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FEDERAL SURVEILLANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS, 1920-1984



Between the early 1920s and early 1980s, the Justice Department and its Federal Bureau of Investigation engaged in widespread investigation of those deemed politically suspect. Prominent among the targets of this sometimes coordinated, sometimes independent surveillance were aliens, members of various protest groups, Socialists, Communists, pacifists, militant labor unionists, ethnic or racial nationalists, and outspoken opponents of the policies of the incumbent presidents.

Date Range: 1920-1984

Content: 88,021 images

Source Library: Federal Bureau of Investigation Library

Detailed Description:

Black Americans of all political persuasions were subject to federal scrutiny, harassment, and prosecution. The FBI enlisted black "*confidential special informants*" to infiltrate a variety of organizations. Hundreds of documents in this collection were originated by such operatives. The reports provide a wealth of detail on "*Negro*" radicals and their organizations that can be found nowhere else. In addition to infiltration, the Bureau contributed to the infringement of First Amendment freedoms by making its agents a constant visible presence at radical rallies and meetings. Militant Socialist A. Philip Randolph was followed from city to city, and The Messenger's office was vandalized by zealous protectors of the nation's security. A perusal of Bureau case files for this period persuasively argues that black radicalism was one of the major preoccupations and targets of the federal investigatory network.

The value of this collection can be charted in several respects. First, it is a vast treasure of largely untapped source materials for the major social movements and key figures in early twentieth century black history. Second, it provides a window into the development of America's first systematic domestic surveillance apparatus. Finally, it illuminates the enduring conflict in American history between the need of society to protect basic freedoms and the equally legitimate need to protect itself from genuine threats to its security and existence.

This collections consists of a select group of small microfilm products. These include the following:

COINTELPRO: Black Nationalist "Hate" Groups

The FBI Counterintelligence Program file contains details of the bureau's attempts to "expose, disrupt, and neutralize" groups that J. Edgar Hoover perceived as threatening to national security. The material in this file, spanning COINTELPRO's existence from 1956 to 1971, is especially valuable for the view it offers of the U.S. political climate in the 1960s.

FBI File on A. Philip Randolph

A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979), an outspoken black labor leader, is perhaps best remembered as the organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. He was elected a vice president of the AFL-CIO in 1955. This file includes memos and correspondence, most dating from the 1940s with some coverage into the early 1960s.

FBI File on Adam Clayton Powell

Controversial politician and clergyman Adam Clayton Powell was active in many labor organizations and "militant" groups. He was elected to New York City council in 1941, and first elected to U.S. Congress in 1945. In 1967, Powell was excluded by the House of Representatives for alleged misuse of House funds, contempt of New York court orders concerning a libel judgment against him and conduct unbecoming a member.

FBI File on the Atlanta Child Murders (ATKID)

The file, dating from June 1980, contains memos, letters, lab tests, a detailed account of the trial and records of civil-rights questions regarding the case raised by Georgia Representative Mildred Glover and others.

FBI File on the Black Panther Party, North Carolina

Documents in this file, spanning the years from 1968 to 1976, are mainly surveillance reports and investigative and legal memoranda, but also include Black Panther Party publications, transcriptions of speeches by black militant spokespersons, digests of FBI phone intercepts at party headquarters and some of the party's internal records and correspondence.

FBI File on the Committee for Public Justice

The Committee for Public Justice (CPJ), an affiliate of the ACLU, was formed in 1970 to voice concern over the "period of political repression" it perceived the nation to be entering. After the CPJ denounced the FBI, the bureau enlisted conservative media figures to help neutralize the impact of the committee's findings. This file continues after Hoover's death in 1972, including efforts by Directors L. Patrick Gray and Clarence M. Kelley.

FBI File on Elijah Muhammed

Born Elijah Poole in 1897, "the Messenger of Allah" assumed leadership of the movement later known as the Nation of Islam in 1934. The file contains material the FBI collected to show immoral, subversive, or criminal activity in order to discredit him as a leader of the Nation of Islam.

FBI File on the Highlander Folk School

The Highlander Folk School was established in Monteagle, Tennessee, in 1932 by Myles Horton, a native Tennessean who wanted to "provide an educational center in the South for the training of rural and industrial leaders, and for the conservation and enrichment of the indigenous cultural values of the mountain." The school initially educated union workers who were considered promising leadership material; then, in the 1940s, it began accepting African Americans into its program, and emphasis shifted toward aiding southern rural workers. This change raised suspicions among conservative groups, and eventually the school's charter was revoked because state law required private schools to be racially segregated. This FBI file, spanning 40 years, is rich in school-produced materials and local news clippings. It will interest labor historians, civil rights scholars and researchers investigating postwar anticommunism, since the school was constantly suspected of having Communist ties.

FBI File on the Ku Klux Klan Murder of Viola Liuzzo

Like the "Mississippi Burning" investigation, this was one of the first cases to test the new Civil Rights Act. The file on this important case contains FBI letters, memorandums, teletypes and more.

