

War at Home

by Brian Glick

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Government harassment of U.S. political activists clearly exists today, violating our fundamental democratic rights and creating a climate of fear and distrust which undermines our efforts to challenge official policy. Similar attacks on social justice movements came to light during the 1960s. Only years later did we learn that these had been merely the visible tip of an iceberg. Largely hidden at the time was a vast government program to neutralize domestic political opposition through "covert action" (political repression carried out secretly or under the guise of legitimate law enforcement). The 1960s program, coordinated by the FBI under the code name "COINTELPRO," was exposed in the 1970s and supposedly stopped. But covert operations against domestic dissidents did not end. They have persisted and become an integral part of government activity.

How COINTELPRO Worked

When congressional investigations, political trials, and other traditional legal modes of repression failed to counter the growing movements, and even helped to fuel them, the FBI and police moved outside the law. They resorted to the secret and systematic use of fraud and force to sabotage constitutionally protected political activity. Their methods ranged far beyond surveillance, amounting to a homefront version of the covert action for which the CIA has become infamous throughout the world.

FBI Headquarters secretly instructed its field offices to propose schemes to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize" specific individuals and groups. Close coordination with local police and prosecutors was strongly encouraged. Other recommended collaborators included friendly news media, business and foundation executives, and university, church, and trade union officials, as well as such "patriotic" organizations as the American Legion. Final authority rested with FBI Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Top FBI officials pressed local field offices to step up their activity and demanded regular progress reports. Agents were directed to maintain full secrecy "such that under no circumstances should the existence of the program be made known outside the Bureau and appropriate within-office security should be afforded to sensitive operations and techniques." A total of 2,370 officially approved COINTELPRO actions were admitted to the Senate Intelligence Committee, and thousands more have since been uncovered.