

US Domestic Covert Operations

From the Archive: WAR AT HOME (2/5)

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Anyone who doubts that the government is capable of using agents provocateurs to plant phony requests for bomb-making information in this newsgroup as a pretext for censoring the entire net (or that it is capable of much worse if that fails) should take a glance at the following articles. These posts also contain much that should be of interest to anyone thinking about joining or starting any kind of anarchist direct-action campaign or organization. Gary

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How COINTELPRO Helped Destroy the Movements of the 1960s

Since COINTELPRO was used mainly against the progressive movements of the 1960s, its impact can be grasped only in the context of the momentous social upheaval which shook the country during those years.

All across the United States, Black communities came alive with renewed political struggle. Most major cities experienced sustained, disciplined Black protest and massive ghetto uprisings. Black activists galvanized multi-racial rebellion among GIs, welfare mothers, students, and prisoners.

College campuses and high schools erupted in militant protest against the Vietnam War. A predominantly white New Left, inspired by the Black movement, fought for an end to U.S. intervention abroad and a more humane and cooperative way of life at home. By the late 1960s, deep-rooted resistance had revived among Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. A second wave of broad-based struggle for women's liberation had also emerged, along with significant efforts by lesbians, gay men, and disabled people.

Millions of people in the United States began to reject the dominant ideology and culture. Thousands challenged basic U.S. political and economic institutions. For a brief moment, "the crucial mixture of people's confidence in the government and lack of confidence in themselves which allows the government to govern, the ruling class to rule...threatened to break down."

By the mid-1970s, this upheaval had largely subsided. Important progressive activity persisted, mainly on a local level, and much continued to be learned and won, but the massive, militant Black and New Left movements were gone. The sense of infinite possibility and of our collective power to shape the future had been lost. Progressive momentum dissipated. Radicals found themselves on the defensive as right-wing extremists gained major government positions and defined the contours of accepted political debate.

Many factors besides COINTELPRO contributed to this change. Important progress was made toward achieving movement goals such as Black civil rights, an end to the Vietnam War, and university reform. The mass media, owned by big business and cowed by government and right-wing attack, helped to bury radical activism by ceasing to cover it. Television, popular magazines, and daily papers stereotyped Blacks as hardened criminals and welfare chiselers or as the supposedly affluent beneficiaries of reverse "discrimination." White youth were portrayed first as hedonistic hippies and mindless terrorists, later as an apolitical, self-indulgent "me generation." Both were scapegoated as threats to "decent, hard-working Middle America."

During the severe economic recession of the early- to mid- 1970s, former student activists began entering the job market, some taking on responsibility for children. Many were scared by brutal government and right-wing attacks culminating in the murder of rank-and-file activists as well as prominent leaders. Some were strung out on the hard drugs that had become increasingly available in Black and Latin communities and among white youth. Others were disillusioned by mistreatment in movements ravaged by the very social sicknesses they sought to eradicate, including racism, sexism, homophobia, class bias and competition.

Limited by their upbringing, social position, and isolation from older radical traditions, 1960s activists were unable to make the connections and changes required to build movements strong enough to survive and eventually win structural change in the United States. Middle-class students did not sufficiently ally with working and poor people. Too few white activists accepted third world leadership of multi-racial alliances. Too many men refused to practice genuine gender equality.

Originally motivated by goals of quick reforms, 1960s activists were ill-prepared for the long-term struggles in which they found themselves. Overly dependent on media-oriented superstars and one-shot dramatic actions, they failed to develop stable organizations, accountable leadership, and strategic perspective. Creatures of the culture they so despised, they often lacked the patience to sustain tedious grassroots work and painstaking analysis of actual social conditions. They found it hard to accept the slow, uneven pace of personal and political change.

This combination of circumstances, however, did not by itself guarantee political collapse. The achievements of the 1960s movements could have inspired optimism and provided a sense of the power to win other important struggles. The rightward shift of the major media could have enabled alternative newspapers, magazines, theater, film, and video to attract a broader audience and stable funding. The economic downturn of the early 1970s could have united Black militants, New Leftists, and workers in common struggle. Police brutality and government collusion in drug trafficking could have been exposed in ways that undermined support for the authorities and broadened the movements' backing.

