

FBI returns to spying on war protesters

By Hazel Trice Edney
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WASHINGTON — Civil rights scholars fear that new efforts by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to spy on anti-war protesters might spark the kinds of abuses that were popular under FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover during the 1960s.

"One of the things that was striking about the FBI files, which I've read tens of thousands of from the 1960s, is how much erroneous information were in those files, how many times they jumped to the wrong conclusion about someone's political affiliation," says Clayborne Carson, professor of history at Stanford University and editor of the Dr. Martin Luther King papers. "What I'm afraid of now is that if you're at a demonstration that is a pro-Palestinian, that therefore, you are in favor of terrorism. It's not just the intended use of surveillance. It's all of the various uses that might be made of that information."

It was disclosed last week that the FBI has been conducting surveillance at anti-war protests in Washington, D. C. and San Francisco and plan to spy on other lawful demonstrations across the nation.

"Exactly, what are they doing?" asks David Garrow, author of "The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr.," one of the most authoritative books on the FBI efforts to disrupt and discredit civil rights leaders in the 1960s under a program called COINTELPRO "One of the crucial things that first pops into my mind is how many named individual persons, if any, is the FBI opening files on? The fact that you've got agents sort of observing these rallies and even if they've got a video camera, that to me is sort of less intriguing, less pressing than, 'Are they working to identify named U.S. citizens?'"

The FBI maintains its efforts to monitor marchers are both legal and necessary to deter terrorism.

Civil rights advocates are not unmindful of the FBI's effort to smear the King's reputation. Not only did they spy on him, collecting voluminous files, FBI agents sent tapes of private conversations to King's wife, Coretta; urged King to commit suicide and endangered the lives of some activists by pitting them against one another, sometimes with bogus correspondence.

"In my speech to the NAACP convention [last] summer, I predicted this," says Julian Bond, the organization's board chairman. "I said that they spied and lied about us in the 1950s and 60s during the Hoover era and they're probably spying and lying about us today."

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