

Ad

THIS IS MEMBER-EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

OPINION

# As in MLK's day, FBI is failing against white nationalism

Today is 60th anniversary of Hoover's smear campaign.



On Oct. 10, 1963, J. Edgar Hoover's FBI began its campaign of surveillance and propaganda against Martin Luther King Jr. Contributor Lerone A. Martin writes that the bureau hasn't learned from its history. (DMN Archive)

By Lerone A. Martin

1:30 AM on Oct 10, 2023 CDT





Listen to this article now

Powered by  
**Trinity Audio**  
00:00



1.0x

06:53

Sixty years ago today, Attorney General Robert Kennedy granted J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI a long-awaited gift: permission to conduct electronic surveillance on the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The bureau and federal legislators have since declared the campaign against King as a cardinal sin in national security. Yet, the FBI and America still have not learned from this history.

The FBI labeled King a “communist threat.” But they knew better. The FBI had no facts to substantiate its conclusion, but it did not matter. “Facts by themselves are not too meaningful,” the FBI’s Domestic Intelligence Division noted. “They are somewhat like stones tossed in a heap as contrasted to the same stones put in the form of a sound edifice.” After King’s address at the March on Washington in 1963, in which he bemoaned police brutality, the FBI marked him “the most dangerous Negro of the future in this Nation...” and, with the permission of the Kennedy administration, constructed a story to fit its communist frame. The facts be damned.

The FBI installed wiretaps and microphones in King’s home and wherever the nonviolent preacher went, including hotel rooms, the Atlanta and New York offices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the homes of friends with whom he occasionally resided. They distributed their “counter-intelligence” to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, elected officials, journalists and ministers. They all laundered the material, aiding and abetting the campaign.

Not so with white supremacist violence. The bureau had the facts but refused to follow them. The FBI regularly cast white racist violence as outside of its jurisdiction, even when agents had prior knowledge from Ku Klux Klan informants.

The Rev. George Dorsett, a Klan chaplain, was a paid informant while witnessing white supremacist plots and violence. Gary Thomas Rowe, another paid informant, was in the car whose occupants killed white Detroiters Viola Liuzzo following King's Selma to Montgomery March in Alabama in 1965. And the FBI withheld evidence gathered by informants identifying the perpetrators of the bombing of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church.

"You can't explain to a Negro," King noted, "how it is that a plane can be bombed, and its pieces scattered for miles and the crime can be solved, but [the FBI] can't find out who bombed a church."

In recent years, the FBI has made efforts to acknowledge this "shameful history" by distancing itself from Hoover and incorporating King. FBI Director James Comey used the history as a policy plumb line, displaying the infamous 1963 memo on his desk. New agents visit the King Memorial on the National Mall, study King's quotes and write essays "about the intersections" of King's philosophy and the values of the FBI. And an MLK quote — "The time is always right to do what is right" — is etched in stone at the FBI's training facility in Quantico, Va.

Accepting this history is not the same thing as learning from it. The FBI's sins of extralegal surveillance can never be reduced to one person. And these demons cannot be exorcised by a few benign quotes from King. The FBI and National Security priorities must change.

This has yet to happen. Similar to Hoover's FBI, current knowledge of white supremacist plans has not translated into action. In the Jan. 6 attack, the FBI had an "unusual number of informants" in the Proud Boys. These informants warned the bureau of the potential for violence on Jan. 6. Despite opposition from leading Republicans, the FBI has obtained numerous indictments and charges stemming from Jan. 6, but the attack

could have been stopped.

Many believe giving the FBI more power is the answer. Since the Donald Trump administration, liberals have showered the FBI with blind support. A majority of Democrats in Congress back the passage of the Federal [Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2023](#). The bill calls for the Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security and the FBI to receive increased appropriations and expanded powers of surveillance and prosecution to prevent white supremacist violence.

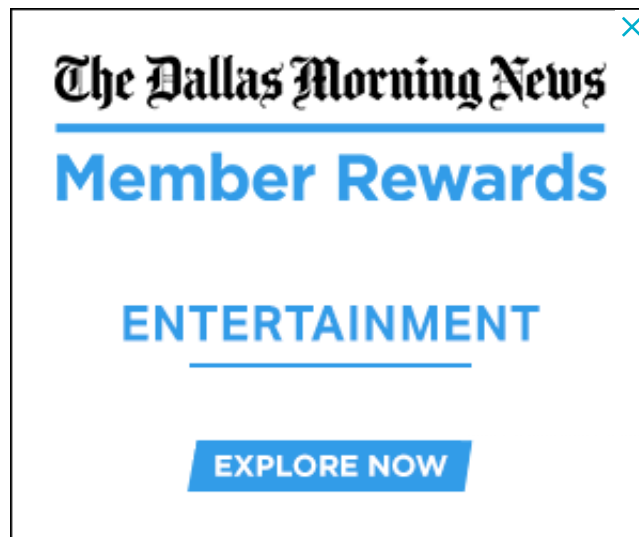
This is not the answer. An already powerful FBI does not need more power and resources to prevent white nationalist violence. Existing policy and law, such as the U.S. Attorney General's Guidelines for Domestic Investigations and [U.S. Statute 18 U.S. Code § 2331\(5\)](#) — which defines domestic terrorism as a destructive, life-threatening criminal act intended to intimidate civilians or influence government policy by violent coercion — provides [plenty of authority for the FBI](#) to prevent, investigate and prosecute white supremacist attacks. But the FBI is still trapped in a history of utilizing its power, propaganda and extreme methods to surveil and prosecute those who call into question white supremacy — communities of color, minority places of worship, and anti-racist movements — and not the perpetrators of white supremacist violence.

Homeland Security and the FBI's Countering Violent Extremism program continue to focus on Muslim communities despite the facts. And the DOJ's "China Initiative" formalized [anti-Asian American](#) xenophobia under the guise of National Security. The program was disbanded last year, but not before [Feng "Franklin" Tao](#) was falsely arrested and charged with espionage.

All of this goes against facts. In June, [the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs](#) concluded that, "domestic terrorism — primarily white supremacist extremists — ha[s] surpassed

international terrorism as the most significant terrorism threat. However ... the FBI and DHS ... over the last several years has not adequately aligned their resources to meet the current threat.” As in the surveillance of King, the FBI still engages questions of religious and racial violence as if the “Facts by themselves are not too meaningful.”

To truly learn from Oct. 10, 1963, federal law enforcement, elected officials, and the public must push the nation to use existing resources to meet the most pressing current threat: white supremacist violence. This does not require more resources or more laws. It simply requires collective commitment and political will.



*Lerone A. Martin is Martin Luther King, Jr. Centennial Professor and director of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.*

**We welcome your thoughts in a letter to the editor. See the guidelines and [submit your letter here](#). If you have problems with the form, you can submit via email at [letters@dallasnews.com](mailto:letters@dallasnews.com)**

