

## Government Infiltration Threatens Rights and Freedom, Warn

Allegations that a famed photographer who chronicled the most pivotal moments in civil rights history was identified as a paid FBI informant reminded activists, organizations and dissident movements of dangerous government surveillance employed yesterday and today against domestic groups.



### **F.B.I. THEN AND NOW** **INFORMANTS**

The last thing one wanted to be thought of in activist circles in the heyday of the civil rights and Black Power movement was an informant or snitch. Providing information and sometimes setting up plots to entrap unsuspecting comrades resulted in deaths, bitter inter- and intra-feuds as well as activists who still languish in prison, not to mention the suffering of those jailed unjustly or who spent decades in exile.

Since Ernest Withers the man the Memphis Commercial Appeal reported was an FBI informant is dead, many unanswered questions remain and his family doubts the reports are true.

“Personally, and as a family, we do not believe what has been alleged. It still has to be proven,” Mr. Withers' youngest daughter, Rosalind Withers, told The Associated Press in an interview. Andrew Jerome Withers, Rosalind Withers and Frances Williams vowed to do their own FOIA request and talk to the FBI themselves in efforts to clear their father's name.

Still the use of informants yesterday and today cannot be denied and so are reasons for concern. In the current political environment and with passage of so-called anti-terror legislation, such as the post-9-11 Patriots Acts, advocates warn Americans should have major worries about violations of their civil liberties and government ability to spy and pry into their private lives.

Informants have been at the center of “terrorist plots” allegedly involving Muslims from Florida to New York. And Muslim leaders from New York to Los Angeles have complained about agents sent to monitor and infiltrate their places of worship.

“A movement or institution with enough strength and political discipline can usually withstand the damage from informants. Unfortunately, the Black movements in this country have never gained the level of critical mass or cohesion necessary to escape the damage done and that's the case in this era,” observed Professor Hank Williams, and instructor and Ph.D. candidate at the City University of New York.

“This has a direct connection to where we are today politically, since the movement was successfully destroyed and a generation of some of the strongest leaders was lost through political assassination, exile, and other means. Some were bought off, others couldn't handle the pressure, and yet others couldn't see the people around them destroyed. That affects where we are now, since many have survived and are even still at the forefront of struggle, losing the wisdom and momentum of the leaders and organizations that didn't survive the '60s and '70s was a serious blow.”

While people should not “get too wrapped up in the past,” Prof. Williams said, “one has to wonder how much further along we'd be if the most politically advanced ideas of the organizations and people who didn't make it had been synthesized and acted upon?”

On Sept. 12, The Commercial Appeal—once noted itself for the fomenting of tensions and hostilities in its coverage of civil rights and Black liberation issues in Memphis—reported that photographer Withers was as an FBI informant and spied on Dr. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement.

A veteran freelancer, Mr. Withers' photography ranged from the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, to the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and beyond.

According to the Commercial Appeal, an informant identification number assigned to Mr. Withers was overlooked in the redaction of a 1977 FBI file. The document, obtained via the federal Freedom of Information Act provided by the Commercial Appeal, cites ME 338-R and identifies Mr. Withers. In the right-hand margin the notation “b7D” provides justification for the redacted words. Under the FOIA, section b7D allows the FBI to withhold information that would identify confidential sources, according to the report.

In the article, Mr. Withers, who died in 2007 at the age of 85, is portrayed in the eyes of the bureau “as a prolific informant who, from 1968 until 1970, passed on tips and photographs detailing an insider's view of politics, business and everyday life in Memphis' Black Community.”

“The grief-stricken aides photographed by Withers on April 4, 1968, had no clue, but the man they invited in that night was an FBI informant—evidence of how far the agency went to spy on private citizens in Memphis during one of the nation's most volatile periods,” the story read. According to the Commercial Appeal, the story reported was two years in the making.

Mr. Withers' children question Commercial Appeal reporting.

“When I heard that, it was just terrifying,” said Rome Withers in an interview with The Tri-State Defender on Sept. 14, speaking about his father. “I just hope that the community understands that this is only an attempt to really demonize his Withers' (photography) collection or even to devalue his collection because we have been on an

uphill fight to try and maintain and keep his collection intact,” he said.

Since his death, the Withers' children say “forces” have tried to gain control of their father's extensive and unique collection. The family says it is involved in a court battle and wants to make the collection available to the public, particularly so the Black community. It covers Black life beginning in the 1940s, they added.

“Unfortunately, Mr. Withers is not here to answer the allegations or to provide exactly—if anything—what happened. However, what we do know is that J. Edgar Hoover was so diabolical that his hatred for Black people did not stop him from doing what he desired to Whites as well. And like Mr. Withers, we don't know what was held over peoples' heads. We don't know the extent of the threat that anyone found operating in this way, faced,” said Atty. Nkechi Taifa, senior political analyst for criminal and justice reform with the Open Society Poverty Center, in Washington, D.C.

