

Encountering and Countering Political Repression

by Chip Berlet

"If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation...want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightening. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

--Frederick Douglass, 1857

When you're trying to wash the tear gas out of your eyes with a bottle of spring water, it's the wrong time to learn about political repression. So reading this section now has a practical value.

Surveillance, infiltration, harassment, media demonization, disruption, police misconduct, excessive use of force, and other repressive techniques have been used to stifle dissent in the United States since it was founded. Repression appears whenever social and political movements threaten the status quo and challenge the unequal distribution of power and wealth. Every progressive movement has faced political repression, and every progressive movement has swept it aside and will continue to do so. The sooner activists learn the basics. . . the faster political repression can be successfully countered.

Brian Glick has outlined the four main repressive techniques used during the FBI's illegal Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO): Infiltration, Psychological Warfare from the Outside, Harassment Through the Legal System, and Extralegal Force and Violence. [see box]. After activists exposed COINTELPRO and it was terminated, many of the surveillance and disruption activities previously employed by the FBI were shifted into a network of right-wing "countersubversive" institutions and groups in the private sector. Ross Gelbspan showed how clandestine right-wing groups coordinated attacks on the movement against U.S. intervention in Central America while law enforcement and intelligence agencies looked the other way.

At the same time the FBI and other public law enforcement agencies sought to regain authority for spying on dissent by reframing it as leading to criminal activity or as a cover for terrorist violence. In Philadelphia the public and private countersubversion networks worked together. The search warrant used to justify a police raid on the headquarters for the protestors planning demonstrations against the Republican Party convention in the summer of 2000 included false allegations from the Maldon Institute, part of a right-wing intelligence network dating back to the 1960s. [for more on Maldon, see: <http://www.publiceye.org/liberty/Maldon.htm>]

Demonstrations

Most activists will face political repression in the streets in the form of police using excessive force such as kicking and beating demonstrators, indiscriminate and dangerous use of tear gas, mass arrests, and roughing up those arrested. Street Law 101 starts with the idea that it is pointless to argue Constitutional rights with someone about to hit you with a heavy wooden baton. The National

Lawyers Guild has written several guides on the law and exercising your rights of political protest. Read these guides before taking to the streets. [See: http://www.publiceye.org/liberty/Security_for_Activists.htm]

Arrests

Legal repression can include indiscriminate arrests, bogus charges, high bails, long detention before arraignment, abuse in jail, and punitive sentencing. Consider these factors seriously in making your plans.

Choose your leaders wisely and democratically, and then defend and protect them. Train others to step forward if leaders are arrested, and arrange beforehand for legal support for all those who are detained.

Be aware that some people, especially those with family care taking responsibility or medical issues, need to avoid arrest. Find ways for them to participate in your demonstrations with a reduced level of risk. Hand out poems and song sheets to those who plan to engage in nonviolent civil disobedience, and sing in jail to keep spirits high. What are they going to do? Arrest you?

Divide and Conquer

Don't let your critics or establishment figures divide your coalition by targeting people or groups with unpopular ideas. The following familiar refrain is old and tired: "If only your group didn't include [fill in the blank: anarchists, communists, feminists, gays and lesbians, Vegans, witches, atheists] you would be more effective. Baloney. It's a trick. Allow one slice and the blade of division keeps cutting. Set your group's principles of unity in a democratic fashion, and then welcome as participants all who abide by those rules.

Disruptive Behavior

It really doesn't matter why someone becomes disruptive or acts like a provocateur, the point is that every group has a right to establish principles of unity that include acceptable limits on behavior. If your group is devoted to non-violence, then a person who continuously suggests trashing store windows probably is in the wrong group. Spend time struggling with them over the principles your group has established. If they are still unwilling to change their behavior, ask them to leave. Don't accuse people who are disruptive or who act suspiciously of being government agents (a habit called agent-baiting). Scurrilous rumors weaken a group's sense of trust and loyalty. Deal with behavior, not intent--because intent often is not easy to ascertain.

