

Contribute →

200

News Opinion Sport Culture Lifestyle

Opinion

• This article is more than 1 year old

The FBI has a history of targeting black activists. That's still true today

Mike German

Fri 26 Jun 2020 05.41 EDT



hroughout its history, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has viewed Black activism as a potential national security threat. It has used its ample investigative powers not to

T suppress violence, but to inhibit the speech and association rights of Black activists. And its reaction to the protests following the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd shows little has changed.

In October 1919, a young J Edgar Hoover, director of the Bureau of Investigation's general intelligence division, [targeted](#) "Black Moses" Marcus Garvey for investigation and harassment because of his alleged association with "radical elements" that were "agitating the Negro movement". Hoover admitted Garvey had violated no federal laws. But the bureau, the precursor organization to the FBI, infiltrated Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association with informant provocateurs and undercover agents who searched for years for any charge that could justify his deportation.

The justice department ultimately won a conviction against Garvey on [a dubious mail fraud charge](#) in 1923. Meanwhile, white vigilantes, police and soldiers targeted Black communities with violence during this period, which included the Red Summer of 1919, the [Tulsa massacre](#) of 1921 and scores of lynchings, did not receive the same [focused attention](#) from Hoover's agents.

The FBI used similar tactics to disrupt, discredit and neutralize leaders of the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s. The FBI's [Cointelpro](#) program targeting civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael was specifically designed to "[p]revent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify and electrify the militant black nationalist movement" rather than to prevent any violent acts they might perpetrate. The methods included informant-driven disinformation campaigns designed to spark conflict within the movement, discourage donors and supporters, and even break up marriages. Overt investigative activity was also used, as one stated goal of the Cointelpro program was to [inspire fear](#) among activists by convincing them that an FBI agent lurked behind every mailbox.

Exposure of the Cointelpro abuses led to an era of reform starting in 1976 including guidelines issued by the attorney general, Edward Levi, to limit [FBI](#) investigations of political activity by requiring a reasonable indication of criminal activity before intrusive investigations could be launched.

Unfortunately, the guidelines were weakened over time, most severely in December 2008, by the Bush administration attorney general, Michael [Mukasey](#). Mukasey's guidelines authorized a new type of investigation called an "assessment", which required no factual basis for suspecting individualized wrongdoing before agents could employ intrusive investigative techniques such as overt and covert interviews, physical surveillance, government and commercial database searches, and recruiting and

tasking informants. The FBI interpreted these guidelines to allow its agents to use census data to [map American communities](#) by race and ethnicity, and to identify and monitor ethnic “facilities” and “behaviors”. A [2009 memo](#) from the Atlanta FBI cited fears of a “Black Separatist” terrorism threat to justify opening an assessment that documented the growth of the Black population in Georgia.

So it wasn't surprising that when a new generation of political activists started the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement to protest police violence after the fatal 2014 shooting of unarmed teenager Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the FBI began [tracking them](#) all across the country, using its “assessment” authority to conduct months-long investigations. BLM activists reported that FBI agents had contacted them at home to [warn them](#) against attending the 2016 Republican national convention.

By 2017, the FBI had invented a new domestic terrorism program [category](#) it called the “Black Identity Extremism movement”. An FBI intelligence [report](#) cited six unrelated incidents over a three year period in which Black subjects not associated with one another attacked police officers, to allege that a terrorist movement driven by “perceptions of police brutality against African Americans” existed. The report stated that “the perceived unchallenged illegitimate actions of law enforcement will inspire premeditated attacks against law enforcement” by so-called “Black identity extremists”, suggesting that the FBI's concerns lay not in illegal police violence, but the hypothetical retaliation it might provoke.

In 2018 and 2019, the FBI [conducted](#) nationwide assessments of “Black identity extremists” under an intelligence collection operation it called “Iron Fist”, [prioritizing](#) these cases over investigations of [far more prevalent](#) violence from white supremacists and far right militants over that period, including mass shootings at a Pittsburgh synagogue and an El Paso shopping mall.

The FBI also [acknowledged](#) using its most advanced surveillance aircraft to monitor BLM protests in Baltimore after the police killing of Freddie Gray in 2018, and again this month at the BLM protests in Washington DC. And, as the Intercept [reported](#) last week, at least four organizers of a Black Lives Matter rally in Cookeville, Tennessee, received unscheduled visits at their homes and workplaces by FBI agents assigned to the local joint terrorism taskforce. The agents questioned them about their social media posts, their plans for the protest, and whether they had connections to antifa - anti-fascist activists who Donald Trump has blamed for inciting violence at BLM protests. The FBI has [reported](#) it found no [evidence](#) of antifa involvement at the protests.

Certainly there is a potential for violence at any protest, and the FBI has made more than 80 [federal arrests](#) of looters and arsonists in recent weeks. But, so far, the most apparent protest violence that falls within the FBI's jurisdiction is not coming from BLM activists or antifa, but from police. North Carolina lawyer T Greg Doucette and mathematician Jason Miller have [compiled](#) a dataset of more than 500 incidents of police violence against protesters that have been captured on video by activists and journalists since George Floyd's death. Several of the officers responsible for this violence have been fired, and a handful have been charged with state violations, but no federal civil rights charges appear to have been brought yet against law enforcers who have been caught on tape attacking peaceful protesters and reporters.

This isn't surprising, as the justice department [rarely](#) brings civil rights charges against police officers for acts of brutality. If the FBI really believes unaccountable police violence against African Americans might provoke retaliation by "Black Identity Extremists", it would put its investigative authorities to better use by holding those officers accountable, rather than monitoring a new generation of Black activists.

Mike German is a former FBI agent and a fellow at the [Brennan Center for Justice's Liberty and National Security Program](#)

... we have a small favour to ask. Tens of millions have placed their trust in the Guardian's high-impact journalism since we started publishing 200 years ago, turning to us in moments of crisis, uncertainty, solidarity and hope. More than 1.5 million readers, from 180 countries, have recently taken the step to support us financially - keeping us open to all, and fiercely independent.

With no shareholders or billionaire owner, we can set our own agenda and provide trustworthy journalism that's free from commercial and political influence, offering a counterweight to the spread of misinformation. When it's never mattered more, we can investigate and challenge without fear or favour.

Unlike many others, Guardian journalism is available for everyone to read, regardless of what they can afford to pay. We do this because we believe in information equality. Greater numbers of people can keep track of global events, understand their impact on people and communities, and become inspired to take meaningful action.

We aim to offer readers a comprehensive, international perspective on critical events shaping our world - from the Black Lives Matter movement, to the new American administration, Brexit, and the world's slow emergence from a global pandemic. We are committed to upholding our reputation for urgent, powerful reporting on the climate emergency, and made the decision to reject advertising from fossil fuel

companies, divest from the oil and gas industries, and set a course to achieve net zero emissions by 2030.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. Every contribution, however big or small, powers our journalism and sustains our future. **Support the Guardian from as little as \$1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Single	Monthly	Annual
\$7 per month	\$15 per month	Other

Support the Guardian →

Remind me in November



opinion