

# THE BSM & THE FBI FILES

by Jonathan Friday

It is common knowledge that during tumultuous times in U.S. history the Federal Bureau of Investigation has spied and kept files on people and organizations it felt were a threat to democracy and national security, such as certain labor movements and civil rights organizations and their leaders. Moreover, the FBI also targeted several university student organizations. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Black Student Movement was no exception.

Jon Elliston, a UNC graduate student, wrote an article in the Sept. 9-15, 1998 issue of the Independent detailing how the FBI watched over and documented its findings on the BSM.

Elliston found the documents while working for the National Security Archive, a private library of declassified government documents. He wanted to document his findings because he did not think of North Carolina as a hotbed for radicalism.

He believes the bureau targeted the BSM because of its political-policing tactics, which were to keep an eye on Black leaders who were challenging the status quo. When the Civil Rights Movement made gains, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and the rest of the FBI leadership went ballistic. Investigators tried to suppress Black leaders for a long time. The FBI decided to play dirty to disrupt this movement. The FBI was worried about student activism. When Black students started to get organized, this set off the alarm. They wanted to know every detail about Black groups even though none had broken the law. Black organizations began to be investigated all over the country.

In August 1967, J. Edgar Hoover ordered FBI field offices to open a new COINTELPRO operation against "Black nationalist-hate groups." COINTELPRO, an acronym for counterintelligence programs, had a field office based in Charlotte, N.C., under the supervision of Richard Murphy. It was Murphy who sought Hoover's permission to investigate the BSM beginning on April 5, 1968, the day after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

According to Elliston the FBI declared the BSM a Black nationalist-hate group. The FBI then stated that "once you described the groups as hate groups, you can justify your reasons."

An April 5, 1968, FBI memorandum from J. Edgar Hoover to SAC (Special Agent in Charge) Richard Murphy approved an investigation of the BSM to determine its aims, purposes, and propensity for violence. "Since this group is a student organization, you should insure the investigation is handled

in such a way as to preclude embarrassment to the Bureau," said Hoover.

Elliston said, "The bureau wanted to investigate the BSM's 'propensity for violence' because the FBI considered such groups dangerous political trends. They need this pretext. They did not find evidence that the BSM had a propensity for violence." The FBI had potential

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to resort to terrorist acts to threaten its targets. There were no terrorist threats at UNC, however, Elliston said, "The fact that I didn't find evidence of it, doesn't mean that it did not happen."

It would be difficult to assess damage to the BSM because of a lack of evidence. There is not much evidence that the FBI tried to disrupt the BSM, but there is lots of contingency planning and papers that raise those possibilities. FBI surveillance of the BSM started in 1968, but when did it end? Has it? "We don't know from currently available documents when surveillance on BSM stopped. These programs, (COINTELPRO), were exposed and denounced in Congress in the mid-1970s and at that point in became much more difficult for the FBI to wage secret campaigns, Elliston said.

Elliston is convinced that there are several cases of the FBI using similar tactics in the years that followed, particularly in the 1980s. "They did go after groups that went against Reagan's policies regarding Central America. It is also a safe bet that they are currently keeping an eye on the Nation of Islam. I can't produce documents, but I'd be surprised that these tactics were not going on."

Two years after FBI surveillance of the BSM started, one FBI file dated Dec. 15, 1970, concluded: "The aim of BSM is to promote black studies and promote a black cultural program. The group also held social meetings and operated tutorial program(s) among black students."

The file also said: "The group seems primarily interested in the completion of their education. There is no known key activist or extremist influence present."

When asked if he believed that minority groups like the BSM could now trust the government, Elliston said: "I'll choose my words very carefully here. I don't think any person in this country should let their guard down when it comes to what the federal government is capable of against dissidents. We still have agencies that have the ability to do things in secret and we still have agencies whose job it is to maintain the status quo in some sense. So any group that wants to rock the boat a bit, politically, should keep the FBI's track record in mind." 