

CounterPunch

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propaganda in any given case, but the problem also dates to much earlier than World War I in a country that grew out of colonies founded on the basis of war.

The lesson to be drawn by the fact-based community from the irrationality of war support is not that all is hopeless, but that

1. the danger is greater than might be imagined, as much war support knows no limits—a danger that grows with every day that the U.S. government works toward the deployment of more and smaller and “more usable” first-strike nuclear weapons; and
2. key to building resistance to each particular war is educating young and old people to oppose the entire institution of war.

I recently spoke to a college class and asked them to name some justified wars. It absolutely made my day that for the first time in my experience nobody said “World War II.” But they did say “the revolution” as if there had only ever been one, and “the civil war” as if these young people had had the good fortune to be born into the one country where both of the justifiable wars in world history had happened. This line of thinking is no different from imagining one’s parents, by virtue of being one’s parents, to have possessed and bestowed on you the one true religion.

When a Florida school district this past year announced that it would evict from its sporting events anyone who failed to properly honor the U.S. flag, it was engaging in a policy of holy excommunication, and it was doing as much or more for the support of coming wars as any forged documents that any future Karl Rove might commission. **CP**

DAVID SWANSON wants you to declare peace at

<http://WorldBeyondWar.org>. His new book is *War No More: The Case for Abolition*.

Medium Cool Decades of the FBI's Surveillance of Haskell Wexler

BY DAVID PRICE

American cinematographer Haskell Wexler (1922-2015) transformed Hollywood and independent filmmaking. His use of natural light and sound and innovations in mixing scripted action with the unscripted world, and pioneering use of handheld cameras raised the bar decades before the coming of the *Dogma 95 Manifesto* or Soderbergh's films. Wexler won academy awards for his camerawork on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* and *Bound For Glory's* groundbreaking use of the Steadicam, while his unprecedented mixing

of documentary and fictional styles and his choice of the political subjects in *Medium Cool* broke artistic and political boundaries. Now, with the FBI's release of Wexler's 175 page FBI file, we can see how his politics and art brought him decades of FBI surveillance.

He was born in 1922, into a wealthy Chicago family. His father, Simon Wexler, owned Allied Radio Corporation of America, a large company manufacturing radios and selling electronic components. Haskell's FBI file documents agency concerns over Simon Wexler donations to Chicago's Abraham Lincoln School, and sponsorship of events at the Chicago Council for American Soviet Friendship, and funding local events backed by Harry Bridges. While raised with the luxuries of privilege, Haskell came of age in Depression era Chicago, surrounded by progressives. Young Wexler befriended Studs Terkel, who he considered one of his greatest teachers. While still a student, Haskell helped organize a labor strike at his father's radio manufacturing plant, and worked for photographer Micky Pallas, photographing striking workers in Chicago. He briefly attended college at Berkeley, dropping out to join the Merchant Marine, and during the Second World War was aboard a ship which was sunk in the Indian Ocean by German torpedoes leaving him afloat in a lifeboat with other survivors for two weeks before being rescued.

Throughout the 1940s, the FBI tracked Wexler's radical politics. They recorded his membership in the Convoy Club of the Young Communist League and his wartime membership of the Seamen's Branch of Communist Party, New York City. In 1948, the Bureau considered placing him on the FBI's Security Index; the FBI catalogued various political activities and otherwise mundane activities (“he operates a photographic laboratory in the apartment”) with suspicion, and filed reports on Wexler for decades.

Reports of communist involvement led to wartime FBI investigations. One inquiry to previous landlords produced assurances that Wexler and his wife Nancy were “communists because they had a large picture of Stalin in their room talked along Communist lines.” The FBI tracked he and his wife Nancy attending meetings of various communist front organizations, like the American Youth for Democracy, and his subscription to *The Daily Worker*, *New Masses*, and other Communist Party linked publications.

After the war, his father provided substantial funds to equip his own film studio in Illinois, and he began making films in earnest. His early works included commercial projects as well as some with leftist political messages—working on union documentaries and a film supporting Henry Wallace's presidential bid. During this period the FBI tracked Wexler's car being parked at various leftist political events in the Chicago, including Communist Party meetings (1948, 1950), Progressive Party meetings (1949-50), the 1951 World Peace Congress, and the 1952 meeting of the Veterans of the

Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

When Wexler applied for a passport in 1954 to travel to England and France for work on a documentary film on Shakespeare, the State Department denied his request because of allegations that he had been a Communist—advising him that he had 30 days to respond to these charges. He did not challenge this finding, then four years later he reapplied for a passport for a leisure trip to Europe, and the passport was issued.

