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COMMENTARY

'Black Identity Extremists' and the Dark Side of the FBI

Leaked documents remind us of the agency's history of dirty tricks.

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RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS have helped put the FBI in a favorable light. The agency and its leadership have been praised for its performance throughout the investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. Former director James Comey affirmed the agency's fundamental goodness in a letter to his colleagues after he was relieved of his post President Trump.

"I have said to you before that, in times of turbulence, the American people should see the FBI as a rock of competence, honesty, and independence," wrote Comey. "It is very hard to leave a group of people who are committed only to doing the right thing."

While Comey might only have good things to say about the FBI, newly leaked documents suggest he shouldn't. Despite the agency's new, upstanding image, it might be back to its Hoover-era dirty tricks—if it ever really departed from them.

Foreign Policy reported recently on the existence of a document that circulated within the FBI's counterterrorism division. Just nine days before the deadly white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, it named a major threat to public safety: not organized white nationalists, but "black identity extremists."

"The FBI assesses it is very likely Black Identity Extremist (BIE) perceptions of police brutality against African Americans spurred an increase in premeditated, retaliatory lethal violence against

law enforcement and will very likely serve as justification for such violence," the report reads in part.

The "black identity extremist" tag might be new but the tactic behind it is not. The FBI's attempt to characterize the police reform movement as violent and extremist is but the agency's most recent effort to criminalize black activism by labeling it a danger to public safety and national security.

There's perhaps no better example of the contrast between the FBI's reputation and its character than its behavior during the 1964 Freedom Summer. If you learned about that historic summer in school, you probably heard stories of how the civil rights campaign would not have been a success without protection provided to volunteers by the FBI. That's definitely the story I was told in school, but it's not the whole truth.

My father, David Dennis, was integral to organizing the Freedom Summer as co-director of the Council of Federated Organizations. In fact, a bout of bronchitis kept him from traveling with James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner on the day the three young civil rights workers were murdered by the Klan. He told me the full story of the FBI's involvement that summer.

The truth is that J. Edgar Hoover, who ran the agency from 1924 to 1972, never wanted the FBI to protect civil rights workers. When the Council of Federated Organizations asked for his help as it registered black Mississippians to vote, he responded in no uncertain terms.

"We most certainly do not and will not give protection to civil rights workers," Hoover said at a news conference early that summer. "In the first place, the FBI is not a police organization. It's purely an investigative organization, and the protection of individual citizens, either natives of this state or coming into the state, is a matter for the local authorities."

Of course, the FBI did later become heavily involved with the Freedom Summer after Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner went missing, beginning its now-famous "Mississippi Burning" investigation. For that, the agency is given more credit than it deserves.

After the three civil rights workers disappeared, Hoover ordered FBI agents to begin a preliminary search. He sent additional agents to Mississippi to look for the men after their car was found burned out.

The buried remains of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were finally found 44 days after they disappeared.

Most people don't know, however, that President Lyndon B. Johnson had to pressure Hoover and the FBI to get involved. Hoover expressed his disdain for the civil rights workers, even after they went missing. In fact, in a recorded phone call, Hoover can be heard noting to Johnson that Schwerner and his wife were communists, the "extremists" of the era.

My father told me the story of the FBI's mixed record that summer and other stories of his interactions with the agency—the spying, intimidation, and blatant racism of agents. My understanding of the FBI's capacity for wrongdoing only grew as I learned about COINTELPRO, its covert, often illegal, campaigns to break up the civil rights movement and "neutralize" activists.

Hoover has been scapegoated as the nexus of that evil. According to reports, Comey kept a copy of a 1963 order authorizing Hoover to conduct round-the-clock surveillance of Martin Luther King Jr. on his desk as a reminder of the director's abuses.

News of the agency's most recent anti-activist activity suggests, however, that anti-blackness and dirty tactics aren't relegated to the agency's history or one man's leadership.

It's unclear how the new "black identity extremists" tag will impact the lives of activists. We do know that the Department of Homeland Security has been surveilling Black Lives Matter activists since 2014, but there's no way to know what's next. Damage has already been done, though. With its report, the FBI has legitimized the idea that black activism is a threat and should be treated accordingly—with violent force, no doubt.

We all should be keeping a much closer eye on the FBI than we have in recent years. If its history teaches us anything it's that the agency is capable of serious harm and tremendous good, often at the same time.

It's great that the FBI is competent, honest, and independent when it comes to its handling of the president, but that's not all it handles. The agency has incredible power. Despite the changing political winds, we must maintain our skepticism of the FBI to be sure that power isn't abused.

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