to September 11. That "matured" me. When my FBI file arrived, instead of being horrified I simply felt a grim weariness.

Once upon a time we believed in a certain concept called trial by jury. Perhaps you have heard of it. Three aspects of this quaint process are particularly striking to me. The first is that the accused was to be judged by his peers, not by some secretive functionary. The second is that he had the right to face his accuser, or the accuser's representative. The third is the firm instruction given by the judge to the twelve citizens in the jury box: "Innocent until proven guilty."

A trial is not an investigation. A spook's appointed duty is to suspect. I was accused, secretly. I was spied on. Very possibly I still am, given that interesting admission: "*785* pages were reviewed and *294* pages are being released." I have no redress. To be sure, I am not a victim; my worries are not for me, but for the American Way of Life.

As this story goes to press, Americans continue to shake their heads over new revelations of widespread data mining and near-universal phone tapping, while Unamericans righteously defend these tactics and call for the punishment of the leakers who revealed them. Were I to be shown in accurate detail why it was necessary for me to be kept under surveillance, possibly for the rest of my life, I might be able to accept these invasions of my privacy for the collective good. The ostensible purpose of this surveillance is to protect us, and our freedoms, from terrorists. What remains uncertain, since secret, is how terrifying the terrorists presently are, and to what extent rights and liberties may be undermined in order to save us from them. I cannot say how many intelligence operatives might be hampered or endangered by greater oversight; on the other hand, if the Unamericans continue to have their way we will never know how many innocent people they have imprisoned, tortured, and perhaps murdered. I would be abdicating my responsibility as a citizen were I to rely on the Unamericans to decide such questions.

William T. Vollmann's most recent book is *Imperial* (Penguin). His last article for *Harper's Magazine,* "Homeless in Sacramento," appeared in the March 2011 issue.

Tags

21st century, American, Authors, Biography, Border security, Career as Unabomber, Central Intelligence Agency, Domestic intelligence, Federal Bureau of Investigation,

Freedom of information, Immigration and Customs, Enforcement, Informers, Intelligence service, John Steinbeck, Methodology, Mexican-American, Border Region, National security, Officials and employees, Pictorial works, Political and social, Prevention, Security classification (Government documents), Terrorism, Terrorism investigation, Theodore John Kaczynski, Travel, United States, William T. Vollmann, Yemen

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