Paranoia

OK Sometimes THEY are out to get YOU. Obsessing over the details is pointless. Repression happens. Take reasonable precautions and move on. [See article in this section, "Common Sense Security."] Don't let bogus "experts" divert you from your goals with scary talk about wiretaps and infiltrators. This is a form of self-aggrandizing disruptive behavior. Clicks, buzzing, and electrical fluctuations on a phone line are symptoms of either bad phone service or a bug, and the most experienced and honest experts with thousands of dollars worth of equipment will tell you they can't really tell the difference unless they physically find a bug. [For more information, see <http://www.publiceye.org/liberty/Whatbugs.html>]

Bottom Line

The goal of political repression is to stop you from being an effective activist. By educating yourself and working in a team with others as part of a larger movement, these schemes to protect power and privilege and preserve the status quo will be overcome.

Chip Berlet, senior analyst at Political Research Associates, spent 20 years as a political organizer from 1967-1987, working with civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, labor union, antifascist, and other groups. He specialized in demonstration and rally logistics, media, and security. He has written extensively on political repression, worked as a paralegal on lawsuits against government intelligence abuse, and was a cofounder of Police Misconduct and Civil Rights Law Report.

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The Four Main Techniques of Political Repression

Used during the 1960s and 1970s

by Brian Glick, *The War at Home*

[excerpt used by permission of author]

1. **Infiltration:** Agents and informers did not merely spy on political activists. Their main purpose was to discredit and disrupt. Their very presence served to undermine trust and scare off potential supporters. The FBI and police exploited this fear to smear genuine activists as agents.

2. **Psychological Warfare From the Outside:** The FBI and police used myriad other "dirty tricks" to undermine progressive movements. They planted false media stories and published bogus leaflets and other publications in the name of targeted groups. They forged correspondence, sent anonymous letters, and made anonymous telephone calls. They spread misinformation about meetings and events, set up pseudo movement groups run by government agents, and manipulated or strong-armed parents, employers, landlords, school officials and others to cause trouble for activists.

3. **Harassment Through the Legal System:** The FBI and police abused the legal system to harass dissidents and make them appear to be criminals. Officers of the law gave perjured testimony and presented fabricated evidence as a pretext for false arrests and wrongful imprisonment. They discriminatorily enforced tax laws and other government regulations and used conspicuous surveillance, "investigative" interviews, and grand jury subpoenas in an effort to intimidate activists and silence their supporters.

4. **Extralegal Force and Violence:** The FBI and police threatened, instigated, and themselves conducted break-ins, vandalism, assaults, and beatings. The object was to frighten dissidents and disrupt their movements. In the case of radical Black and Puerto Rican activists (and later Native Americans), these attacks—including political assassinations—were so extensive, vicious, and calculated that they can accurately be termed a form of official "terrorism."

A longer overview is at:
http://www.publiceye.org/liberty/War_at_Home/Glick_Overview.html

Order the book *War at Home: Covert Action Against U.S. Activists and What We Can Do About It* from a local bookstore or contact South End Press at <http://www.southendpress.org/>

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Common Sense Security

by Sheila O'Donnell

Around the world people are rising up in anger over the restructuring of the global economy to benefit faceless multinational corporations and greedy wealthy elites. Organizations challenging this process have been placed under surveillance by infiltrators, photographic recording equipment, and electronic listening devices. Demonstrators have been beaten, maced, and tear-gassed. A pattern is emerging in these incidents which is similar to past attacks on labor, civil rights, anti-war, Central America, and environmental activists.

Just a few years ago, people organizing or speaking out against environmental degradation in this country and abroad faced an escalating pattern of harassment. There were arsons, robberies, burglaries, and attacks on environmental activists—especially on women—who are often on the front lines in isolated rural areas. Investigators learned of more than 100 cases during the 1990s.

As our movements have become stronger and more sophisticated, the techniques of the state, corporations, and right-wing groups have also become more sophisticated. We have seen government agents, corporate security and right-wing intelligence networks share information as well as an ideology. For instance, the FBI's COINTELPRO operations targeted dissidents in America in the 1960s and 1970s. Caution and common sense security measures in the face of the concerted efforts to stop us are therefore both prudent and necessary.

