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FBI sought to fire complaining agent

Memo describes retaliation plan

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A Chicago FBI agent who has complained to the media and Congress that the bureau bungled terrorism investigations had been targeted for firing by supervisors who vowed to "take him out," according to a memo written by a former high-ranking official in the FBI's disciplinary office.

The FBI opened an internal investigation against Agent Robert G. Wright Jr. in 2003 just days after his appearance at a news conference and on a national television news program, according to the memo obtained by the Tribune.

#3 The top two agents in the FBI's disciplinary office at the time, Robert J. Jordan and J.P. "Jody" Weis, ordered an investigation into Wright for insubordination and had already made up their minds to have him fired, according to the memo.

#4 The memo, written by John Roberts when he was third in command of the Office of Professional Responsibility, questioned how often supervisors misused the disciplinary process to silence employees critical of the FBI.

#5 Roberts could not be reached Monday for comment, but his lawyer, Stephen Kohn, said the memo's point is clear. "The FBI uses its Office of Professional Responsibility to retaliate against whistleblowers," Kohn said.

Wright, an agent since 1990, would not comment. He has been the subject of at least six disciplinary investigations in his career, and his supporters have long suspected that the FBI retaliated against him for his harsh public criticism of the bureau.

Weis, a former special agent in charge in the Chicago office, and Jordan, head of the FBI's Portland office, could not be reached for comment. A spokesman for the FBI in Washington declined to comment.

Roberts, who has since retired, wrote the memo for the Senate Judiciary Committee in December.

Roberts outlined what he claimed were examples of misconduct in the Office of Professional Responsibility.

The memo, written while Roberts still worked as unit chief for the office, was heavily censored by the bureau before it was turned over to the Judiciary Committee's ranking members, Sens. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) and Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.).

- #1 The Senate Judiciary Committee this week may release Roberts' memo providing accounts of the Wright case and other alleged misconduct by the Office of Professional Responsibility, according to sources familiar with the committee's work.
- #2 Grassley and Leahy have warned the bureau about retaliating against agents, having singled out Wright in a June 2003 letter to FBI director Robert Mueller.
- #3 "The FBI should worry more about catching terrorists than gagging its own agents." Grassley wrote to Mueller. "Suppressing free speech is not the way to reform the FBI."

Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Wright has held two national news conferences and has given several television news interviews in which he accused the FBI of mishandling terrorism investigations during the 1990s into fundraising by militant Islamic groups such as Hamas.

- #5 On June 2, 2003, Wright held a news conference in Washington, D.C., in which he called the FBI's attempts to investigate terrorism "pathetic" and referred to the bureau's International Terrorism Unit as a "complete joke." He also appeared on an ABC-TV news program.
- #6 Roberts said he had problems with the bureau after he appeared on "60 Minutes" in 2002 and criticized the FBI, saying a double standard of discipline existed in which lower-level employees were treated more harshly than the bosses. He had FBI clearance to appear on TV.
- #7 After the TV interview, Roberts reported that Jordan retaliated against him. FBI director Mueller sent a letter of criticism to Jordan and rejected a proposed bonus for him.
- #8 In his memo, Roberts cited the FBI's latest probe of Wright as an inappropriate use of the internal investigations process.
- #9 Roberts said his wife, Brenda, a secretary in the office for nine years, observed Jordan and Weis "appearing happy and excited" about Wright's media appearances.
- #10 "They discussed that his appearance on television will enable them to, in their words, 'take him out,' according to Roberts' memo. "My wife was appalled at what was happening in this matter and took contemporary notes of what was occurring in the ... Wright matter."
- #11 Roberts said Weis instructed him to open a disciplinary investigation into Wright's conduct for insubordination. Weis reportedly said that Wright was not supposed to conduct any media interviews without FBI approval.
- #12 According to the memo, Roberts maintained that the allegation against Wright was not serious enough for the Office of Professional Responsibility to investigate and that the Chicago field office should handle the matter.
- #13 When Roberts told Weis that at most Wright faced a written reprimand, Weis allegedly said that there were "more serious allegations in this matter."

#14 Roberts wrote that he told Weis that he had never witnessed the bureau firing an agent for insubordination.

#15 "I told ... Weis that every time the FBI departs from established procedures and policy, we get our heads handed to us," Roberts wrote. "He did not change his mind and I knew this was going to be a hot item."