

F.B.I.'s Deadly Games

Letter by Edward V. Hanrahan,
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It is axiomatic, but easily forgotten, that a suspension of the liberties of even the most reviled group in a society will dilute the liberties of all since each discretionary suspension of rights leads more easily to the next one. This truth is brought to mind by the release of a study, by the staff of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's counterintelligence programs against the Black Panther Party and other "black nationalist-hate groups."

While revelations about Cointelpro activities against Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have elicited widespread concern and comment, little has been made of the program against the Panthers and other black groups, even though the evidence indicates that those programs may well have been responsible for the death of a number of individuals charged with no crime. That is a large accusation, but three events drawn from committee records suffice to sustain it.

- At U.C.L.A. in 1969, the Black Panthers and US, another black group, were engaged in a violent conflict that had already caused two deaths. The F.B.I. exacerbated the struggle by sending the Panthers inflammatory material, ostensibly from US. After further deaths, the bureau's San Diego office made the following appraisal of its efforts: "Shootings, beatings, and a high degree of unrest continues to prevail in the ghetto area of south east 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 the program."

- The F.B.I. sent an anonymous letter to a Chicago gang leader whose organization it characterized as one to which "violent type activity, shooting and the like are second nature." The letter advised the gang leader that the Panthers intended to have him killed, which, according to the F.B.I., was designed to "intensify the degree of animosity between the two groups" and cause "retaliatory action which could disrupt the BPP or lead to reprisals against its leadership." This project apparently failed; there is no record of any violence flowing from it.

- In December 1969 a special unit of Cook County police raided the headquarters of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party. When the raid was over, according to a Federal grand jury which investigated the matter, the police had fired between 82 and 99 shots and the occupants only one. Two Panthers, including Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois chapter, were dead. Although the raid was ostensibly carried out to find illegal weapons, F.B.I. internal memorandums indicate both that the bureau took credit for being the sole source for information that led to the raid and that it believed the weapons inside the apartment were purchased legally.

Such reckless endangerment of human life was justified neither by violent rhetoric nor by the fact that while some of the Panthers were undoubtedly idealistic, others were undoubtedly thugs. Yet the Cointelpro activities had no sanctions in law and represent the ultimate in governmental lawlessness and arrogance.

F.B.I. Director Clarence M. Kelley asserts that under his direction the bureau has been "purged" of its rancid past, but there is no record that the agents who directed and engaged in such programs were prosecuted for their crimes or even faced administrative discipline. In the absence of any visible internal effort by the bureau to make officials accountable, it is difficult to be entirely comfortable either about the F.B.I. or the liberties of American citizens.