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# Police Intelligence and 'Political Leaders'

Because I was metropolitan police chief during the period in question, I am particularly interested in the current controversy here and around the nation over the extent and kinds of information collected for police intelligence on various "political leaders" in recent years.

Each time the subject of intelligence gathering arises, news reports feign surprise that intelligence agents have gathered information at "political events" and that intelligence reports occasionally reflected the presence and sometimes the speeches of "political leaders."

Semantic disputes can develop over what are "political events" and who are "political leaders." But almost by any definition, the massive demonstrations of urban activists in the mid-1960s and the later anti-war convocations were "political events" led by "political leaders." By every definition, the local and national leaders who addressed such gatherings were "political leaders." The wonder is that anyone now pretends to be surprised that the police monitored such events and listened to the speeches. It was only from such monitoring that the police could effectively estimate what next events were likely to take place and what numbers of police officers would be needed and how they should be deployed.

Similarly, when the Black United Front of Washington in 1968 was saying that killing a police officer in cold blood was "justifiable homicide," the BUF was a "political organization." It included in its membership several individuals who, by every definition, are "political leaders." Who is surprised that police intelligence sources reported on the meetings of BUF and on what was being said by its members?

Intelligence gathering at those kinds of events and meetings is a relatively easy matter, as the meetings were usually open to the public. Except that news coverage was sometimes incomplete, sometimes slanted, and usually

too slow for police operational planning, the important information from such meetings could just as easily have been obtained by monitoring news reports; indeed, police intelligence reports more often than not read like a summary of news reports. And until the news media raised a fuss, police intelligence agents often impersonated reporters to obtain information. Stopped from that practice, the intelligence gatherers learned that it usually was just as easy to attend press conferences and other events without bothering to identify themselves at all.

More difficult than the open rallies, meetings, speeches, and press conferences which were the staple of most intelligence reports were the close-knit "political organizations," such as the Black Panther Party. Political organization or not, who is amazed that police intelligence units developed undercover sources who reported on the internal activities of the Black Panthers?

Undercover sources for all kinds of operations are the bane of intelligence gatherers. By necessity, undercover sources are selected on the basis of their ability to infiltrate and meld into a group more than for character references. And to preserve their cover, they are deployed to do their work with a minimum of either training or supervision. It is unfair to over-generalize, for some undercover operatives are highly motivated individuals who understand clearly the legal and ethical limits of their work. Others, unfortunately, prove to be fringe characters who either rip-off the government through false pretenses of furnishing factual information for their pay, or turn out to be so unsophisticated they misconstrue or misapply their instructions and thus overstep their bounds.

To what extent do police monitor the private lives of political leaders and activists? My observation has been that police agencies generally don't care in the least about the private

lives of persons unless there appears to be a possible relationship to organized crime. When a political leader is seen in company with known narcotics suppliers, however, his name does go into the organized crime intelligence file. The same happens when the name of a political figure shows up in files seized from a well-organized call girl. This is not because the police care particularly about the habits of the individuals as persons, but because of the possibility that they are more than friends and customers, actually a part of the criminal operations. Like news reporters, municipal police officers learn so much of the private lives of important individuals, accidentally, in the course of their regular work, that the value of private-life information for either intelligence purposes or for gossip becomes insignificant to them. Also, any "political leader" charged with a criminal offense, as some have been, can be certain that a file was made from the event.

Balanced against the value, even the necessity, of police intelligence gathering is the unfortunate fact that those who think they are watched become overly constrained in their relationships with other people, suspicious even of their friends. (The same, of course, can be said of investigative reporting.)

In seeking a balance between the values and the hazards, it is tempting to assert a flat prohibition against intelligence files on "political leaders." But that assertion would disregard both the semantic question of who is a "political leader" and the crucial fact that nowhere in America has organized crime taken hold without participation at some point by "political leaders" of the jurisdiction.

More important as a matter of principle, though, is the fact that if intelligence gathering is seen as a greater threat to personal liberty than can be tolerated, then by all means we should never allow our "political leaders" to exempt themselves while leaving the rest of us at its mercy.