Spend a few minutes to assess your work from a security point of view: understand your vulnerabilities; assess your allies and your adversaries as objectively as possible; do not underestimate the opposition. Try to assess your organizational and personal strengths and weaknesses. Do not take chances. Plan for the worst; work and hope for the best. Here are some specific suggestions for protecting yourself and your projects:

Office

- Never leave the only copy of a document or list behind; take a minute to duplicate an important document and keep the duplicate in a safe place off-site.
- Keep mailing and donor lists and personal phone books out of sight. Always maintain a duplicate at a different location; update it frequently.
- Know your printer if you are about to publish and know your mailing house if you contract for distribution. The loss of camera-ready copy or a change in text could feel like a disaster.
- Back up and store important computer disks off-site. Sensitive data and membership lists should be kept under lock and key. Do not leave sensitive files on the hard disk; use

floppies, back them up, and store the disks in secure spots. Use an encryption program to protect your data.

- Know the background of anyone you are trusting to work on any part of a project that is sensitive. Projects have been bungled because an untrustworthy person has purposefully intervened or inadvertently screwed up.
- Don't hire a stranger as a messenger. Your message might not arrive or could arrive after being duplicated for an unintended party.
- Sweeps for electronic surveillance are only effective for the time they are being done, and are only effective as they are being done if you are sure of the person(s) doing the sweep. Sweeps tend to be expensive because one must sweep a large area to be effective. Many experts contend that the most sophisticated federal government and private agency taps cannot be detected.
- Keep a camera handy at all times.

Trash

- What you consider trash could be a real treasure to someone looking for information about you or your projects. Don't throw information out in your trash. Garbology has become a tactic because it is so useful.
- Keep a "Burn file" in a secure place and occasionally burn it or use a shredder. Make sure your shredder creates confetti because strips can easily be reconstructed with a little patience.

Telephone

- Do not list your address with your phone number in the directories. Consider having yourself unlisted.
- If you receive threatening calls on your answering machine, immediately remove and save the tape.
- Never respond to a query over the telephone from an unknown person--lottery tickets, fabulous prizes, jury questionnaires, etc. notwithstanding. Ask for a telephone number and call the party back considerably later or the following day. Check the phone book to see if the phone number they gave you is legitimate. Check it out. Do the same if a reporter calls.
- Never say anything you don't want to hear repeated where there is any possibility of being recorded or overheard. Don't say anything on the phone you don't want to hear in open court.
- Don't talk in code on the telephone. If you are being tapped and the transcript is used against you in court, the coded conversation can be alleged to mean anything by government code "experts."
- Don't gossip about sensitive people or projects on the telephone. All information that can make an outsider "in the know" about you and your projects is valuable and makes everyone vulnerable.
- Keep a pad and pen next to the telephone. Jot down details of threatening or suspicious calls immediately. Note the time, date and keep a file.
- Don't waste time worrying about phone taps or imagining that strange clicks or hums or other noises indicate a phone tap. Many taps are virtually impossible to detect. Trust your instincts. If you think your phone is tapped, act accordingly.

Mail

- Get a mail box through the United States Post Office or a private concern. Be aware that the

Post Office will give your street address to inquirers under certain circumstances.

- If you receive a threatening letter, handle it as little as possible. Put both the letter and the envelope in a plastic bag or file folder. Give the original to the police only if they agree to fingerprint it. If not, give them a copy because you may wish to have your own expert examine it.

Automobiles

- Keep your automobile clean so you can see if there is an addition or loss.
- Put no bumper stickers on your car which identify you as an organizer. Make your car look ordinary.
- Put your literature in the trunk or in a closed box.
- Keep your car locked at all times.

Police

- Report any incidents to the local police and ask for protection if you feel it is warranted.
- Report threats or harassment to your local police. Demand that they take a report and protect you if that is necessary. Talk to the press and report the police response as well as the incident(s).
- Report thefts of materials from your office or home to the police; these are criminal acts.

Under Surveillance?

