

Government Spying Has Always Focused On Crushing Dissent ... Not On Keeping Us Safe

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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Governments Spy On Their Citizens for Control and Power

Top terrorism experts say that [mass spying on Americans doesn't keep us safe](#).

High-level American government officials have [warned for 40 years](#) that mass surveillance would lead to tyranny. They've warned that the government is using information gained through mass surveillance in order to [go after anyone they take a dislike to](#). And a lieutenant colonel for the Stasi East German's - [based upon his experience](#) - agrees.

You don't have to obsess on the NSA's high-tech spying to figure out what the government is doing. Just look at old-fashioned, low-tech government spying to see what's really going on.

Instead of focusing on catching actual terrorists, police spy on Americans [who criticize the government, or the big banks or the other power players](#).

Todd Gitlin - chair of the PhD program in communications at Columbia University, and a professor of journalism and sociology - [notes](#):

Under the Freedom of Information Act, the [Partnership for Civil Justice Fund](#) (PCJF) has unearthed documents showing that, in 2011 and 2012, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and other federal agencies were busy surveilling and worrying about a good number of Occupy groups - during the very time that they were missing actual warnings about actual terrorist actions.

From its beginnings, the Occupy movement was of considerable interest to the DHS, the FBI, and other law enforcement and intelligence agencies, while true terrorists were slipping past the nets they cast in the wrong places. In the fall of 2011, the DHS specifically [asked](#) its regional affiliates to report on "Peaceful Activist Demonstrations, in addition to reporting on domestic terrorist acts and 'significant criminal activity.'"

Aware that Occupy was overwhelmingly peaceful, the federally funded Boston Regional Intelligence Center (BRIC), one of 77 coordination centers known generically as "fusion centers," was [busy monitoring](#) Occupy Boston daily. As the investigative journalist Michael Isikoff [recently reported](#), they were not only tracking Occupy-related Facebook pages and websites but "writing reports on the movement's potential impact on 'commercial and financial sector assets.'"

It was in this period that the FBI received the second of two Russian police warnings about the extremist Islamist activities of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the future Boston Marathon bomber. That city's police commissioner later testified

that the federal authorities did not pass any information at all about the Tsarnaev brothers on to him, though there's no point in letting the Boston police off the hook either. The ACLU has uncovered documents showing that, during the same period, they were [paying close attention](#) to the internal workings of...Code Pink and Veterans for Peace.

In Alaska, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Wisconsin, intelligence was not only pooled among public law enforcement agencies, but shared with private corporations — and vice versa.

Nationally, in 2011, the FBI and DHS were, in the words of Mara Verheyden-Hilliard, executive director of the Partnership for Civil Justice Fund, “treating protests against the corporate and banking structure of America as potential criminal and terrorist activity.” Last December using FOIA, [PCJF obtained](#) 112 pages of documents (heavily redacted) revealing a good deal of evidence for what might otherwise seem like an outlandish charge: that federal authorities were, in Verheyden-Hilliard’s words, “functioning as a de facto intelligence arm of Wall Street and Corporate America.” Consider these examples from PCJF’s summary of federal agencies working directly not only with local authorities but on behalf of the private sector:

- “As early as August 19, 2011, the FBI in New York was meeting with the New York Stock Exchange to discuss the Occupy Wall Street protests that wouldn’t start for another month. By September, prior to the start of the OWS, the FBI was notifying businesses that they might be the focus of an OWS protest.”
- “The FBI in Albany and the Syracuse Joint Terrorism Task Force disseminated information to... [22] campus police officials... A representative of the State University of New York at Oswego contacted the FBI for information on the OWS protests and reported to the FBI on the SUNY-Oswego Occupy encampment made up of students and professors.”
- An entity called the Domestic Security Alliance Council (DSAC), “a strategic partnership between the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and the private sector,” sent around information regarding Occupy protests at West Coast ports [on Nov. 2, 2011] to “raise awareness concerning this type of criminal activity.” The DSAC report contained “a ‘handling notice’ that the information is ‘meant for use primarily within the corporate security community. Such messages shall not be released in either written or oral form to the media, the general public or other personnel...’ Naval Criminal Investigative Services (NCIS) reported to DSAC on the relationship between OWS and organized labor.”
- DSAC gave tips to its corporate clients on “civil unrest,” which it defined as running the gamut from “small, organized rallies to large-scale demonstrations and rioting.” ***
- The FBI in Anchorage, Jacksonville, Tampa, Richmond, Memphis, Milwaukee, and Birmingham also gathered information and briefed local officials on wholly peaceful Occupy activities.
- In Jackson, Mississippi, FBI agents “attended a meeting with the Bank Security Group in Biloxi, MS with multiple private banks and the Biloxi Police Department, in which they discussed an announced protest for ‘National Bad Bank Sit-In-Day’ on December 7, 2011.” Also in Jackson, “the Joint Terrorism Task Force issued a ‘Counterterrorism Preparedness’ alert” that, despite heavy redactions, notes the need to ‘document...the Occupy Wall Street Movement.’”