By the close of the decade, many of the movements' internal weaknesses were starting to be addressed. Black-led multi-racial alliances, such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign and the Black Panthers' Rainbow Coalition, were forming. The movements' class base was broadening through Black "revolutionary unions" in auto and other industries, King's increasing focus on economic issues, the New Left's spread to community colleges, and the return of working-class GIs radicalized by their experience in Vietnam. At the same time, the women's movement was confronting the deep sexism which permeated 1960s activism, along with its corollaries: homophobia, sexual violence, militarism, competitiveness, and top-down decision-making.

While the problems of the 1960s movements were enormous, their strengths might have enabled them to overcome their weaknesses had the upsurge not been stifled before activists could learn from their mistakes. Much of the movements' inability to transcend their initial limitations and overcome adversity can be traced to COINTELPRO.

It was through COINTELPRO that the public image of Blacks and New Leftists was distorted to legitimize their arrest and imprisonment and scapegoat them as the cause of working people's problems. The FBI and police instigated violence and fabricated movement horrors. Dissidents were deliberately "criminalized" through false charges, frame-ups, and offensive, bogus leaflets and other materials published in their name. (Specific examples of these and other COINTELPRO operations are presented on pages 41-65.)

COINTELPRO enabled the FBI and police to exacerbate the movements' internal stresses until beleaguered activists turned on one another. Whites were pitted against Blacks, Blacks against Chicanos and Puerto Ricans, students against workers, workers against people on welfare, men against women, religious activists against atheists, Christians against Jews, Jews against Muslims. "Anonymous" accusations of infidelity ripped couples apart. Backers of women's and gay liberation were attacked as "dykes" or "faggots." Money was repeatedly stolen and precious equipment sabotaged to intensify pressure and sow suspicion and mistrust.

Otherwise manageable disagreements were inflamed by COINTELPRO until they erupted into hostile splits that shattered alliances, tore groups apart, and drove dedicated activists out of the movement. Government documents implicate the FBI and police in the bitter break-up of such pivotal groups as the Black Panther Party, SDS, and the Liberation News Service, and in the collapse of repeated efforts to form long-term coalitions across racial, class, and regional lines. While genuine political issues were often involved in these disputes, the outcome could have been different if government agencies had not covertly intervened to subvert compromise and fuel hostility and competition.

Finally, it was COINTELPRO that enabled the FBI and police to eliminate the leaders of mass movements without undermining the image of the United States as a democracy, complete with free speech and the rule of law. Charismatic orators and dynamic organizers were covertly attacked and "neutralized" before their skills could be transferred to others and stable structures established to carry on their work. Malcolm X was killed in a "factional dispute" which the FBI took credit for having "developed" in the Nation of Islam. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the target of an elaborate FBI plot to drive him to suicide and replace him "in his role of the leadership of the Negro people" with conservative Black lawyer Samuel Pierce (later named to Reagan's cabinet). Many have come to view King's eventual assassination (and Malcolm's as well) as itself a domestic covert operation.

Other prominent radicals faced similar attack when they began to develop broad followings and express anti-capitalist ideas. Some were portrayed as crooks, thugs, philanderers, or government agents, while others were physically threatened or

assaulted until they abandoned their work. Still others were murdered under phony pretexts, such as "shootouts" in which the only shots were fired by the police.

To help bring down a major target, the FBI often combined these approaches in strategic sequence. Take the case of the "underground press," a network of some 400 radical weeklies and several national news services, which once boasted a combined readership of close to 30 million. In the late 1960s, government agents raided the offices of alternative newspapers across the country in purported pursuit of drugs and fugitives. In the process, they destroyed typewriters, cameras, printing presses, layout equipment, business records, and research files, and roughed up and jailed staffers on bogus charges. Meanwhile, the FBI was persuading record companies to withdraw lucrative advertising and arranging for printers, suppliers, and distributors to drop underground press accounts. With their already shaky operations in disarray, the papers and news services were easy targets for a final phase of COINTELPRO disruption. Forged correspondence, anonymous accusations, and infiltrators' manipulation provoked a flurry of wild charges and counter-charges that played a major role in bringing many of these promising endeavors to a premature end.

