

Can Educators Trust Representatives of Government?

William Van Til

In 1974 the United States was rocked by the Watergate affair; among the consequences were the resignation of a President and the indictment of two attorneys general in charge of the Justice Department. Today the Federal Bureau of Investigation is prominently in the news. In hearings before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the FBI is charged with misdoings, such as harassment of Martin Luther King from 1964 onward, and with failure to intervene to protect civil rights workers. On the other hand, an FBI official testifies that accomplishments in dealing effectively with the Ku Klux Klan constituted the FBI's finest hour.

The current discussion of the roles and responsibilities of government agencies and representatives made me turn back to my 10-year-old records of an incident in my work in which the Justice Department and the FBI became involved. Throughout the incident, I trusted the agencies of my government. As a citizen and educator, I told them what I knew and relied upon them for help.

Ten years later I must ask myself questions. Knowing what Americans now know, if a similar situation were to arise in the future, would I be equally trusting and open? Should I be? Can I be?

This is the incident.

In the summer of 1965 I conducted for New York University an institute for supervisors and curriculum leaders on problems of desegregation and integration. The institute was supported by a grant of funds to the university through the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Part of NYU's agreement in the government contract was that either I or one of my staff would follow up the summer workshop during the next year through consultation in each community from which the institute participants came. So in January, 1966, I embarked on a trip to several Southern communities to help institute participants carry out their institute-developed programs for orderly and effective school desegregation and integration. My schedule of appointments within specific communities was to be arranged by the individual institute participants.

When I work in the field, I have the habit of keeping in touch with my office. So, on the afternoon of January 19, 1966, I called New York University from the community at which I was consulting. My secretary told me that a man who said he was from the Justice Department had called and indicated that someone was impersonating Dr. Van Til in the Southern state in which I was then visiting. My graduate assistant (who was my co-worker in the institute) was then unavailable, but would have more information about the conversation when I called back.

So I traveled on to Southern City (pseudonym), and I called the local institute participant who was arranging my schedule for consultation there. Since I have decided not to identify her, to avoid any potential embarrassment, you will have to take my word that she was a deeply religious, humane, aware, and intelligent person. She was also highly dependable. She told me happily of the schedule she and her colleague in the institute (an equally fine person) had arranged for me. I learned that I was scheduled for consultation the next day both at Southern City and Smaller Community (pseudonym). Up to that point, I had not known that I would be scheduled for Smaller Community as well as Southern City. Smaller Community, she told me, was marked by vigorous racial conflict and was dominated by the Klan. She and her colleague cooperated with a small group of religious and civic leaders in Smaller Community who were supporters of desegregation and integration of the schools.

At 8 p.m. I reached my graduate assistant in New York City. Along with my secretary, he had talked with the man who said he was from the Justice Department. The Justice Department man had told them that a few days earlier an individual purporting to be Dr. William Van Til of New York University, who said he had been appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to the President's Committee on Racial Unrest, had attempted to obtain information about desegregation plans and personnel from people sympathetic to desegregation and integration. "Where?" In Smaller Community.

My graduate assistant had responded to the caller that, as far as he knew, the real Dr. Van Til's travel schedule had not taken him to Smaller Community, nor was the real Dr. Van Til a member of any President Johnson's Committee on Racial Unrest. My graduate assistant was, of course, correct--I had never been in Smaller Community and did not belong to any President Johnson's Committee on Racial Unrest, a nonexistent organization. The man who said he was from the Justice Department then asked my graduate assistant for a full and complete description of Dr. Van Til. My graduate assistant readily supplied a description of my appearance and physical characteristics.

Following this exchange of information, neither of us said anything for a while. Then I asked, "How do we know that this caller is actually from the Justice Department?" My graduate assistant said, "We don't." I asked, "How do I know that I am not being set up by somebody unknown as a clay pigeon for my trip tomorrow to Smaller Community?" My graduate assistant said, "We don't."

A follow-up call to my secretary's home yielded the information that the man from the Justice Department had given her his name. In this account I will call him Mr. N. I had visited Washington, D.C., frequently enough to know that the Justice Department, along with the rest of the government offices, was not open during the evening. So I recognized that I would be unable to reach any Mr. N in person that evening.

I suddenly felt lonely in my room in the big hotel in Southern City. I called home and brought my family up to date on developments, just in case. I still felt lonely. I asked myself what a Constitution-respecting, law-abiding United States citizen and educator who had conducted an institute on a government grant through the Civil Rights Act

should do in this situation. So, on that night 10 years ago, I called the local office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Southern City.

The FBI man who answered listened to my account. I indicated that it was particularly important for me to know whether a Mr. N of the Justice Department actually existed and had actually telephoned my New York University office, or whether parties unknown, possibly the Klan, had called New York to obtain a description of me for purposes of possible harassment or violence during tomorrow's visit to Smaller Community. I asked for information on the impersonation of me in Smaller Community which had taken place days earlier. Mr. X of the Southern City office of the FBI said he would call the FBI man in Smaller Community and let me know.

