

## **Not in America: Review of the Documentary *Cointelpro 101***

Dr. Lenore J. Daniels – Black Commentator – 10/21/2010

There will be no swastikas this time but seas of red, white and blue flags and Christian crosses. There will be no stiff-armed salutes, but recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance. There will be no brown shirts but nocturnal visits from Homeland Security.

Chris Hedges, “How Democracy Dies: Lessons from a Master”

A few weeks ago, I came across an ad inviting college graduates to consider working for Homeland Security. For the college graduate, strapped with negotiating the repayment of student loans while struggling with minimum wages as servers at McDonalds, the starting salary of 35,000 is appealing and even more so for those with specialized skills in technology.

These college graduates are often not war bound as are their less fortunate “undereducated” and “unskilled” contemporaries. It is not hard to envision an entry level or managerial position with Homeland Security.

A lack of history is the unstated requirement. No Daniel Ellsberg (after or before the Pentagon Papers) need apply. And Homeland Security does not have to worry. No Daniel Ellsberg of any kind will apply—and they know it!

Orwellian grown-up-children only!

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Fairly familiar with the story of how this government targeted activists for justice for the purposes of neutralizing social change, I realized after viewing the documentary *Cointelpro 101* that the Left rarely has presented the Puerto Rican, the Chicano/Mexicano, Indigenous, and Black as efforts on the part of the government to destabilize and silence people of color. The government’s COINTELPRO program was nothing short of an assault and that assault, *Cointelpro 101* makes clear, was direct, brutal, and criminal. And why not?

The collection of campaigns to neutralize the democratic progress in the U.S., COINTELPRO, is an extension of this nation’s involvement in the practice of genocide, conquest, colonization, and enslavement. The continued incarcerations of freedom fighters after 20 or 30 years as well as the incarceration of millions of Indigenous, Black, and Chicano/Mexicano and even the recent FBI raids in Chicago and Minneapolis targeting predominantly white activists are examples of the continuation of COINTEPRO today.

The goal of COINTELPRO was to “sow division and distrust” among citizens in a nation claiming for itself a model nation of democracy. COINTELPRO, as this film

shows—was/is not only the criminal activities of a paranoid president or an even more bizarre FBI chief.

The producers of *Cointelpro 101* (Freedom Archives, 2010) have assembled documentary footage, photos, and commentaries from Jose Lopez, Priscilla Falcon, Ward Churchill, Kathleen Cleaver, Geronimo Pratt, and others to present the historical and often simultaneous implementation of U.S. war strategies beginning in the 1950s to conquer the hearts and minds of the core Left in this nation. *Cointelpro 101* does not preach—but it teaches.

Beginning (as the film admits) with the “lesser known” story of the Puerto Rican movement for independence, the U.S. government since its conquest of Puerto Rico in 1898, sought to eliminate the peoples’ struggle against colonization and imperialism. The film’s unflinching representation of the tactics used by the government leaves no doubt that U.S. citizens were under attack from within the Empire. Originally, the FBI targeted the Puerto Rican National Liberation Movement. But, as *Cointelpro 101* shows, what began in Puerto Rico in the 1950s expanded to include Puerto Rican grassroots leaders and organizations in major Northern urban areas. The FBI compiled 165,000 files against Puerto Rican leaders and organization members. As the Puerto Rican Cultural Center activist Jose Lopez explains, the FBI had free reign to infiltrate organizations, blacklist, and arrest, incarcerate, and kill activists who attempted to protest against U.S. colonial policies.

By the early 1970s, the FBI targeted American indifference. With the aid of the media, the FBI created a red-alert narrative warning that the “minorities” are coming! *Indifference* took a stance *against* marauders! In turn, as *Cointelpro 101* shows, the government green-lighted a pogrom of infiltrating, wiretapping, framing, and incarcerating activists groups everywhere and anywhere in the U.S.

The Chicano/Mexicano struggle for farmer’s and immigration rights did not begin in the 1960s but an extension of the conquest of Mexico by the U.S. government. Thanks to the *goodwill* of local law enforcement and (yes) right-winged vigilante groups, the FBI build up its attack—with willing bedfellows. (The KKK, other pre-Tea Party citizens, and law enforcement, were, not many years ago, one and the same militia force, with individuals members of both groups). As activists Ricardo Romero, Francisco “Kiko” Martinez, and Professor Falcon comment, this joint operation became an effective killing machine. *Cointelpro 101* presents us with names and photos of freedom fighters, one after another, (Linda Montoya, an educator, Rito Conales and Antonio Cordoba, both “riddled” with bullets, Ricardo Falcon, 22 years old, and six young activists blow to bits in a car bomb)—outright murdered—most all in the early 1970s. *What crime did these young people commit?*

The “American public” has yet to confront this nation’s practice of genocide against Indigenous peoples, and few understand how the government’s assault on the people at Wounded Knee ultimately resulted in more oppression and the framing of American Indian Movement members, including Leonard Peltier. Fewer still understand how

the U.S. government trained and funded “goon squads” to orchestrate a reign of terror predominantly against the elderly leaders and women and children. (How different is this war tactic from the one in which citizens in Chile, Guatemala, for example, are trained at the School of the Americas to return to their homeland as military and police officials charged with terror and murder). When young AIM members were called in to protect the people, the U.S. government speeded to the reservations with armored tanks and high-powered weaponry—in support of its hired goon squads—not the elderly, women, and children. The Constitutional Rights of Indigenous people was, states Professor Ward Churchill, suspended.

*Cointelpro 101* challenges the viewer to recognize the connections as well-planned and, most important, as Churchill states, “illegal” destructive strategy to eliminate people, a strategy no less horrifying than that one executed by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. In America, Churchill states, the government waged a counterinsurgent war against activists. Counterinsurgency, anti-war activist, Laura Whitehorn added, on U.S. soil is “supposed to be illegal.”

*--Not in America!*

But in America, the strategy to eliminate activists engaged in the fight for justice and social change had to also target the American public with a campaign labeling these activists criminals, conspirators against innocent Americans and the red, white, and blue. In other words, the American public had to be eternized by the language government officials and the media employed to demonize Puerto Rican, Chicano-Mexicano, Indigenous, and Black activists and their communities.

*Take cover in your homes while we battle these monsters in the streets and in their adobes.*

COINTELPRO, the film insists, the U.S. government inflicted violence and used terror on U.S. citizens (long before 9-11) as is its strategy against what it perceives as a threat to its racial, social, and economic dominance anyone else in the world. Inspired by the Civil Rights movement on the Left, these movements in Puerto Rico, in the Chicano-Mexicano communities, on Indigenous’ lands challenged their right to free speech, to organize, and to protest for social change, and the government’s response involved massive efforts on the part of hundreds of FBI agents, local law enforcement operations, and informants. A drugged-out-on-fear American public did not notice and did not care if the government cleaned the treasury to pay for an insurgency against American citizens of color.

The movement that began in the South, that is, the Hoover movement, spread throughout the country. J. Edgar Hoover’s fear of the Civil Rights Movement and its leaders, Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, spread, too, to win the hearts and minds of white America. Because the Civil Rights Movement, *Cointelpro 101* shows, had the “ability to bring unity and to transform grassroots movements” into national

campaigns, Black leaders had to be “neutralized.” To understand U.S. history is to recognize that enslavement of Africans and their descendents was but one phase in the relationship between Blacks and the U.S. government. The elimination of an enslaved Black was costly and therefore employed as a strategy to instill terror in the masses of Black workers and remove the treat of terror in the white community. But the effort to *neutralize* Black Americans began the minute Southerner confederate soldiers understood change in the South was on its way, and free-roaming Blacks on the landscape was not the change Southern citizens could live with and thrive. The official policy that spread throughout the U.S. then became one that encouraged the servitude or the neutralization of Black Americans.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, African Americans were the most visible and vocal population calling for social change. The work of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Fannie Lou Hamer drew the attention of the FBI’s COINTEPRO, who, as former Black Panther Geronimo Pratt explained, organized an assault that began with SNCC. Other targets of COINTELPRO included the Black Panthers and RAM. Leaders were expunged—shot dead—in the streets, in their homes, or in the prisons as the FBI infiltrated these organizations with agent provocateurs and informants. Many under surveillance were framed, charged with “crimes,” and forced to fight erroneous charges as “criminals.”

The Department of Justice, according to an ex-FBI agent, “learned everything and about people in a political organization.” In 1968, while protesters took to the streets. The Chicago Police department was organizing the “Red Squad,” and, as police footage reveals, the function of the Red Squad was to watch and ultimately infiltrate suspicious Black, Latino as well as anti-war organizations in order to neutralize leaders. Former Black Panther Kathleen Cleaver recalls the Key Agitator Index, in other words, a list of grassroots and organization leaders the FBI targeted for an early death.

There is a moment in *Cointelpro 101* when a juror from the Geronimo Pratt case, faces the camera: “We had no clue,” she admits,

as to what the government could do or what they did do even tough Vietnam was going on. You couldn’t believe that your own government was doing that at home to one of its own citizens, to one of its own veterans.

Geronimo Pratt, a Vietnam veteran, joins and the Black Panthers and becomes an instant target of COINTELPRO.

That was America then...and this is America now...

Homeland Security!

“When those kinds of people are making decisions on what is politically appropriate for the citizens to do, then we don’t have a democracy,” states Kathleen Cleaver. COINTELPRO used taxpayers’ money to operate illegal and criminal activities, explains Pratt, to declare victims enemies of the people. Today, taxpayers fund the

government's strategy to continue expanding its surveillance of an ever-expanding number of activists and organizations within its borders and without while it attempts to win the hearts and minds of the "American public" with narratives profiling the "enemy."

The message: "If you dare to go out and make social change, you will be punished" (Priscilla Falcon).

Today, the operation is more sophisticated, states activist attorney Bob Doyle. "It doesn't have to be secret anymore." As *Cointelpro 101* shows, anyone can be charged as a terrorist today if engaged in radical politics. With the Patriot Act, adds Cleaver, there need not be a crime. "People are just investigated, whisked off to prison, [then] interrogated and tortured." What was illegal under COINTELPRO is now legal. "Now, that's the law."

*Cointelpro 101* shows that the discovery of COINTEPRO files and the Frank Church investigation barely fazed the government. How does the government take it upon itself "the supervising of what is allowed politically and what isn't allowed politically?" asked Cleaver.

The "shoot to kill" suspected American "terrorists" did not begin under the Obama administration, but Obama's selection assured the FBI and other law enforcement agencies that the business of murdering justice and democracy will progress. To what? What is that future envisioned by these fellow citizens?

All the voices who contribute to *Cointelpro 101* agree in one voice that the U.S. government's practice of injustice must be "dismantled" and replaced "with something that reflects our interests, concern with our well-being, and reflects a certain sort of respect for the dignity of our communities and traditions, and us as individuals."

I watched *COINTELPRO 101* thinking of the students who, while preparing cover letters and resumes to send to Homeland Security, inherited a perception of the *terrorists* homeland propaganda.

Students need to view this film.

*Cointelpro 101* is a riveting recall of history for anyone who wants to be inspired to work toward an end to the U.S. practice of terrorism. Because it was not *then*: it is happening *still* in America!

To purchase the film or to learn more, contact: Claude Marks,  
www.freedomarchives.org or [info@freedomarchives.org](mailto:info@freedomarchives.org). Phone: 415 863-9977.