A similar pattern can be discerned from the history of the Black Panther Party. Brutal government attacks initially elicited broad support for this new, militant, highly visible national organization and its popular ten-point socialist program for Black self-determination. But the FBI's repressive onslaught severely weakened the Party, making it vulnerable to sophisticated FBI psychological warfare which so discredited and shattered it that few people today have any notion of the power and potential that the Panthers once represented.

What proved most devastating in all of this was the effective manipulation of the victims of COINTELPRO into blaming themselves. Since the FBI and police operated covertly, the horrors they engineered appeared to emanate from within the movements. Activists' trust in one another and in their collective power was subverted, and the hopes of a generation died, leaving a legacy of cynicism and despair which continues to haunt us today.

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/** pn.publiceye: 23.6 **/
** Written 6:50 pm Jan 24, 1991 by nlgclc in cdp:pn.publiceye **

**Black Panther Party Program:
What We Want**
-adopted 1966

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the CAPITALISTS of our Black Community.
4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.
5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.
6. We want all black men to be exempt from military service.
7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people.
8. We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.
9. We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.
10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.

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Domestic Covert Action Remains a Serious Threat Today

The public exposure of COINTELPRO and other government abuses elicited a flurry of apparent reform in the 1970s. President Nixon resigned in the face of impeachment. His Attorney General, other top aides, and many of the "plumbers" were prosecuted and imprisoned for brief periods. The CIA's director and counter-intelligence chief were ousted, and the CIA and the Army were again directed to cease covert operations against domestic targets.

The FBI had formally shut down COINTELPRO a few weeks after it was uncovered. As part of the general face-lift, the Bureau publicly apologized for COINTELPRO, and municipal governments began to disband the local police "red squads" that had served as the FBI's main accomplices. A new Attorney General notified several hundred activists that they had been victims of COINTELPRO and issued guidelines limiting future operations. Top FBI officials were indicted for ordering the burglary of activists' offices and homes; two were convicted, and several others retired or resigned. The Bureau's egomaniacal, crudely racist and sexist founder, J. Edgar Hoover, died in 1972. After two interim directors failed to stem the tide of criticism, a prestigious federal judge, William Webster, was appointed by President Carter to clean house and build a "new FBI."

Behind this public hoopla, however, the Bureau's war at home continued unabated. Domestic covert action did not end when it was exposed in the 1970s. It has persisted throughout the 1980s and become a permanent feature of U.S. government.

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Domestic Covert Action Did Not End in the 1970s

Director Webster's highly touted reforms did not create a "new FBI." They served mainly to modernize the existing Bureau and to make it even more dangerous. In place of the backbiting competition with other law enforcement and intelligence agencies which had previously impeded coordination of domestic counter-insurgency, Webster promoted inter-agency cooperation. Adopting the mantle of an "equal opportunity employer," his FBI hired women and people of color to more effectively penetrate a broader range of political targets. By cultivating a low-visibility image and discreetly avoiding public attack on prominent liberals, Webster gradually restored the Bureau's respectability and won over a number of its former critics.

State and local police similarly upgraded their repressive capabilities in the 1970s while learning to present a more friendly public face. The "red squads" that had harassed 1960s activists were quietly resurrected under other names. Paramilitary SWAT teams and tactical squads were formed, along with highly politicized "community relations" and "beat rep" programs featuring conspicuous Black, Latin, and female officers. Generous federal funding and sophisticated technology became available through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, while FBI-led "joint anti-terrorist task forces" introduced a new level of inter-agency coordination.

Meanwhile, the CIA continued to use university professors, journalists, labor leaders, publishing houses, cultural organizations, and philanthropic fronts to mold U.S. public opinion.[f-41> At the same time, Army Special Forces and other elite military units began to train local police for counter-insurgency and to intensify their own preparations, following the guidelines of the secret Pentagon contingency plans, "Garden Plot" and "Cable Splicer." They drew increasingly on manuals based on the British colonial experience in Kenya and Northern Ireland, which teach the essential methodology of COINTELPRO under the rubric of "low-intensity warfare," and stress early intervention to neutralize potential opposition before it can take hold.

