

Police Monitored Activist Leaders

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Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when hundreds of thousands of citizens marched on the nation's capital in behalf of civil rights and antiwar causes, the metropolitan police department had as many as 10 intelligence officers assigned to monitor and keep files on activist leaders, Assistant Police Chief Theodore R. Zanders recalls.

The undercover agents routinely spied on local black leaders, including Julius Hobson Sr., Marion Barry and Walter E. Fauntroy, at public rallies, and recorded their observations in files that were kept at police headquarters.

Barry and Hobson now are members of the elected City Council and Fauntroy is the District's elected delegate to Congress. "But in those days, they were activists," Zanders said yesterday.

The files, which since have been destroyed in a shredding machine, did not contain any information about the private lives of the persons watched, Zanders said. And Zanders emphasized that no person was ever placed under surveillance at a time when he held public office. For example, he said he was "certain" there had never been a file on Mayor Walter E. Washington.

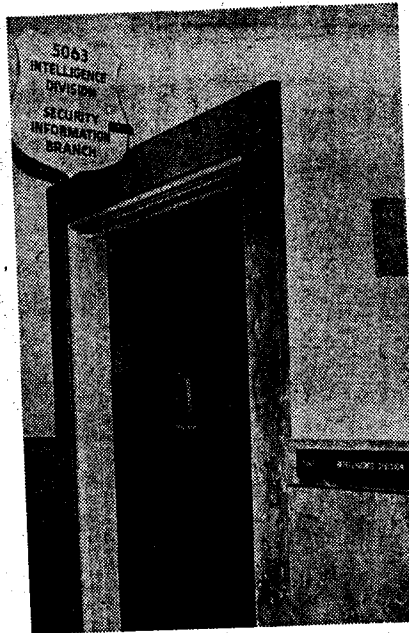
When Barry and Hobson were the objects of covert investigations, they were members of the Black United Front organized by Stokely Carmichael. Fauntroy was the local leader of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Commenting on how the police differentiated between Barry the activist and Barry the public official, Councilman Barry said: "I guarantee you they won't keep any files on me now, at least not legally; we've got budget control" over the police department.

Barry said that while he was "appalled that the police had nothing better to do with taxpayers' money than watch those of us in the civil rights movement who were pushing hard against the system," he said he wasn't surprised by the tactic.

As the number of demonstrations dwindled (from a high of 440 in 1971 to 210 last year), the intelligence unit shifted its attention to normal criminal investigations.

"Today, 95 per cent of our information gathering involves criminal intelligence, on organized crime and other data," said Zanders. "The other five per cent is a holdover from the days of demonstrations."



Room 5063 at Police headquarters houses the intelligence unit.

One man, Detective Al Johnson, "scans newspapers and magazines to find out what's going on," Zanders said, but even Johnson doesn't spend full time on the assignment.

All the files have been destroyed, as have been the thousands of photographs police operatives took of persons who attended the demonstrations.

As assistant chief for inspectional services, Zanders is in charge of morals, field inspections, internal affairs and intelligence. Prior to last March, he was the deputy chief of the special operations division, and as such, was responsible for planning police coverage of the demonstrations.

The department "isn't above buying information, or employing special officers (non-police agents), Zanders said, explaining how it secured information on protesters. The civilian spies "don't stay long enough to be permanent employees, working a year or so," Zanders said.

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District Police Spied On Activist Leaders

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Detective Johnson, who is the senior member of the intelligence unit, having worked in it since October, 1968, said recently, "the cause isn't there anymore."

In the antiwar days, "a lot of people became disillusioned with the movement and came to us with information," Johnson said. "Some information you didn't have to pay for—there was a certain amount of patriotism—and a lot did it for self gain. And we got lots of anonymous tips."

Attempts to put "plants" within various movements never was very successful, Johnson said. For example, he said, "when the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) was going underground, they formed small cells. That was one reason the Capitol bombing was never solved. Within a small group, nobody is going to tell a stranger anything."

Protests have become so rare, Johnson said, "that we no longer subscribe to the Quicksilver Times and other underground publications," which were required reading for intelligence officers a few years ago.

Johnson was one of the plainclothes' officers who "took a lot of pictures" at demonstrations, but he said "those are long gone, too," along with the files. "We took them to the shredder."

Today, about one half of the police department's 20 investigators in the intelligence unit (which has a total of 26 employees) work on organized crime, Zanders said.

It's not major family, Mafia stuff," Zanders said, "but it is organized. Criminals need associations and patterns" similar to Mafia organizations, he said.

Intelligence unit investigators "try not to be too visible, working a little more undercover than other investigators," Zanders said.

The other half of the squad attempts to "be aware of extremist groups engaged in bombings, taking hostages" and other criminal acts.

The unit "stays aware of the tone of the city and the nation," Zanders said.

It also keeps files on "persons with mental conditions" and others who write threatening letters to public officials. "We had a card on the guy who drove his car through the White House gate," Zanders said.

The squad shows up at the relatively few demonstrations that still occasionally draw substantial crowds, such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson's march around the White House and the anti-abortion lobby at the Capitol last month. But files no longer are kept on individual leaders.

If there is an arrest, that makes it a criminal matter and we file it," Detective Johnson said of the present policy. "If there is no arrest, we drop it (information gathered) in the shredder."

Most of the intelligence squad is now occupied "tracking down organized fences, burglary rings and other criminal types," Johnson said.

"Crime is our problem, not demonstrators," Zanders said. "We look on that as a period that has passed."