

No Bias Found in F.B.I. Report on Catholic Extremists

Republicans claimed the bureau's memo was evidence of an anti-conservative strain among F.B.I. ranks, but an internal investigation failed to uncover any "malicious intent."



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A memo by the F.B.I. warning of possible threats posed by "radical-traditionalist" Catholics violated professional standards but showed "no evidence of malicious intent," according to an internal Justice Department inquiry made public on Thursday.

Republicans have seized on the 11-page memo, which was leaked early last year, as a talking point. They have pointed to the document to sharply criticize the bureau and suggested, without evidence, that it was part of a broader campaign by the Biden administration to persecute Catholics and conservatives over their beliefs.

The memo was quickly withdrawn after being leaked, and top law enforcement officials have repeatedly distanced themselves from it.

The assessment by the Justice Department's watchdog found that agents in the F.B.I.'s office in Richmond, Va., improperly conflated the religious beliefs of activists with the likelihood they would engage in domestic terrorism, making it appear as if they were being targeted for the faith.

But after a 120-day review of the incident ordered by Congress, Michael E. Horowitz, the department's inspector general — drawing from the F.B.I. report and interviews conducted by his own investigators — found no evidence that “anyone ordered or directed” anyone to investigate Catholics because of their religion.

A statement from the F.B.I. on Thursday said the inspector general's review aligned with the bureau's own accounting.

“The F.B.I. has said numerous times that the intelligence product did not meet our exacting standards and was quickly removed from F.B.I. systems,” it said. “We also have said there was no intent or actions taken to investigate Catholics or anyone based on religion.”

The F.B.I. memo, drafted by an analyst in the Richmond office in late 2022 and completed with other authors in January 2023, cited potential threats from self-identified Catholic extremists and “far-right white nationalists” in the run-up to the 2024 election.

The authors wrote that the overlap of these groups presented new opportunities for “threat mitigation,” development of confidential sources and “exploration of new avenues for tripwire” — a reference to an early warning system for domestic terrorism.

The memo, known as a so-called awareness product, was written for the office's leaders and intended to predict possible activity rather than to offer a rigorous factual assessment. Similar memos were drafted after Virginia legalized online sports betting, to determine its effect on money laundering and other criminal activity.

“Although there was no evidence of malicious intent or an improper purpose,” Mr. Horowitz wrote, the memo “failed to adhere to analytic tradecraft standards and evinced errors in professional judgment.”

After the memo's release, Christopher A. Wray, the F.B.I. director, tightened approval requirements for such reports and formally admonished employees involved in the case.

The Richmond memo was spurred by the department's investigation of a male resident of Henrico County who, according to the memo, described himself as a "radical traditional Catholic Clerical Fascist," illegally collected weapons, had a history of making violent threats against liberals, racial minorities and Jews, and seemed to be preparing to launch some kind of domestic terrorist attack.

That man was not identified, but the dates and details of the case are identical to those included in the case file of Xavier Lopez, who was indicted on federal weapons charges last June, pleaded guilty last month and has yet to be sentenced. A call to Mr. Lopez's lawyer was not immediately returned.

The F.B.I. investigation of Mr. Lopez included scrutinizing his interactions with members of a conservative Catholic congregation, unaffiliated with the local archdiocese, that he attended.

The bureau placed a confidential informant in the congregation to to befriend the man, and to determine if he was trying to recruit other members "to carry out an attack," the inspector general found. The F.B.I. decided to deploy the informant because it was the only potential opportunity to establish regular contact with Mr. Lopez.

The informant was under strict orders to collect information only about the target, and not about the church or other parishioners, according to the inspector general.

The Richmond office contacted officials in the domestic terrorism division of the F.B.I.'s national headquarters in Washington to discuss creating a report for the bureau's senior leaders.

An analyst at headquarters replied that she was "really interested in this resurgence of interest in the catholic church" among people they identified as domestic violent extremists — but the effort was dropped when the memo was made public, the inspector general found.

In campaign speeches, former President Donald J. Trump has accused the administration of "going violently and viciously after Catholics," without specifically referring to the memo.

Republicans, led by Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and Senator Charles E. Grassley, who serves on the Senate Judiciary Committee, have demanded answers from Mr. Wray and other Justice Department officials.

In a statement, Mr. Grassley said the report left some important questions unanswered, including the bureau's decision to delete files associated with the memo.

In April 2023, Mr. Jordan threatened to subpoena Mr. Wray if he did not answer questions about the memo. That proved unnecessary.

"The F.B.I. proposed that its agents engage in outreach to Catholic parishes to develop sources among the clergy and church leadership to inform on Americans practicing their faith," Mr. Jordan said at the time.

At a contentious hearing before Mr. Jordan's committee in July, Mr. Wray vehemently rejected the claim that the bureau had targeted Catholics. He described himself as aghast after seeing the memo, ordered that the document be purged from F.B.I.'s system and ordered an internal review.

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