A January 1961 State Department Passport Division report notified the FBI of Wexler's plans to travel to Brazil to work on a film. An FBI agent telephoned Wexler Brothers Productions, Inc. in Hollywood and used a fake name and pretext to gather information on his planned trip to Brazil, to work on the (1961) film *The Fisherman and His Soul*. The FBI profiled Wexler Brothers Productions, Inc., detailing its 1958 incorporation, stock value, capitalization and assets, office locations, and the corporate accounts held at the Chicago National Bank. The FBI's dossier reported:

Haskell 'Pete' Wexler is a motion picture cameraman who belongs to Local 666, Chicago, Illinois. He comes from a very wealthy Chicago family, and is rumored to be a millionaire in his own right. However, he has a burning desire to be a first cameraman and has threatened to sue Local 659 for a million dollars since the Local has denied him first cameraman status. He does, however, work out of the Chicago Local as a first cameraman on motion picture productions which are made in areas not under the jurisdiction of Local 659, Los Angeles.

He is allowed to work out of Local 659, Los Angeles, as an assistant cameraman or operator. His most recent motion picture assignments as a cameraman were "Studs Lonigan," a motion picture which was photographed in the Midwest and completed at Hal Roach Studios, Culver City, California, and one other picture the name of which was unrecalled by [REDACTED], Wexler has not as yet, produced a motion picture, but has no hesitancy in investing money in motion pictures on which he can serve as a cameraman.

One FBI informer claimed "Wexler's father left his sons a large number of shares of Superior Oil Company valued at \$30.00 per share, which they later sold for \$1800.00 per share." The FBI learned the Wexler brothers inherited ownership of the family business, describing it as "one of the largest electronic firms in the United States." Another FBI informer reported the Wexler brothers had "terrific" financial connections throughout the United States and have no difficulty in obtaining funds for investment in motion pictures." FBI memos noting Wexler's financial independence highlight this freedom removed the normal constraints facing others in the film industry. The FBI's interest in Wexler's wealth exemplifies the FBI's long history of investigating left-leaning elites in ways that right-leaning, even openly fascist, elites were seldom monitored.

After FBI informers in Hollywood's Professional Cultural Section of the Southern California District of the Communist Party reported they didn't know Wexler, the FBI called Wexler's mother, pretending to be a former Merchant Marine shipmate passing through town, to gather information about his activities. In July 1961, the FBI contacted Wexler and requested an interview "to determine his nationalistic sympathies, and if he merits consideration for placement on one of the Bureau indexes." Wexler told the FBI that he was upset by this contact, and told them he wanted to speak with his attorney. Days later Wexler contacted Special Agent Parker, and saying his attorney advised him to not speak with the FBI without his attorney being present. Parker reported that despite the attorney's advice, he kept Wexler on the phone chatting, telling Wexler about;

the confidential nature of much of the Bureau's work and the matter to be discussed with him did involve internal security, and for this reason it was felt it would be best that he and the Agent talk privately. Eventually as a result of discussion, Wexler agreed to discuss the matter with [the] Agent with the provision that it would be kept confidential and that his attorney [REDACTED] would never be told that he had talked with the FBI against his wishes and without his being present. Wexler was assured that the entire contact was confidential insofar as the FBI was concerned, and he stated he knew this was true, and he likewise would keep it confidential.

On July 27, 1961, Wexler told the FBI he joined the Communist Party in 1943 or 1944, and resigned near the end of the war "because he could not withstand the regimentation." The FBI concluded, "Wexler stated that he is opposed to Communism, is a loyal American, and would fight for this country against the Soviet Union or any other country. He stated that if information came to his attention regarding the CP or CP members, he would voluntarily furnish this information to the FBI."

Some of what Wexler told the FBI was demonstrably false and appears as an effort to reduce the FBI's perception of him as dangerous. Wexler told the FBI that;

when he was a young boy his father was an ultra-conservative and this caused him to rebel and assume the position of a radical. He stated probably this had something to do with his joining the Communist Party. He stated that while he realizes Communism is wrong and it stands for everything he abhors, he still considers himself a person wanting other[s] to have a better life too. He stated that he was appalled at some of the poverty which exists in Latin-American countries, and pointed out that while he was in Brazil he let his beard grow and some of the peasants when they saw him would cheer him and call him "Fidel." Wexler stated that it is things like this which make him concerned because our country is not doing enough to assist the Latin-American people and he is afraid unless something is done, they will go Communist.