In 2010, [the American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee](#) learned ... that the Tennessee Fusion Center was “highlighting on its website map of ‘Terrorism Events and Other Suspicious Activity’ a recent ACLU-TN letter to school superintendents. The letter encourages schools to be supportive of all religious beliefs during the holiday season.”

Consider an “intelligence report” from the North Central Texas fusion center, which in a 2009 “Prevention Awareness Bulletin” described, [in the ACLU’s words](#), “a purported conspiracy between Muslim civil rights organizations, lobbying groups, the anti-war movement, a former U.S. Congresswoman, the U.S. Treasury Department, and hip hop bands to spread tolerance in the United States, which would ‘provide an environment for terrorist organizations to flourish.’”

And those Virginia and Texas fusion centers were hardly alone in expanding the definition of “terrorist” to fit just about anyone who might oppose government policies. According to a 2010 report in the [Los Angeles Times](#), the Justice Department Inspector General found that “FBI agents improperly opened investigations into Greenpeace and several other domestic advocacy groups after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and put the names of some of their members on terrorist watch lists based on evidence that turned out to be ‘factually weak.’” The Inspector General called “troubling” what the Los Angeles Times described as “singling out some of the domestic groups for investigations that lasted up to five years, and were extended ‘without adequate basis.’”

Subsequently, the FBI continued to maintain investigative files on groups like Greenpeace, the Catholic Worker, and the Thomas Merton Center in Pittsburgh, cases where (in the politely put words of the Inspector General’s report) “there was little indication of any possible federal crimes... In some cases, the FBI classified some investigations relating to nonviolent civil disobedience under its ‘acts of terrorism’ classification.”

[In Pittsburgh](#), on the day after Thanksgiving 2002 (“a slow work day” in the Justice Department Inspector General’s estimation), a rookie FBI agent was outfitted with a camera, sent to an antiwar rally, and told to look for terrorism suspects. The “possibility that any useful information would result from this make-work assignment was remote,” the report added drily.

“The agent was unable to identify any terrorism subjects at the event, but he photographed a woman in order to have something to show his supervisor. He told us he had spoken to a woman leafletter at the rally who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent, and that she was probably the person he photographed.”

The sequel was not quite so drroll. The Inspector General found that FBI officials, including their chief lawyer in Pittsburgh, manufactured postdated “routing slips” and the rest of a phony paper trail to justify this surveillance retroactively.

Moreover, at least one fusion center has involved military intelligence in civilian law enforcement. In 2009, a military operative from Fort Lewis,

Washington, [worked undercover](#) collecting information on peace groups in the Northwest. In fact, he helped run the Port Militarization Resistance group's Listserv. Once uncovered, he told activists there were others doing similar work in the Army. How much the military spies on American citizens is unknown and, at the moment at least, unknowable.

Do we hear an echo from the abyss of the counterintelligence programs of the 1960s and 1970s, when FBI memos — I have some in my own heavily redacted files obtained through an FOIA request — were routinely copied to military intelligence units? Then, too, military intelligence operatives spied on activists who violated no laws, were not suspected of violating laws, and had they violated laws, would not have been under military jurisdiction in any case. During those years, more than 1,500 Army intelligence agents in plain clothes were spying, undercover, on domestic political groups (according to *Military Surveillance of Civilian Politics, 1967-70*, an unpublished dissertation by former Army intelligence captain Christopher H. Pyle). They posed as students, sometimes growing long hair and beards for the purpose, or as reporters and camera crews. They recorded speeches and conversations on concealed tape recorders. The Army lied about their purposes, claiming they were interested solely in “civil disturbance planning.”

Indeed, the New York Review of Books notes that spying in America has [always been focused on crushing dissent](#):

In the United States, political spying by the federal government began in the early part of the twentieth century, with the creation of the Bureau of Investigation in the Department of Justice on July 1, 1908. In more than one sense, the new agency was a descendant of the surveillance practices developed in France a century earlier, since it was initiated by US Attorney General Charles Joseph Bonaparte, a great nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, who created it during a Congressional recess. Its establishment was denounced by Congressman Walter Smith of Iowa, who argued that “No general system of spying upon and espionage of the people, such as has prevailed in Russia, in France under the Empire, and at one time in Ireland, should be allowed to grow up.”