An hour later he called back to tell me that a Mr. N of the Justice Department did exist. But the local office of the FBI in Southern City had no way of knowing at that moment whether or not he had called New York University. Mr. X also told me that his man in Smaller Community had no evidence that anyone had impersonated a Dr. Van Til in Smaller Community. To determine whether Mr. N of the Justice Department had actually called my New York University office, Mr. X advised me to call Mr. N myself. So I tried a call to the Justice Department at midnight, found as expected that it was closed, and left a message with the switchboard operator for Mr. N to return my call in the morning.

Early the next morning, Mr. N of the Justice Department called. First he felt me out with preliminary conversation to be sure I was the authentic Dr. Van Til. Then he told me that a Smaller Community citizen had become suspicious of the information-gathering bogus Dr. Van Til, and had called a congressman. The congressman had then called Mr. N, who, in turn, had called my New York University office. So now I knew there was a real Mr. N in the Justice Department. I also knew that there was a false Dr. Van Til in Smaller Community. I relayed this information to the local FBI in Southern City.

That morning I taxied to the school of the two women who had been participants in the institute and who were currently my schedule makers. After they heard me out, they decided that the small private meeting they had scheduled with five Smaller Community desegregation supporters should be canceled. They concluded that the Klan had somehow learned that I was to visit Smaller Community, and probably also knew of the forthcoming meeting. Therefore, the personal security of the Smaller Community citizens, the two institute participants, and their visitor from New York might be endangered.

So one of the two institute participants called her contact at a school in Smaller Community. I began to feel like a character in a James Bond movie when I heard her say, "The package has arrived here, but we are not going to deliver it. Sorry." Her entire conversation was conducted in similar disguised and ambiguous language. The last time I had heard Aesopian language like this had been from anti-Nazis with whom I had talked during my canoe trip down the Danube River just before World War II. My institute participants told me that telephone conversations to Smaller Community were frequently

listened in upon and recorded for the Klan. "Listened in on by whom?" I asked. "We don't know for sure. We think it's the telephone operators," they answered.

In mid-morning, during our ensuing conference and consultation in Southern City, the phone rang again. It was the Smaller Community contact, who said cryptically, "Has the party in question left Southern City safely as yet? If not, advise him not to leave from the Southern City airport this morning."

My two institute participants suggested that I report the further developments to the local FBI. Mr. X was out, but I talked to Mr. Z of the local FBI and asked that he check with his man in Smaller Community to see if there was any information concerning this warning or any insight into possible future developments. Mr. Z checked with his FBI supervisor, who advised that I call the school in Smaller Community for information. I explained that my institute participants believed the telephone conversations were listened in on and that private conversation with Smaller Community was not feasible. Mr. Z then indicated that his superior felt that no action could be taken at this point by the FBI.

The institute participants tried one more guarded call to Smaller City and learned little more. The judgment was still that it would be undesirable for me to leave from the airport in Southern City that morning.

So the participants and I traveled by car to still another city in which I was scheduled to consult with still other institute participants. As we rode along, we kept looking in the rear-view mirror. We were not looking for state troopers who might be after speeders.

The consultation went well in the city to which we drove, my last scheduled visit in the state. After sharing in the conference, the participants who had accompanied me returned to their home base, Southern City. I spent the night in the city to which we had driven. The next morning I flew to the adjoining state in which I was to continue my consultative visits. Familiar now with my new James Bond role, I purchased my ticket at the airport in the name of William Andrews, using my discarded and almost forgotten middle name. Back in New York City, I wrote up an account of the experience, sent a copy to Mr. X of the local FBI office in Southern City, and placed a copy in my own file. I received an acknowledgement from the FBI in Southern City and an indication that the account would be forwarded to the FBI and Justice Department in Washington.

Ten years after this incident I learn, along with other Americans, of Martin Luther King's harassment by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Ten years later I read, along with other Americans, of the use of the FBI for political purposes by several Presidents and their administrations. Ten years later I read, along with other Americans, of attempted CIA assassinations of foreign governmental leaders. Ten years later I hear calls, along with other Americans, for the reopening of inquiries into the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert F. Kennedy, because of suspicions that the CIA and FBI may have known more about domestic assassinations than they revealed.

Ten years later, along with other Americans, I live in the climate of mistrust and suspicion of government officials which is our heritage from Watergate.

So 10 years after the incident I have recounted, I write and I wonder. I wonder if I can presently turn to agencies of my government as my shield in a time of trouble. I want urgently to answer, "Yes, I can!" because, without faith in one's elected government and its designated officials a democratic society may perish.

But if a government is to belong to the people, governmental power must be used on behalf of the people. Governmental power must not be abused. Worthy ends have a way of being corrupted by unworthy means.

So I ask myself some hard questions. If an incident similar to that of 10 years ago ever arose again in my life as an educator and citizen, what would I do? I want to trust the representatives of agencies of my government. Should I? Can I? I want the answers to be "yes."

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