FBI File on Malcolm X

Please Note: This file supersedes the 2-roll Malcolm X: FBI Surveillance File, published by Scholarly Resources in 1978. If you purchased the 2-roll collection, please contact us for special ordering information. Approximately 9,000 pages of documents have been released since the original file was published, including memoranda from the FBI.

FBI File: MIBURN (Mississippi Burning)

In the summer of 1964, civil rights advocates Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Earl Chaney were working in rural Mississippi and were abducted and killed by local Ku Klux Klan members. Their murders were among the first to be tried under the new Civil Rights Act. This file includes bureau letters, memoranda and prosecuting reports on the case.

FBI File on the Moorish Science Temple of America

The FBI investigated the Moorish Science Temple for its alleged hostility toward capitalism and its efforts to incite revolution. This collection is organized into geographic sections demarcating FBI headquarters and various field offices, including Baltimore, Chicago and Philadelphia. It is filed chronologically within the geographic sections. Materials contain correspondence, memos, reports, interviews and pamphlets.

FBI File on the Murder of Lemuel Penn

This FBI file documents the investigation and trial of murdered African-American U.S. Army Reserve Officer Lemuel Penn. It contains a large number of newspaper clippings, numerous reports concerning Klan-related activities, including statements from eyewitnesses, and photographs of areas where Klan meetings were held. It also includes correspondence with Lester Maddox, Thurgood Marshall and Lyndon Johnson. The FBI file on the murder of

Lemuel Penn is an important resource for studying the civil rights movement, segregation and the Ku Klux Klan.

FBI File on Muslim Mosque, Inc.

Founded by Malcolm X after his break with the Nation of Islam, Muslim Mosque, Inc. was a politically-oriented movement affiliated with the orthodox Islamic religion. The file contains memoranda by Special Agents in Charge and supporting documentation.

FBI File on the NAACP

These files on the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) cover the years 1923 to 1957, and reflect bureau investigations into the NAACP's supposed connections with the Communist party.

FBI File on the National Negro Congress

Among these files, materials are synopses of news reports regarding the National Negro Congress (NNC), announcements of its meetings, copies of its constitution and membership rosters and the bureau's investigative reports.

FBI File on the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU)

Organized by Malcolm X after his break with the Nation of Islam, the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) was under surveillance from its establishment until it dissolved in the 1960s. This file contains memoranda by FBI agents with supporting documentation.

FBI File on Paul Robeson

The FBI's investigation of, and dissemination of information about, actor/singer Paul Robeson and his Communist party association contributed significantly to the ruin of his career. This file includes all the bureau reports on Robeson and his wife, news clippings and transcripts of his telephone conversations.

FBI File on the Reverend Jesse Jackson

The files of the FBI on Jesse Jackson span the years 1967 to 1984 and include the original investigative file on Jackson detailing his early career as head of "Operation Breadbasket" and PUSH (People United to Save Humanity); records of various threats made against him; documents from class-action suits in which he joined against the FBI, CIA, and City of Chicago; and information regarding FBI and Secret Service protection of Jackson as a presidential candidate in 1984.

FBI File on Roy Wilkins

Roy Wilkins, a prominent member of the NAACP, served as acting secretary and later as executive secretary. He was a key figure in the prevention of Communist infiltration of the NAACP. Provided is information on Wilkins's connections to such figures as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Paul Robeson. The file is also rich in Black Panther Party documents critical of Wilkins.

FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was organized in 1960 to encourage voter registration for blacks in the Deep South. Under Stokely Carmichael, the group pushed for economic enfranchisement and advocated black supremacy. The FBI maintained a file on the SNCC because Communists were believed to be infiltrating its leadership. This file comprises reports from 19 cities, including Atlanta (SNCC national headquarters), Chicago, Dallas and San Francisco. Each section is in chronological order, spanning 1964 to 1973. The file contains addresses, membership and information on groups believed to associate with the SNCC.

FBI File on Thurgood Marshall

This lightly excised FBI file is of great value to those studying African-American history and the civil rights movement.

FBI File on W. E. B. Du Bois

NAACP founder W. E. B. Du Bois was investigated by the FBI for suspected Communist ties. In 1951, the Peace Information Center he was running was indicted as a suspected Communist "front" organization. The file contains coverage on this event and the last section consists of newspaper clippings about Du Bois.

FBI Investigation File on Communist Infiltration of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

This file documents the FBI's investigation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which was organized in 1957 in Atlanta, with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as president.

FBI Surveillance File: Malcolm X

Malcolm X, one of the black militant movement's most controversial figures, joined the Black Muslims while serving a prison sentence and, on his release in 1952, became a minister in Elijah Mohammed's Nation of Islam. Later breaking with his group, he converted to orthodox Islam and founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity. The FBI opened a file on Malcolm X in 1953 and continued surveillance until his assassination in 1965. This file, encompassing 2,300 pages, gives insight into the various factions and leaders of the black militant movement during the 1950s and '60s, as well as details on the FBI's attempts to neutralize it.

FBI Investigation File on Marcus Garvey

The FBI investigation File on Marcus Garvey is an informative source on his role as a spokesman for black nationalism, on the American black community of the 1920s, and on the origins of the black social protest and separatist movements.