



**It takes one mind  
to have a dream,  
and many hands to shape it.**

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## Revisiting the FBI's Dirty War on Black America

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Thanks to a CNN documentary airing this week, the tale of FBI informant Ernest Withers is now well known. The black photographer spent years busily documenting the civil rights movement and capturing candid images of its leaders, most notably Martin Luther King, Jr.

Whether through flattery or the naiveté of his subjects, Withers and his camera were able to get close—very close—to the movement's inner circles. He got so close that King and others trusted him to record their most intimate moments—ones that Withers would dutifully report back to his FBI handlers.

Withers's case was not exceptional. At that time, the woods were full informants, both men and women. Their existence was possible not only because of a corrupt, paranoid FBI that was intent on making life hell for civil rights leaders and others during the turbulent 1960s, but because they had the tacit blessing of three U.S. presidents: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. All three men firmly believed that the battle against domestic subversives—that is, communists, socialists, black nationalists, Black Panthers and civil rights leaders, most notably King—justified bending and ultimately breaking the law, civil liberties be damned.

There is also ample evidence in the correspondence, internal memos and discussions made public by historians and former White House staffers, to suggest that Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon never believed moderate civil rights leaders like King posed any real threat to the established order. Yet they still winked and nodded as John Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, launched a top secret and blatantly illegal counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO. It targeted not only the civil rights movement but other more radical leaders and organizations as well.

The mandate of that program, spelled out in the stacks of secret documents released by Senate investigators in 1976, was to “disrupt, misdirect, discredit, and neutralize” groups and individuals the FBI considered politically objectionable. Yet in nearly all of the cases, those targeted by COINTELPRO were neither foreign spies, terrorists nor criminals.

The FBI patterned COINTELPRO on the methods used by its counterintelligence division and internal security sections during the 1940s and '50s. The arsenal of dirty tactics they used included unauthorized wiretaps, agents provocateur, poison-pen letters, “black-bag jobs” (breaking and entering to obtain intelligence) and the compiling of secret dossiers.

Driven by a grotesque mix of personal racism and paranoia, Hoover kicked the program into high gear in the 1960s. The FBI recruited thousands of “ghetto informants,” such as Withers for their relentless campaign of harassment and intimidation against African American groups. The bureau even organized its targets into Orwellian categories agents gave such labels as “Rabble Rouser Index,” “Agitator Index” and “Security Index.”

The impact of COINTELPRO on the Civil Rights and Black Power movements was immediate and devastating. Thousands lost their jobs, were expelled from schools, evicted from homes and publicly slandered.

Only a few of those would ever be indicted, convicted or even accused of committing a crime. In fact, FBI documents released in 1976 revealed that the bureau devoted less than 20 percent of its spy activities to infiltrating actual crime syndicates or to solving bank robberies, murders, rapes and interstate theft. By contrast, more than half of all FBI targets were political organizations.

Following the death of Hoover in 1972 and subsequent congressional disclosure of his illegal program, the Justice Department assured the public that operations like COINTELPRO were a thing of the past. The department had clamped down on all illegal FBI activities.

That was not the case.

In the 1980s, the FBI waged a five-year covert spy campaign against dozens of religious and pacifist groups and leaders that opposed American foreign policy in Central America.

In the 1990s, the agency mounted yet another series of covert campaigns against civil rights, environmental and anti-nuclear weapon groups, as well as against Native American and Arab-American political figures and organizations.

Read the rest of this story online at [www.theskanner.com](http://www.theskanner.com)



**Martin Luther King Jr.**  
once said, “All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.”

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