

# FBI War on the Black Panthers

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1990

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was formed in Oakland, California in 1966. Within two years it had dropped self-defense from its title and spread throughout the country, particularly in California and the northern ghettos. It also came under tremendous pressure as federal and state repression of the movement intensified.

This was the period when, as thousands of FBI documents released under provision of the Freedom of Information Act amply demonstrate, the Bureau was engaged in what amounted to a secret war against the Panthers. The FBI, the de facto political police in the U.S. since its inception, was already conducting Counterintelligence Programs (COINTELPRO) to infiltrate and disrupt the Communist Party, USA, the Socialist Workers Party, and Puerto Rican nationalist movements. These operations were greatly expanded and directed against many of the radical and reformist movements that were gaining momentum in the late 1960s.

The COINTELPRO operation entitled 'Black Extremists/Hate Groups' had as its main target the growing Black Panther Party (BPP). Its structure called for the FBI field offices to aggressively interdict Panther activities in their cities. According to released documents, special agents in charge of the various offices were called on by FBI superiors to formulate "imaginative and hard-hitting counterintelligence measures aimed at crippling the BPP." Massive surveillance via wiretaps, burglaries, electronic devices, live "tails," and mail tampering was only the beginning.

The feds shared information and collaborated with local police units that often had been specifically created for "red squad" purposes. At least 38 Panthers were murdered by various police agencies between 1968 and 1972, and at least 12 others died in "shooting wars" deliberately fostered by FBI COINTELPRO specialists through an assortment of disinformation ruses. Hundreds more party members and their supporters were beaten or suffered gunshot wounds.

Scores of Panthers were railroaded into the local penitentiary on what has since been revealed to have been highly suspicious and sometimes plainly false information provided to local police by Bureau counterintelligence operatives.

Other COINTELPRO methods that appear in FBI memoranda include:

Forged Mail. The FBI regularly sent forged correspondence to groups or members of groups to exacerbate differences among activists and to create snitch-jackets (see below). If the possibility of physical violence between groups became apparent, these efforts were often intensified.

Fake "propaganda." The FBI fabricated and distributed publications, leaflets, broadsheets, cartoons, etc. in the name of targeted organizations designed to misrepresent their positions, goals and objectives in a way to publicly discredit them and increase tensions within and between groups.

Disinformation. The FBI systematically released false information to their print and electronic media contacts. They hoped this process would condition public sentiment to accept the brutal Bureau/police repression. Potential killer cops on the beat also watched the television news and read the papers, and thereby had their worst Panther nightmares reinforced. This had the effect of increasing trigger-finger itch during street confrontations.

Harassment Arrests. The executive branch of government used the judiciary branch as a tool of attack. Repeated arrests of targeted individuals on spurious charges were carried out, not to obtain convictions, but to demoralize, harass and increase paranoia.

Arrestees and their supporters were tied up in a series of pre-arraignment imprisonment and preliminary courtroom procedures. Money was depleted through posting of numerous bail bonds and the retention of lawyers. Grand juries were used to evade the Fifth Amendment and compel testimony. The FBI and the US Justice Department [sic] convened over 100 grand juries in the late 1960s and subpoenaed more than 1,000 activists from various dissident movements.

Informers and Agent Provocateurs. COINTELPRO documents have revealed that thousands of informers were used against the left in this period. In the BPP and in other groups, many also functioned as agent provocateurs. They encouraged or engaged in illegal activities which could then be attributed to members of the BPP or the party itself. They disrupted internal functioning and assisted in the spread of disinformation. To exploit rifts between rival black nationalist groups, agent provocateurs were used to escalate the fighting, sometimes provoking gun battles.

Snitch-Jacketing. "Snitch-jacketing" or "bad-jacketing" refers to the well-known prison practice of creating suspicion, through the spreading of rumors, manufacture of evidence, etc., that loyal group members, usually in key positions, are FBI/police informers. In the case of the BPP, it became known to FBI agents that the likely outcome of this tactic would be extreme physical violence directed at the "jacketed" individuals. Yet such efforts were continued and in some cases accelerated. Some prominent targets of FBI snitch-jacketing were civil rights leader Stokely Carmichael, and Black Panthers Fred Bennett and Geronimo Pratt.

Political Assassination. The FBI has been implicated in the outright physical elimination of selected political activists, often after other attempts at destroying their effectiveness had failed. The Bureau almost always used surrogates to perform such functions, but repeatedly provided the basic intelligence, logistics, or other elements necessary to "successful" operations.

Following rival gang or local police murders of Black Panthers, FBI field offices, in memoranda to the Director's Office in Washington, D.C., would claim credit for contributing to these incidents.

COINTELPRO operations were first uncovered in 1971 after activists broke into an FBI field office in Media, Pennsylvania and stole files. Continued revelations in the last nineteen years have shown that COINTELPRO contributed significantly to the factional fighting that helped undermine dissident movements in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s.

The FBI's COINTELPRO came under fire and was officially discontinued in 1972. Its abuses are not just past history, though this is the slant the corporate media puts on the COINTELPRO stories they report. Targets of the program such as Geronimo Pratt, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and others are still imprisoned for crimes they did not commit. The sustained FBI campaign of disruption of Central America anti-intervention groups in the early 1980s, the supplying of the explosive device used in the MOVE bombing in Philadelphia in 1985, and the recent infiltration of Earth First! by an FBI operative suggests that COINTELPRO-type operations have become a permanent part of the U.S. government's efforts to neutralize certain political opposition.

The sobering conclusion is that the Bureau learned its lessons well from COINTELPRO exposure. The "war on drugs" now provides the cover COINTELPRO did previously for counterinsurgency activities in black and Latino communities. The present public hysteria whipped up by the media could easily be used for political purposes. Perhaps the next time police proxies kill an activist in bed, the only justification necessary will be "evidence" of drug dealing.

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Fifth Estate #334, Summer, 1990

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