

Jim Jordan's new myth: an 'anti-Catholic' FBI

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Conservative media outlets, fueled by distortions from Republican Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, are promoting a false story that the FBI has an anti-Catholic bias and is targeting traditionalist Catholics for criminal investigation.

At the center of this new smear campaign is a single internal intelligence memo, dated Jan. 23 and written by the bureau's Richmond, Virginia, field office, assessing far-right extremist threats stemming from "Radical-Traditionalist Catholic" ideology. When a right-wing site published the document a few weeks later, the FBI headquarters promptly denounced and shelved the memo.

But Jordan and his foot soldiers nonetheless have been using it as a battering ram to discredit law enforcement — just as multiple criminal investigations against former President Donald Trump are heating up. On Monday, Jordan subpoenaed FBI Director Christopher Wray to appear before the new "weaponization of government" subcommittee, which Jordan chairs with a mix of grandstanding and sound bites calculated to mislead the public into a state of high disinformation anxiety. For Jordan, the prospect of agitating the Christian right is apparently a far loftier goal than pursuing the truth.

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The FBI's swift response is of no consequence to Jordan and his allies. Nor do they care that both Wray and Attorney General Merrick Garland, under oath, already unequivocally denounced the memo, confirmed its elimination from use and pledged to prevent any similar occurrences. Appearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in March, Wray testified that he was "aghast" upon learning of the memo. "It does not reflect FBI standards," he told the committee. "We do not conduct investigations based on religious affiliations or practices, full stop." He noted that the memo was a "product" of just one field office, amid "scores" of internal intelligence memos turned out by the bureau and its field offices on a regular basis. In other words, one misguided field office has been schooled on bureau policy, and the memo and its methods have been discredited and rejected.

Similarly, in his March appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Garland testified that he found the document "appalling" when he first saw it. "The FBI is not targeting Catholics. As I've said, this is an inappropriate memorandum, and it doesn't reflect the methods the FBI is supposed to be using," he told lawmakers. Garland emphasized, "We

have a rule against investigations based on First Amendment activity, and Catholic churches are obviously First Amendment activity.” (Sen. Josh Hawley, a Missouri Republican, eager to notch a propaganda victory, ignored the attorney general’s testimony and accused the Justice Department of “targeting Catholics, targeting people of faith, specifically for their faith views.”)

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Fixating on a single occurrence or mistake within the vast federal bureaucracy and blowing it up into an ongoing scandal is a hallmark of the GOP's long-running efforts to paint Democratic administrations as anti-Christian. In addition to the memo brouhaha, Republicans have recently attacked the bureau for the arrest of a Catholic anti-abortion protester for allegedly assaulting a clinic escort outside an abortion clinic. (He was later acquitted.) And they are also up in arms over the decision by the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center not to renew a contract for pastoral care with an order of Franciscan priests.

The latter is similar to a firestorm in 2011 when Republicans accused the Obama administration's Department of Health and Human Services of anti-Catholic bias after it declined to renew a contract with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to provide services to victims of human trafficking. The HHS made that decision because of the conference's refusal to refer clients to a full range of reproductive health care, including abortion, contraception and sterilization, even as many survivors of trafficking have been subjected to sexual violence. Furthermore, the bishops' conference continued to receive millions in federal grants to provide a variety of other services.

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Nevertheless, that single nonrenewal of a contract prompted a fervor in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. At an Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing, for example, Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey accused the agency of discriminating against the bishops' conference "solely because it fundamentally respects the innate value and preciousness of an unborn child and refuses to be complicit in procuring his or her violent death by abortion." The following year, opposition to the contraception coverage requirement in the Affordable Care Act prompted Republicans to hold hearings on whether insurance coverage for contraception was anti-Catholic.

Claiming Democratic administrations are anti-Catholic or anti-Christian is old hat for the GOP. But this new offensive against the FBI comes at an opportune time for them to consolidate opposition to the government with support for Donald Trump, who needs to keep the Christian right base agitated against his perceived enemies in his latest run for the White House. The charge of the FBI's anti-Catholic bias melds well, for instance, with the Christian right's anger over the raid at Mar-o-Lago last year.

By combining fables about a lawless FBI and a virulently anti-religious government, leaders of the Christian right create a new way to tie their voters to Trump. As Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Ariz., put it, "If they can come for Trump, they will come for you." Now the GOP can both energize the base with a new myth of an anti-Christian government and simultaneously inject them with a strong dose of relatability with their revered leader.