

Cointelpro Plan Against Blacks Detailed by FBI

By John M. Goshko
Washington Post Staff Writer

The FBI made public yesterday previously secret documents describing how in 1967 it instituted a "counterintelligence" program to disrupt and discredit "black nationalist, hate-type organizations."

The documents, obtained by a group of reporters under the Freedom of Information Act, involve one of the various covert campaigns conducted by the FBI under the general term Cointelpro.

These activities, which were carried on between 1956 and 1971, were ordered by then-FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to harass allegedly militant political groups of the right and left.

Disclosures by the press and Congress already have made clear that a number of black organizations were major targets of the Cointelpro activities. As a result, the documents released yesterday track over information that has become known from other sources and contain few surprises.

Of principal interest are two documents from FBI headquarters to field offices that establish when the program against black groups was started and supply some additional facts about its aims and methods.

One letter, dated Aug. 25, 1967, specified that the bureau was about to begin a program against black groups and warned field agents not to confuse it with already existing Cointelpro activities aimed at the U.S. Communist Party and related organizations or the Ku Klux Klan and "hate-type groups primarily consisting of white members."

"The purpose of this new counterintelligence en-

deavor," the letter said, "is to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist, hate-type groups, their leadership, spokesmen, membership and supporters, and to counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder."

Field agents were directed to think of ways in which such groups could be prevented from recruiting new members, discredited by leaks of harmful informa-

tion to the news media or brought into conflict with each other.

In planning their campaigns, the field offices were told to keep in mind that "many individuals currently active in black nationalist organizations have backgrounds of immorality, subversive activity and criminal records. Through your investigation of key agitators, you should endeavor to establish their unsavory backgrounds."

This initial letter was fol-

lowed by a "background" telegram stating that the program was being expanded to include 41 FBI field offices. It identified as primary targets "the radical and violence-prone leaders, members and followers" of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and Nation of Islam (Black Muslim movement).

Despite the FBI's characterization, most persons familiar with the civil rights movement would disagree with the lumping together of these groups as "radical and violence-prone."

The SCLC, originally headed by the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., has always been regarded as non-violent and non-radical. SNCC, which went through several changes of leadership and policy direction, did espouse some radical political positions at times, but has never been regarded by impartial observers as violence-prone.

Of the other two, RAM has always characterized itself as an adherent of revolutionary violence; and the Nation of Islam, although advocating separatism from whites, insists that its members be law-abiding. However, the Muslim movement has been troubled by internal dissension and breakaway factions whose rivalries have resulted in violence.

Past disclosures have left no doubt that various FBI offices did translate these directives into specific harassment tactics against black groups. These ranged from an attempt by the FBI in California to instigate a gang war between rival black groups to a campaign of wiretapping and personal harassment aimed at Dr. King.

The documents released yesterday relate to the participation of the FBI's Cleveland field office in the campaign against black groups. And what they principally reveal is that agents in Cleveland, unlike those in other parts of the country, never managed to get the program off the ground.

Most of the documents are periodic progress reports stating that "at the present time, Cleveland does not have any approved counterintelligence operations being effected."