

45 Years After COINTELPRO, FBI Still Thinks ‘Dissent is the Enemy’

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Forty-five years ago on Tuesday, peace activists broke into an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania and unearthed documents exposing the government’s expansive COINTELPRO operations, which aimed to surveil, disrupt, and “neutralize” lawful activist groups, including war protesters, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the American Indian Movement, and the National Lawyers Guild.

Though the COINTELPRO revelations stirred widespread outrage and led to the eventual passage of reform legislation, such as the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, such abuse of activists’ First Amendment rights continues to this day.

More than 60 national and local groups on Tuesday sent a [letter](#) (pdf) to the leaders of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees expressing concern over the FBI’s and Department of Homeland Security (DHS)’s “abuse of counterterrorism resources to monitor Americans’ First Amendment protected activity.”

The groups, which include Center for Constitutional Rights, Council on American-Islamic Relations, Government Accountability Project, Greenpeace USA, National Lawyers Guild, School of the Americas Watch (SOAW), and Veterans for Peace, among others, are urging the Committees to conduct a full investigation, not unlike the [Church Committee](#), “to determine the extent of FBI and DHS spying in the past decade.”

“The FBI in particular has a well-documented history of abuse of First Amendment rights,” the letter states—referring specifically to the COINTELPRO operations—and such activities have continued, including “sending undercover agents and informants to infiltrate peaceful social justice groups, as well as surveillance of, documenting, and reporting on lawful political activity.”



Some of the groups targeted by the FBI's COINTELPRO. (Source: Zinn Ed Project)

Groups recently targeted by the FBI include SOAW, Occupy Wall Street, [Black Lives Matter](#), and [anti-Keystone XL Pipeline activists](#). Meanwhile DHS and local fusion centers, which operate as local sources of “counter-terrorism” intelligence gathering and sharing, [monitored](#) the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter movements as well.

What’s more, the groups [note](#), “documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act show that the FBI continuously invokes counterterrorism authorities to monitor groups it admits are peaceful and nonviolent.”

“Labeling activism as terrorism criminalizes political dissent,” the letter states. “Given the current political climate and draconian laws concerning terrorism, individuals may be deterred from participating in completely lawful speech, such as a protest march, by this stigma.”

“That the FBI cannot discern between activism and terrorism shows us that they think dissent is still the enemy,” [said](#) Chip Gibbons, legal fellow with Bill of Rights Defense Committee and Defending Dissent Foundation, which organized the letter.

“There have been multiple attempts at reform but after each and every one we see the same thing happening again. The FBI claims to no longer investigate groups for their political beliefs, but look at who the FBI investigates under its counterterrorism authority—peace groups, racial justice groups, economic justice groups—the very same types of organizations that were targeted during the heyday of J. Edgar Hoover.”

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