Wexler told the FBI that "he would like to maintain contact with them" in case he came across information the FBI should know about, stating that he "considered espionage a very serious crime"—and admitted he knew Martha Dodd and Alfred Stern (convicted Soviet spies who in 1957 had fled the U.S.), and that he had been in their home and even introduced their son to the woman he would eventually marry. These admissions suggest Wexler feared the FBI falsely suspected him of having connections to espionage.

If Wexler's admissions of past Communist connections and limited contacts with known radicals like Dodd and Stern were efforts to reduce FBI suspicions, this approach worked. The FBI report concluded that "no recommendation is being made that Wexler be placed on any of the Bureau's indexes" and his case was closed in the L.A. office; the FBI made no further inquiries about Wexler for three years.

In April 1964, the FBI noticed a story in the UCLA Daily Bruin about Wexler's work on the film *The Bus* (1965), documenting civil rights activists bus trip from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. for the 1963 March on Washington. They later recorded Marlon Brando and Harry Belafonte were "promoting the group from Hollywood." One FBI informer reported Wexler had "so much film that he did not know what to do with it" that he was considering making three films from the trip. The FBI's opposition to the Civil Rights movement spawned more surveillance of Wexler, and the Bureau's usual decision to file these reports under the heading "SECURITY—C" (C for "Communist") demonstrates the FBI's belief that the civil rights movement was a Communist threat to American security.

Internal FBI reports described Wexler's 1968 masterpiece *Medium Cool* as "anti-establishment and anti-law enforcement in nature," and the Bureau files reported news stories in *Daily Variety* on the film. The Bureau monitored Wexler's involvement and financial support for the Hollywood group, Entertainment Industry for Peace and Justice (EIPJ), which the FBI described as dominated by Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland.

In 1972, the FBI finally placed Wexler on the ADEX security index, under the subversive designation "Category IV," identifying him as "potentially dangerous because of background, emotional instability or activity in groups engaged in activities inimical to U.S." Wexler's placement on ADEX followed a visible shift in the political orientation his films, moving away from edgy but mainstream works like *The Loved One* (1965), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* (1966), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), to more radical works—the three films he completed before being placed on ADEX were *Medium Cool* (1969), *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (1971), and *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1972). Edward Albee's critique of Twentieth Century marriage was one thing, but presenting the Barrigan brothers' radical views in a sympathetic light was another thing altogether.

In 1974 the FBI collected reports that Jane Fonda, Thomas Hayden, and Wexler's planned to travel to North Vietnam to film a documentary eventually released in November 1974 as, *An Introduction to the Enemy*. FBI agents stationed in Paris, and L.A. tracked Wexler as the cameraman traveling with Fonda and Hayden to film in North Vietnam. After Hayden, Fonda, their infant son, and Wexler returned from North Vietnam, the FBI pieced together the steps of their trip; learning they first claimed they were traveling "to Thailand and Japan for purpose of filming for three weeks," but instead traveled from Bangkok to North Vietnam.

The FBI routinely develops short biographical summaries of individuals that are recycled repeatedly in future reports; these often contain sensationalist accusations or quotes. Hayden's recycled-summary listed SDS activities, status as one of the Chicago Eight, and re-repeated an interview quote: "when the time comes for bombings, when people can understand bombings, I will be the first one to load a truck full with explosives and drive it into a building. . . I am not kidding and you can quote me so that you can remember this day."

A May 1974 memo to FBI Director Kelly justified ongoing investigations into Wexler, Fonda and Hayden traveling to North Vietnam, arguing this constituted advocating the overthrow of the Government, insurrection, seditious conspiracy, or violations of the Internal Security Act of 1950 and the Communist Control Act of 1954. Prior to the release of *Introduction to the Enemy*, FBI headquarters advised the New York Bureau that they should "should be alert to any press reviews concerning this production, reporting same in form suitable for dissemination, if such press reviews indicate the nature of this production is contrary to the best interests of this nation." The film received mixed reviews and political attacks in the mainstream media, the FBI took no further action in this matter, and Wexler continued working on both independent and mainstream Hollywood projects.

In 1975 Wexler began work as cinematographer on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and he later claimed he was fired after the FBI made inquiries on the set about him and his politics. But there are no indications in Wexler's released FBI file the Bureau made inquiries with anyone associated with *Cuckoo's Nest*.

