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The F.B.I.'s Black Phantom Menace

Andrew Rosenthal OCT. 19, 2017

When most Americans think of domestic terrorism, they probably think about the Oklahoma City bomber, white supremacists who wallow in Nazi nostalgia, racists who spray gunfire in black churches and lone-wolf psychopaths like the one who murdered at least 59 people in Las Vegas on Oct. 1.

Not the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It's thinking outside that narrow box.

In a report that was never supposed to be made public, but was on Oct. 6 by foreignpolicy.org, the F.B.I.'s Counterterrorism Division has concluded that there is a real threat from the "black identity extremist" movement.

It said "Black Identity Extremist (BIE) perceptions of police brutality against African Americans" has been responsible for "an increase in premeditated, retaliatory lethal violence against law enforcement and will very likely serve as justification for such violence" in the future.

Wait, what exactly is black identity extremism? The answer is: nothing.

It's a fiction, as others have powerfully argued, including Andrew Cohen, a fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice.

But that doesn't make the report any less sinister. As Cohen pointed out, the F.B.I. has a "history of surveillance and intimidation of black Americans that frequently goes beyond legitimate law enforcement into paranoia, racism, and political expediency."

The F.B.I. document takes pains to say that the mere exercise of constitutional rights to protest and even the "rhetorical embrace" of violent tactics "may not" constitute extremism. But the danger — or even the aim — is that the entire racial justice movement gets painted with the brush of terrorism.

The next time there is an act of violence by an African-American against police officers, brace yourself for the right-wing media or the attorney general or the tweeter in chief to seize on the phrase "black identity extremists."

It has already happened. Fox News obligingly used videotape of Black Lives Matter protests as the backdrop for its credulous account of the report after it was published.

The report inevitably draws comparisons to the notorious Cointelpro operations against black activists in the last century. But it would be unfair to say the F.B.I. has not made any progress since J. Edgar Hoover ordered the agency to "disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize" what he called "black nationalist hate-type organizations."

The language of the new document is more cagey. But the sentiments are chilling.

The report "conflates black political activists with dangerous domestic terrorist organizations that pose actual threats to law enforcement," the Congressional Black Caucus said in a letter asking for a meeting with the F.B.I.

"It relies on a handful of obviously terrible incidents to paint black Americans who exercise free speech against witnessed police brutality as possible violent extremists," the letter said. (It was referring to six cases since 2014 in which the F.B.I. said the black identity menace was behind attacks on police officers, including the reprehensible shooting of 11 police officers, five of whom died, in Dallas on July 7, 2016.)

The F.B.I. draws a line from the killing by a police officer of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014 to all those other cases and warns of a "surge" in ideologically motivated violence against the police.

The report also draws a line from the activists of the '60s and '70s to the "extremists" of today. The black threat, it said, had simply been dormant.

There is no such connection. The F.B.I. failed even to make any real connection among the six incidents it cited.

The authors of the report act as though there is doubt about the institutional racism in our country and in some police forces. (I am not saying all white police officers are racists.)

The F.B.I. document talked about "perceived injustices against African-Americans" — perceived by anyone who is really paying attention.

The counterterrorism division said it "considered" the possibility that violence against the police is not driven by their phantom B.I.E.s but decided that was "very unlikely."

Fifty years ago, Hoover's F.B.I. spied on civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr. It forged letters to create friction between rival black-power movements, which led to a shooting at the University of California in Los Angeles in 1969 that left two dead. Undercover police officers were responsible for framing 21 Black Panthers for a fake bombing conspiracy in New York in 1969.

The list goes on and on.

There is a slippery slope between this kind of intelligence assessment and acts of repression. The F.B.I. has slid gleefully down that slope before. It must not be allowed to do so again.

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