

FBI Claims Role in '69 Black Unrest

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The FBI in a secret 1969 memorandum to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover took substantial credit for the "high degree of unrest" that it said existed in the black ghetto of southeast San Diego.

Bringing Hoover up to date on FBI "counterintelligence" efforts to disrupt black nationalist organizations it characterized as "hate groups," the bureau's San Diego field office reported in the Sept. 18, 1969 memorandum.

"Shootings, beatings and a high degree of unrest continues (sic) to prevail in the ghetto area of southeast San Diego. Although no specific counterintelligence action can be credited with contributing to this overall situation, it is felt that a substantial amount of the unrest is directly attributable to this program."

The three-page memo and related documents obtained by The Los Angeles Times from the Senate intelligence committee reveal an intensive effort by the FBI to foster and capitalize on the enmity between the Black Panther Party and the US organization in San Diego at a time when the two militant black groups were warring openly.

In a three-month period, from late May through August 1969, the warfare took the form of two killings, the wounding of four other persons, shotgun and rifle attacks and a bombing.

James E. Adams, deputy associate director of the FBI who has testified extensively before congressional committees on the discontinued counterintelligence effort, said the purpose never was to promote violence.

In an interview, Adams said: "We were not trying to get people to kill each other, but to disrupt these groups, to reduce their effectiveness. I don't know of any action that was designed to produce violence."

But the documents, which the FBI turned over to the Senate Intelligence Committee, and an investigation by The Times in San Diego indicates that the FBI program at least nurtured the hatred that sparked the shootouts.

"This violence was taking place before we got in the act," Adams said.

However, the first Panther-US shooting incident in San Diego appears to have taken place on May 23, 1969, when John Arthur Savage, a 21-year-old Black Panther, was shot to death in southeast San Diego.

Three months earlier, the FBI's San Diego office proposed—and Hoover approved—distributing bogus cartoons showing that the US organization considered the Panthers to be ineffectual and corrupt.

"These are clever cartoons which belittle the Panthers and should further differences among BPP leaders and members," Hoover said in approving the scheme.

Adams said the violence-prone Black Panthers and US were pitted against each other in an effort to prevent them from joining forces. He said only a "very thin line" separates such activity from the actual promotion of violence—but emphasized the FBI sought to avoid violence.

"That's why all of these things had to be approved at headquarters," Adams said. "We tried diligently to thread the needle."

Adams said the wording of the San Diego field office's memo to Hoover should have been challenged by FBI headquarters. "I know the wording is subject to the characterization that this office was taking credit for shootings, beatings," he said. "But our purpose was to prevent violence, not to foment violence."