Nonetheless, the new Bureau became deeply engaged in political surveillance during World War I when federal authorities sought to gather information on those opposing American entry into the war and those opposing the draft. As a result of this surveillance, many hundreds of people were prosecuted under the 1917 Espionage Act and the 1918 Sedition Act for the peaceful expression of opinion about the war and the draft.

But it was during the Vietnam War that political surveillance in the United States reached its peak. Under Presidents Lyndon Johnson and, to an even greater extent, Richard Nixon, there was a systematic effort by various agencies, including the United States Army, to gather information on those involved in anti-war protests. Millions of Americans took part in such protests and the federal government—as well as many state and local agencies—gathered enormous amounts of information on them. Here are just three of the numerous examples of political surveillance in that era:

- In the 1960s in Rochester, New York, the local police department launched Operation SAFE (Scout Awareness for Emergency). It involved twenty thousand boy scouts living in the vicinity of Rochester. They got identification cards marked with their thumb

prints. On the cards were the telephone numbers of the local police and the FBI. The scouts participating in the program were given a list of suspicious activities that they were to report.

- In 1969, the FBI learned that one of the sponsors of an anti-war demonstration in Washington, DC, was a New York City-based organization, the Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee, that chartered buses to take protesters to the event. The FBI visited the bank where the organization maintained its account to get photocopies of the checks written to reserve places on the buses and, thereby, to identify participants in the demonstration. One of the other federal agencies given the information by the FBI was the Internal Revenue Service.

The National Security Agency was involved in the domestic political surveillance of that era as well. Decades before the Internet, under the direction of President Nixon, the NSA made arrangements with the major communications firms of the time such as RCA Global and Western Union to obtain copies of telegrams. When the matter came before the courts, the Nixon Administration argued that the president had inherent authority to protect the country against subversion. In a unanimous decision in 1972, however, the US Supreme Court rejected the claim that the president had the authority to disregard the requirement of the Fourth Amendment for a judicial warrant.

Much of the political surveillance of the 1960s and the 1970s and of the period going back to World War I consisted in efforts to identify organizations that were critical of government policies, or that were proponents of various causes the government didn't like, and to gather information on their adherents. It was not always clear how this information was used. As best it is possible to establish, the main use was to block some of those who were identified with certain causes from obtaining public employment or some kinds of private employment. Those who were victimized in this way rarely discovered the reason they had been excluded.

Efforts to protect civil liberties during that era eventually led to the destruction of many of these records, sometimes after those whose activities were monitored were given an opportunity to examine them. In many cases, this prevented surveillance records from being used to harm those who were spied on. Yet great vigilance by organizations such as the ACLU and the Center for Constitutional Rights, which brought a large number of court cases challenging political surveillance, was required to safeguard rights. The collection of data concerning the activities of US citizens did not take place for benign purposes.

***Between 1956 and 1971, the FBI operated a program known as COINTELPRO, for Counter Intelligence Program. Its purpose was to interfere with the activities of the organizations and individuals who were its targets or, in the words of long-time FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize" them. The first target was the Communist Party of the United States, but subsequent targets ranged from the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference to organizations espousing women's rights to right wing organizations such as the National States Rights Party.

A well-known example of COINTELPRO was the FBI's planting in 1964 of false documents about William Albertson, a long-time Communist Party official, that persuaded the Communist Party that Albertson was an FBI informant. Amid

major publicity, Albertson was expelled from the party, lost all his friends, and was fired from his job. Until his death in an automobile accident in 1972, he tried to prove that he was not a snitch, but the case was not resolved until 1989, when the FBI [agreed to pay](#) Albertson's widow \$170,000 to settle her lawsuit against the government.

COINTELPRO was eventually halted by J. Edgar Hoover after activists broke into a small FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, in 1971, and released stolen documents about the program to the press. The lesson of COINTELPRO is that any government agency that is able to gather information through political surveillance will be tempted to use that information. After a time, the passive accumulation of data may seem insufficient and it may be used aggressively. This may take place long after the information is initially collected and may involve officials who had nothing to do with the original decision to engage in surveillance.

Since President Obama is asking us to trade some of our privacy with respect to our phone calls and our use of the Internet for greater protection against terrorism, at the very least we need to know exactly how our privacy is being violated. We also need to debate fully whether such measures uphold our Constitutional rights, such as the First Amendment's guarantees of freedom of expression and the Fourth Amendment's prohibition of unreasonable searches and seizures. Yet if the program is kept secret, and if even the court opinions stating the rationale for authorizing surveillance are kept secret, we cannot decide whether a trade-off is warranted; if it is warranted, exactly what should be traded; if constitutional rights are implicated, whether these are appropriate matters for a trade; or how we can impose limits on any trade so as to minimize the violation of our rights. A trade made in ignorance is not much of a trade.

Postscript: This is not some "post-9/11 reality". Spying on Americans started [before 9/11](#).

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