

Stealing from government can be a good thing

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On Monday, former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden beamed himself into a packed room at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas, telling the crowd he broke the law to expose NSA spying because “the Constitution was being violated on a massive scale.”

Snowden shouldn’t have gotten a hearing, insisted an irate Rep. Mike Pompeo (R-Kan.), saying Snowden’s “only apparent qualification is his willingness to steal from his own government.”

No doubt this sounds familiar to Betty Medsger, the author of a fascinating new book, *The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover’s Secret FBI*.

Forty-three years ago Saturday, an unlikely band of antiwar activists calling themselves “The Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI” broke into a bureau branch office in Media, Pa., making off with reams of classified documents. Despite a manhunt involving 200 agents at its peak, they were never caught, but the files they leaked proved that the agency was waging a secret, unconstitutional war against American citizens.

As a young *Washington Post* reporter, Medsger was the first to receive and publish selections from the files — over the protests of then-attorney general (and later Watergate felon) John Mitchell, who called the *Post* three times falsely claiming that publication would jeopardize national security and agents’ lives.

Decades in journalism really taught Medsger how to write an arresting lede; her new book begins:

“In late 1970, William Davidon, a mild-mannered physics professor at Haverford College, privately asked a few people this question:

‘What do you think of burglarizing an FBI office?’”

What follows is one hell of a true story: riveting as any heist film, and far more significant. With the statute of limitations expired, and the Citizens senior citizens, five of the original eight have come forward to tell the tale.

“As if arranged by the gods of irony,” Medsger writes, the very morning Hoover learned of the break-in, then-assistant attorney general William H. Rehnquist, in testimony the FBI helped prepare, told Congress that what little surveillance the government engaged in did not have a “chilling effect” on constitutional rights.

Two weeks later, one of the first documents Medsger published — a memo exhorting FBI agents to “enhance the paranoia” among antiwar protesters and “get the point across there is an FBI agent behind every mailbox” — gave the lie to that notion.

But the most important purloined document turned out to be a routing slip with the cryptic notation “COINTELPRO—NEW LEFT.” Americans eventually learned that “COINTELPRO” was FBI argot for “counterintelligence program”: domestic “black ops” against “subversives.” It started in 1956, to fight homegrown communists, but soon expanded to target the antiwar and civil rights movements. As an FBI deputy director later explained to a congressional committee, “this was a rough, dirty business” in which the bureau “brought home” methods used against Soviet agents abroad: burglaries, illegal wiretaps, blackmail and disinformation designed to foment violence.

The FBI’s attempts to get Martin Luther King Jr. to kill himself — by sending him a “highlight reel” surveillance tape of his extramarital affairs and a letter saying: “there is only one thing left for you to do” — was just the most infamous example of these widespread tactics.

The FBI agent who led the post-Media internal reforms told Medsger that without the burglars, COINTELPRO might never have been exposed, and that if they’d been convicted, he’d have recommended “suspended sentences because of the major contribution they made to their country.” Today, the bureau’s own website admits that the Citizens’ “leaking of those documents to the news media ... led to a significant re-evaluation of FBI domestic security policy.”

That hardly settles the Snowden controversy, of course. But as *The Burglary* shows, history sometimes forgives those with a “willingness to steal from their own government.”

Gene Healy is vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute.