

Archives Unbound: Federal Surveillance of African Americans, 1920-1984



Archives Unbound

Archives Unbound answers the call within libraries and university departments to digitise small collections of primary source material. This new online resource digitises the most sought-after microfilm collections from Gale and Primary Source Media, capturing defining moments in history. Between 5,000 to 200,000 pages per title, these specialist collections act as small adjuncts to the large Gale digital collections making them an affordable option for libraries and departments.

Federal Surveillance of African Americans, 1920-1984

Between the early 1920s and early 1980s, the Justice Department and its Federal Bureau of Investigation engaged in widespread investigation of those deemed politically suspect. Prominent among the targets of this sometimes coordinated, sometimes independent surveillance were aliens, members of various protest groups, Socialists, Communists, pacifists, militant labour unionists, ethnic or racial nationalists and outspoken opponents of the policies of the incumbent presidents.



Black Americans of all political persuasions were subject to federal scrutiny, harassment and prosecution. The FBI enlisted black “confidential special informants” to infiltrate a variety of organizations. Hundreds of documents in this collection were originated by such operatives. The reports provide a wealth of detail on “Negro” radicals and their organizations that can be found nowhere else.

In addition to infiltration, the Bureau contributed to the infringement of First Amendment freedoms by making its agents a constant visible presence at radical rallies and meetings. Militant Socialist A. Philip Randolph was followed from city to city and The Messenger’s office was vandalized by zealous protectors of the nation’s security. A perusal of Bureau case files for this period indicates that black radicalism was one of the major preoccupations and targets of the federal investigatory network. The value of this collection is unparalleled on several levels:

- As a vast treasure of largely untapped source materials for the major social movements and key figures in early twentieth century black history
- As a unique window into the development of America’s first systematic domestic surveillance apparatus
- In the illumination of the enduring conflict in American history between the need of society to protect basic freedoms and the equally legitimate need to protect itself from genuine threats to its security and existence

Features:

- Intuitive searches that deliver organised results
- Highlighted keywords to facilitate research
- Flexible and accessible for the 24-hour researcher
- Subject-specific collections support multidisciplinary research in history, political science, hard science, ethnic studies and more
- Active publishing schedule, with multiple collections added annually
- Highly targeted at 5,000 to 200,000 pages per collection

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This collection consists of a select group of small microfilm products. These include the following:

COINTELPRO: Black Nationalist “Hate” Groups

The FBI Counterintelligence Program file contains details of the bureau’s attempts to “expose, disrupt and neutralize” groups that J. Edgar Hoover perceived as threatening to national security. The material in this file, spanning COINTELPRO’s existence from 1956 to 1971, is especially valuable for the view it offers of the U.S. political climate in the 1960s.

FBI File on the Atlanta Child Murders (ATKID)

The file, dating from June 1980, contains memos, letters, lab tests, a detailed account of the trial and records of civil-rights questions regarding the case raised by Georgia Representative Mildred Glover and others.

FBI File on the Black Panther Party, North Carolina

Documents in this file, spanning the years from 1968 to 1976, are mainly surveillance reports and investigative and legal memoranda, but also include Black Panther Party publications, transcriptions of speeches by black militant spokespersons, digests of FBI phone intercepts at party headquarters and some of the party’s internal records and correspondence.

FBI File on Elijah Muhammed

Born Elijah Poole in 1897, “the Messenger of Allah” assumed leadership of the movement later known as the Nation of Islam in 1934. The file contains material the FBI collected to show immoral, subversive, or criminal activity in order to discredit him as a leader of the Nation of Islam.

FBI File on the Ku Klux Klan Murder of Viola Liuzzo

Like the “Mississippi Burning” investigation, this was one of the first cases to test the new Civil Rights Act. The file on this important case contains FBI letters, memoranda, teletypes and more.

FBI File on Muslim Mosque, Inc.

Founded by Malcolm X after his break with the Nation of Islam, Muslim Mosque, Inc. was a politically-oriented movement affiliated with the orthodox Islamic religion. The file contains memoranda by Special Agents in Charge and supporting documentation.

FBI File on the NAACP

These files on the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) cover the years 1923 to 1957, and reflect bureau investigations into the NAACP’s supposed connections with the Communist party.

FBI File on Paul Robeson

The FBI’s investigation of, and dissemination of information about, actor/singer Paul Robeson and his Communist party association contributed significantly to the ruin of his career. This file includes all the bureau reports on Robeson and his wife, news clippings and transcripts of his telephone conversations.

FBI File on the Reverend Jesse Jackson

The files of the FBI on Jesse Jackson span the years 1967 to 1984 and include the original investigative file on Jackson detailing his early career as head of “Operation Breadbasket” and PUSH (People United to Save Humanity); records of various threats made against him; documents from class-action suits in which he joined against the FBI, CIA and City of Chicago; and information regarding FBI and Secret Service protection of Jackson as a presidential candidate in 1984.