- Brief your membership on known or suspected surveillance. Be scrupulous with documentation. Do not dismiss complaints as paranoia without careful investigation. The opposition can and frequently does have informants join organizations to learn about methods and strategy.
- Discuss incidents with colleagues, family, and membership. Call the press if you have information about surveillance or harassment. Discussion makes the secret dirty work of the intelligence agencies and private spies easier to spot.
- If you wish to have a private conversation, leave your home or office and take a walk or go somewhere very public and notice who can hear you.
- If you know a secret, keep it to yourself. As the World War II poster warned: loose lips sink ships.
- Photograph the person(s) following you or have a friend do so. Use caution. If someone is overtly following you or surveilling you, she or he is trying to frighten you. Openly photographing them makes them uncomfortable. If you are covertly being followed, have a friend covertly photograph them.
- If you are being followed, get the license plate number and state. Try to get a description of the driver and the car as well as passengers. Notice anything different about the car.
- If you are followed or feel threatened, call a friend; don't "tough it out" alone. "They" are trying to frighten you. It is frightening to have someone threatening your freedom.
- Debrief yourself immediately after each incident. Write details down: time, date, occasion, incident, characteristics of the person(s), impressions, anything odd about the situation.
- Keep a "Weirdo" file with detailed notes about unsettling situations and see if a pattern emerges.

Break-Ins

- Check with knowledgeable people in your area about alarm systems, dogs, surveillance

cameras, motion sensitive lights, dead bolt locks, and traditional security measures to protect against break-ins.

Visits From the FBI

- Don't talk to the FBI or any government investigator without your attorney present. Get the names and addresses of the agents and tell them you will have your attorney contact them to set up a meeting. If you have an attorney, give her or him the name and phone number. Under any circumstance, get the agents' names and addresses. Information gleaned from a conversation can be used against you and your co-workers. The agents' report of even an innocuous conversation could "put words in your mouth" that you never uttered or your words could be distorted or made up if you don't have your attorney present.
- Call the National Lawyers Guild, American Civil Liberties Union, or other sympathetic legal organizations if you need assistance locating a reliable attorney in your area.
- The FBI rarely sets up interviews with counsel present. Often when the demand is made to have the interview with counsel, the FBI loses overt interest.
- Don't invite agents into your home. Speak with the agents outside. Once inside, they glean information about your perspective and lifestyle.
- Don't let agents threaten you or talk you into having a short, personal conversation without your lawyer. Don't let them intimidate or trick you into talking. If the FBI wants to empanel a Grand Jury, a private talk with you will not change the strategy of the FBI. Don't try to outwit the FBI; your arrogance could get you or others in serious trouble.
- FBI agents sometimes try to trick you into giving information "to help a friend." Don't fall for it; meet with the agents in the presence of your attorney and then you can help your friend.
- Lying to the FBI is a criminal act. The best way to avoid criminal charges is to say nothing.
- Any information you give the FBI can and will be used against you.
- Write for your government files under the Freedom of Information Act and keep writing to the agencies until they give you all the documents filed under your name.
- Don't let the agents intimidate you. What if they do know where you live or work and what you do? We have a constitutional right to lawful dissent. You are not required to speak with the FBI. They intend to frighten you; don't let them.
- Do not overlook the fact that government agencies sometimes share information within the government and with the private sector, particularly right-wing organizations. This has been documented.

Remember

If you feel you are being surveilled, your phones tapped, or that you are being followed, the best overall advice is to trust your instincts. If you feel something is wrong, trust the feeling. Your instincts are usually right. Most of us recall the times when we "felt something was wrong" or we "knew better but did it anyway."

Talk to colleagues and make yourself as secure as you can. Experts claim that people who resist get away from attackers more often than those who do not. The same logic applies to keeping outsiders out of your business; it is a more subtle form of attack.

Trust your instincts and resist when possible.

One of the biggest blocks to resistance is the failure to recognize that we are under attack. None of this advice is intended to frighten but to create an awareness of the problems. A knowledge of the strategies and tactics of your adversaries will strengthen your movement. Cover yourself; it's a tough world out there.

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Suggested Readings

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- Some Useful Websites:*
- Political Research Associates website, <<http://www.publiceye.org>> under "Security for Activists: Overcoming Repression."
- National Lawyers Guild website, <<http://www.nlg.org>>