This absence raises two possible, conflicting, interpretations. The first explanation is that the FBI did not release all files pertaining to investigations of Wexler. The second is that no FBI intrusion on the set occurred, and that Wexler was fired for his well-documented strongly expressed artistic differences and clashes with the director. This would not be the first time he'd have been fired for such clashes. He was fired two years earlier as cinematographer on Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*—with all of Wexler's footage reshot except for the amazing multi-camera complicated central surveillance shot in San Francisco's Union Square. In

Pamela Yates' documentary *Rebel Citizen*, Wexler admitted having provided acting directions, and rewriting dialogue for Jack Nicholson and others off set on *Cuckoo's Nest*, because of what he saw as the failures of director Milos Forman—acts supporting the likelihood that he was fired for these intrusions, as producer Michael Douglas claimed. Perhaps the best evidence supporting the FBI story as a face saving explanation, comes from director Irving Kershner, who said he never head the FBI story at the time of Wexler's firing—despite his own political alignment and friendship with Wexler.

Whatever the cause of this firing, the FBI certainly had investigated Wexler's work filming fugitive members of the Weathermen for the then forthcoming documentary, *Underground*. Filming with director Emile de Antonio, Wexler shot *Underground*, interviewing five Weathermen Underground fugitives hiding at a safe house at an undisclosed location, filming in ways obscuring their faces. Wexler's released FBI file includes few references to this, and given Wexler's later lawsuit against the FBI alleging illegal surveillance and theft, the FBI likely withheld these files when they originally processed the files released to Wexler. These reports have yet to be released under FOIA.

In 1981, former FBI agent Wesley Swearingen disclosed that an employee of the sound studio editing the film *Underground* had surreptitiously copied the film's audio track and provided a copy to the FBI, who tried to use it to locate the filmed fugitives. In the early 1980s Wexler and de Antonio brought suit against the FBI, though they failed to get the courts to make the FBI release these allegedly stolen materials; and no record of these tapes appeared in Wexler's released FBI files.

According to Emile de Antonio's biographer Randolph Lewis, de Antonio was aware of ongoing FBI surveillance after filming *Underground*, and he later recounted that in May 1975, after being following by FBI agents, he called the FBI office and asked, 'Would you get your fucking gumshoes off my back please[?]' As if in reply to his comment, two FBI agents appeared several days after at his Manhattan offices. The agents asked him where they could serve a subpoena on his wife, Terry—'A graveyard on Long Island,' he told them." The following month de Antonio was subpoenaed, and told to surrender all shot footage, sound recordings, working copies that Wexler and he had shot on the Weatherman. Fortunately, they had already preemptively burnt all the footage and sound that had not been used in the final cut.

President of the Screen Directors Guild Robert Wise, and the ACLU, opposed the subpoena as a violation of first amendment freedoms. Hollywood stars, including Mel Brooks, Sally Field, Rip Torn, Shirley MacLaine, Jack Nicholson, William Friedkin, Terrence Malick, Arthur Penn, Peter Bogdanovich, and Elia Kazan issued statements of support. The confluence of shady legal ground, a strong team of defense lawyers, and high-profile supporters led the gov-

ernment to withdraw its subpoena, and de Antonio was not required to testify.

When *Underground* was finally released, it received mixed reviews, many reviewers stressed the undeniable plodding unchallenged narrative, though most lauded the daring will of the filmmakers. Yet, it mostly remained an unseen film, having great difficulty getting distribution, with film festivals fearing getting involved in the controversies surrounding it. A 1981 LA Times article covering Wexler the de Antonio's suit against the FBI for theft and copyright infringement, is the final entry in Wexler's released FBI file, yet Wexler continued to make provocative political films until his death in 2015.

Even without a lifelong involvement in radical political causes, the FBI might have monitored such a genius of *cinéma vérité*. Wexler's vision often feels ethnographically raw, missing an artificial luster that dominated American film, his audiences see more of the poverty, inequality, and injustices of our world. Such unvarnished visions seem bound to attract the attentions of a Bureau maintaining American power relations of injustice. Yet, with Wexler, it was his primacy activist insistence of this unglossed vision of an unjust world that so anchored him in his cinematic approach, the stories he chose to tell, and decades of FBI surveillance. **CP**

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The Big Chill 21st Century Fascism

BY DAN GLAZEBROOK

It is the contention of this article that we are entering into a new fascist epoch. Movements with outright fascist roots are winning elections and referendums in Britain and the USA, and mainstream electoral parties too are being 'fascisized' in the process. Even the left are being fascisized, with the movements against war and neoliberal globalization increasingly falling under the hegemony of the new fascists. And yet, the term 'fascism' has for so long been used as a byword for any kind of brutality or state control to which one takes exception, that many seem not only to have forgotten what it means, but also to be failing to notice it how it is unfolding before their very eyes.

Part of the problem is that fascism has too often been conflated with particular elements of one or other of its historical manifestations, or even with perceived elements that have never, in reality, existed. Many, for example, conflate fascism with military dictatorship. Yet, dictatorships existed for centuries—if not millennia—before fascism, and, as Robert