While domestic covert operations were scaled down once the 1960s upsurge had subsided (thanks in part to the success of COINTELPRO), they did not stop. In its April 27, 1971 directives disbanding COINTELPRO, the FBI provided for future covert action to continue "with tight procedures to ensure absolute security." The results are apparent in the record of 1970s covert operations which have so far come to light:

The Native American Movement: 1970s FBI attacks on resurgent Native American resistance have been well documented by Ward Churchill and others.[f-44> In 1973, the Bureau led a paramilitary invasion of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota as American Indian Movement (AIM) activists gathered there for symbolic protests at Wounded Knee, the site of an earlier U.S. massacre of Native Americans. The FBI directed the entire 71-day siege, deploying federal marshals, U.S. Army personnel, Bureau of Indian Affairs police, local GOONS (Guardians of the Oglala Nation, an armed tribal

vigilante force), and a vast array of heavy weaponry.

In the following years, the FBI and its allies waged all-out war on AIM and the Native people. From 1973-76, they killed 69 residents of the tiny Pine Ridge reservation, a rate of political murder comparable to the first years of the Pinochet regime in Chile.[f-45> To justify such a reign of terror and undercut public protest against it, the Bureau launched a complementary program of psychological warfare.

Central to this effort was a carefully orchestrated campaign to reinforce the already deeply ingrained myth of the "Indian savage." In one operation, the FBI fabricated reports that AIM "Dog Soldiers" planned widespread "sniping at tourists" and "burning of farmers" in South Dakota. The son of liberal U.S. Senator (and Arab-American activist) James Abourezk, was named as a "gunrunner," and the Bureau issued a nationwide alert picked up by media across the country.

To the same end, FBI undercover operatives framed AIM members Paul "Skyhorse" Durant and Richard "Mohawk" Billings for the brutal murder of a Los Angeles taxi driver. A bogus AIM note taking credit for the killing was found pinned to a signpost near the murder site, along with a bundle of hair said to be the victim's "scalp." Newspaper headlines screamed of "ritual murder" by "radical Indians." By the time the defendants were finally cleared of the spurious charges, many of AIM's main financial backers had been scared away and its work among a major urban concentration of Native people was in ruin.

In March 1975, a central perpetrator of this hoax, AIM's national security chief Doug Durham, was unmasked as an undercover operative for the FBI. As AIM's liaison with the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee during the trials of Dennis Banks and other Native American leaders, Durham had routinely participated in confidential strategy sessions. He confessed to stealing organizational funds during his two years with AIM, and to setting up the arrest of AIM militants for actions he had organized. It was Durham who authored the AIM documents that the FBI consistently cited to demonstrate the group's supposed violent tendencies.

Prompted by Durham's revelations, the Senate Intelligence Committee announced on June 23, 1975 that it would hold public hearings on FBI operations against AIM. Three days later, armed FBI agents assaulted an AIM house on the Pine Ridge reservation. When the smoke cleared, AIM activist Joe Stuntz Killwright and two FBI agents lay dead. The media, barred from the scene "to preserve the evidence," broadcast the Bureau's false accounts of a bloody "Indian ambush," and the congressional hearings were quietly cancelled.

The FBI was then free to crush AIM and clear out the last pockets of resistance at Pine Ridge. It launched what the Chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission described as "a full-scale military-type invasion of the reservation"[f-46> complete with M-16s, Huey helicopters, tracking dogs, and armored personnel carriers. Eventually AIM leader Leonard Peltier was tried for the agents' deaths before a right-wing judge who met secretly with the FBI. AIM member Anna Mae Aquash was found murdered after FBI agents threatened to kill her unless she helped them to frame Peltier. Peltier's conviction, based on perjured testimony and falsified FBI ballistics evidence, was upheld on appeal. (The panel of federal judges included William Webster until the very day of his official appointment as Director of the FBI.) Despite mounting evidence of impropriety in Peltier's trial, and Amnesty International's call for a review of his case, the Native American leader remains in maximum security prison.

The Black Movement: Government covert action against Black activists also continued in the 1970s. Targets ranged from community-based groups to the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika and the surviving remnants of the Black Panther Party.