“Why the FBI didn't remove ME 338-R remains unclear, but the evident oversight provides the key that unlocks Withers' secret life,” the paper said.

“They still haven't said what he was doing,” observed satirist and activist Dick Gregory, who was also a target of the FBI's nefarious activities. Mr. Gregory told *The Final Call*, “We may never know why this number was not redacted. At the same time, it might help us finally pull some pieces together.”

Mr. Gregory took strong issue with some responses to the spying allegations. Civil rights icon Andrew Young has publicly said he always liked Mr. Withers “because he was a good photographer and was always around.” “I don't think Dr. King would have minded him making a little money on the side,” Mr. Young, 78, told the Memphis newspaper.

“Can you imagine a Jew in Nazi Germany finding out that a Jew was working with Hitler for the Nazis and then another Jew saying we wouldn't have minded him making a little money on the side?” Mr. Gregory asked.

“It is never acceptable to turn for the enemy,” commented Kalongi Changa, of the Atlanta, Ga.-based Free The People Movement and author of the forthcoming book “How to Build a People's Army.” He is a grassroots organizer and deals with social and criminal justice issues.

“With all due respect to Andy Young, I think that is one of the most absurd statements that an educated man can make in these days and times. Saying that he thinks that Dr. King wouldn't have minded this man making money snitching on his people is almost equivalent to saying he wouldn't have minded a prostitute making a little money selling her body,” Mr. Changa said. “Playing with your enemy is like playing with fire—someone or something will eventually get burned.”

“I presume that snitching is older than stealing because a person could steal information and give it away before there was ‘property’ to steal,” said Dr. Nathan Hare, founder of

the San Francisco, Calif.-based Black Think Tank.

“However, though ‘snitch’ is now generally associated with giving away or selling secret information it also means ‘to steal.’ So snitching is tantamount to stealing and in most people’s minds worse than a thief. There at least used to be a code among thieves that they didn’t steal from other thieves, but I don’t think there’s any sense of honor among snitches, and it is rightfully and universally despised and personified with the words ‘rat’ as in ‘to rat,’ ” he said.

“Stool pigeon, which suggests a pigeon sitting on a toilet stool, but is in fact a pigeon used as a decoy to draw others into a net, and thus the snitch becomes an extension of the police or, and for the enemy,” said Dr. Hare.

A victim of government surveillance himself because he was closely aligned with a range of Black Power groups, Dr. Hare added, “The other side of the coin was that so many good guys appeared to be called snitches, who, apparently and probably were not. At one point it looked like people would call anybody who disagreed with them a snitch or an ‘agent provocateur,’ usually shortened to ‘an agent.’ ”

Dr. Hare said one book about the FBI’s dreaded Counterintelligence Program, [COINTELPRO](#), which was designed to disrupt and destroy Black and progressive organizations, misidentified him in connection with the case of former Black Panther Elmer Geronimo “Ji Jaga” Pratt, who was jailed for 27 years for murders he did not commit. Informant Julius Butler, a member of the Panther Party, testified that Mr. Pratt boasted to him about the murder. Mr. Pratt was only freed after a retired FBI agent admitted the agency had evidence that proved the Vietnam vet was nowhere near the crime scene.

Atty. Taifa added: “I think what we have to do is put it all in perspective. It is one thing to be a snitch, then there is the collaborator and then there is another situation when there is in fact something happening within our communities. Say, one of our leaders is murdered and someone knows who did it. Or, a child is raped or molested and someone has that information for authorities. It is critical to provide that information. But it needs to be clearly distinguished from those who seek financial aggrandizement to bring down the movement, seeking to collaborate with the movement when it is not in our community’s best interest,” she said.

A long history of spying inside America

One would be hard pressed to find an instance where dissident or influential individuals and groups were not monitored regularly by the U.S. government as well as some international agencies. The FBI’s Electronic Reading Room houses tens of thousands of pages detailing some of the deepest penetrations into the lives of individuals, organizations and the infiltration of mass movements.

Last month, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Asian Law Caucus and the San

Francisco Bay Guardian filed a lawsuit against the FBI in an effort to speed the release of FBI records on the investigation and surveillance of Muslim communities in the Bay Area.

The civil liberties organizations and The Bay Guardian have requested the records in order to understand and to report on whether and how the FBI are “investigating Islamic centers and mosques (as well as Christian churches and Jewish synagogues); ‘assessing’ religious leaders; Infiltrating communities through the use of undercover agents and informants; Training agents in Islam and Muslim culture; and Using race, religion and national origin in deciding whom to investigate; and identifying particular schools for its Junior Agent Program.