In Mississippi, federal and state agents attempted to discredit and disrupt the United League of Marshall County, a broad-based grassroots civil rights group struggling to stop Klan violence. In California, a notorious paid operative for the FBI, Darthard Perry, code-named "Othello," infiltrated and disrupted local Black groups and took personal credit for the fire that razed the Watts Writers Workshop's multi-million dollar cultural center in Los Angeles in 1973. The Los Angeles Police Department later admitted infiltrating at least seven 1970s community groups, including the Black-led Coalition Against Police Abuse.

In the mid-1970s, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) conspired with the Wilmington, North Carolina police to frame nine local civil rights workers and the Rev. Ben Chavis, field organizer for the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. Chavis had been sent to North Carolina to help Black communities respond to escalating racist violence against school desegregation. Instead of arresting Klansmen, the ATF and police coerced three young Black prisoners into falsely accusing Chavis and the others of burning white-owned property. Although all three prisoners later admitted they had lied in response to official threats and bribes, the FBI found no impropriety. The courts repeatedly refused to reopen the case and the Wilmington Ten served many years in prison before pressure from international religious and human rights groups won their release.

As the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) began to build autonomous Black economic and political institutions in the deep South, the Bureau repeatedly disrupted its meetings and blocked its attempts to buy land. On August 18, 1971, four months after the supposed end of COINTELPRO, the FBI and police launched an armed pre-dawn assault on national RNA offices in Jackson, Mississippi. Carrying a warrant for a fugitive who had been brought to RNA Headquarters by FBI informer Thomas Spells, the attackers concentrated their fire where the informer's floor plan indicated that RNA President Imari Obadele slept. Though Obadele was away at the time of the raid, the Bureau had him arrested and imprisoned on charges of conspiracy to assault a government agent.

The COINTELPRO-triggered collapse of the Black Panthers' organization and support in the winter of 1971 left them defenseless as the government moved to prevent them from regrouping. On August 21, 1971, national Party officer George Jackson, world-renowned author of the political autobiography [Soledad Brother,] was murdered by San Quentin prison authorities on the pretext of an attempted jailbreak. In July 1972, Southern California Panther leader Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt was successfully framed for a senseless \$70 robbery-murder committed while he was hundreds of miles away in Oakland, California, attending Black Panther meetings for which the FBI managed to "lose" all of its surveillance records. Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act later revealed that at least two FBI agents had infiltrated Pratt's defense committee. They also indicated that the state's main witness, Julio Butler, was a paid informer who had worked in the Party under the direction of the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department. For many years, FBI Director Webster publicly denied that Pratt had ever been a COINTELPRO target, despite the documentary proof in his own agency's records.

Also targeted well into the 1970s were former Panthers assigned to form an underground to defend against armed government attack on the Party. It was they who had regrouped as the Black Liberation Army (BLA) when the Party was destroyed. FBI files show that, within a month of the close of COINTELPRO, further Bureau operations against the BLA were mapped out in secret meetings convened by presidential aide John Ehrlichman and attended by President Nixon and Attorney General Mitchell. In the following years, many former Panther leaders were murdered by the police in supposed "shoot-outs" with the BLA. Others, such as Sundiata Acoli, Assata Shakur, Dhoruba Al-Mujahid Bin Wahad (formerly Richard Moore), and the New York 3 (Herman Bell, Anthony "Jalil" Bottom, and Albert "Nuh" Washington) were sentenced to long prison terms after rigged trials.

In the case of the New York 3, FBI ballistics reports withheld during their mid-1970s trials show that bullets from an alleged murder weapon did not match those found at the site of the killings for which they are still serving life terms. The star witness against them has publicly recanted his testimony, swearing that he lied after being tortured by police (who repeatedly jammed an electric cattleprod into his testicles) and secretly threatened by the prosecutor and judge. The same judge later dismissed petitions to reopen the case, refusing to hold any hearing or to disqualify himself, even though his misconduct is a major issue. As the NY3 continued to press for a new trial, their evidence was ignored by the news media while their former prosecutor's one-sided, racist "docudrama" on the case, (Badge of the Assassin,) aired on national television.