“Clear information about the FBI’s activities is necessary in order to understand the scope of their surveillance tactics to assess whether they have had a chilling effect on the right to worship freely or to exercise other forms of expression,” said Julia Harumi Mass, staff attorney for the ACLU of Northern California. “This lawsuit is about transparency. The public is entitled to this information under the Freedom of Information Act.”

“The FBI admitted in March that our clients’ FOIA requests are entitled to expedited processing because of the widespread media attention on these issues, but the government has yet to provide them a single document,” said attorney Raj Chatterjee of the law firm Morrison & Foerster.

The FBI records are sought in part in response to concerns about the effects of possible racial and religious profiling and the potential harm such tactics may have on national security. The groups are also seeking details on whether FBI agents are recruiting Muslim and Arab children at Bay Area schools to serve in the agency’s Junior Agent Program.

“Snitches have played a role in disrupting African resistance since enslavement,” said Georgia State University Professor Akinyele Umoja. Prof. Umoja was referring to paid agents who curry favor with oppressive forces, not tattle tales about run-of-the-mill street crime or illicit activity.

“Denmark Vesey’s planned insurrection was stopped due to information provided to the slaveholders. Informants were present in the civil rights movement in the South. Movement forces assumed snitches were in their meetings. Wise movement leaders often confused their enemies by providing misinformation in public meetings. [COINTELPRO](#) (Counter Intelligence Program of the FBI to destroy Black leadership and movements) and Southern state documents are full of examples of misinformation provided by Movement leaders to confuse White supremacists and local, state and federal police,” he said.

“It is also revealed that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad couldn’t sneeze without the enemy knowing. Snitches also played an important role in the demise of the Black Panther Party.”

The list of Black groups and leaders targeted by government unfortunately goes on and on, he said.

“Informing on the movement is treason. A liberation movement cannot be successful if a culture of snitching is acceptable. Movements are only sustainable and victorious if we have a culture of resistance and self-reliance. One should wear a ‘badge of shame’ for informing on our organizations, leaders, and other sisters and brothers to our enemies,” Dr. Umoja continued.

“We also have to develop a culture of collectivism or communalism. If one wants forgiveness, a public apology should be made and restitution should be made to the individuals, organizations and families involved. People’s lives and human rights were violated by the repression of the [COINTELPRO](#) and other U.S. government initiatives against our movement. “

Dr. Umoja also recommended that if a member of a community has an addiction or a financial or emotional problem, it should be shared with their community and organization. “We are only as strong as our weakest link. If we leave brothers and sisters out there they are vulnerable for parasites who want to destroy the movement,” he said.

Under [COINTELPRO's](#) directive in the 1960s and 1970s, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover was on the lookout for a “Black Messiah” who could inspire diverse groups and unite the Black masses. The language was clear and so were its targets: H. Rap Brown (now Jamil Al Amin), Stokely Carmichael (who became Kwame Ture), the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

“The reason Jamil Al-Amin was transferred to the prison in Florence, Colo., if you recall, is because the Georgia inmates petitioned to make him their imam. An effective organizer—even within the prison population—and a charismatic leader who had also begun to exercise influence over the prison staff is something the government could not afford. So now he sits in solitary. The same for Dr. Mutula Shakur, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Max Sanford, Huey P. Newton. They know they have to do something with people like these,” said Dr. Umoja.

But while the Panther Party and other nationalist groups were destroyed, one movement has been able to re-emerge and is the undeniable target of government surveillance: The Nation of Islam and the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan. With the Nation there is the combination of Islam, Pan Africanism, nationalism and self-reliance—all elements that pose a threat to a nation dependent upon its former slaves, said Dr. Umoja. “Now Minister Farrakhan is here, who represents a blend of all of the elements: an effective organizer, charismatic, influential and has the genuine love of the people from all walks of life. You cannot be an effective leader without charisma. No one can deny that, he has that charisma that no one can control,” he said.

“Unfortunately, the mission of the Nation of Islam has been misunderstood by some in government but in other cases misunderstanding has been created, which has permitted, and it is well documented in history, the violation of our civil and constitutional rights through J. Edgar Hoover that continues down to the present time as revealed in December 2009 disclosures that there was Department of Homeland Security illegal surveillance of the Nation of Islam and that we were still a target of the U.S. government,” said Atty. Abdul Arif Muhammad, general counsel for the Nation of Islam.

“It would not be wise for us to not think such activity does not continue, especially in light of the Islamaphobia present in the United States and being stoked by the media and other forces in and outside of government to illegitimately distort the mission and work of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam.”