

FBI agents march on White House to oppose clemency for political prisoner Leonard Peltier

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In an unprecedented public protest Friday, hundreds of FBI agents marched to the White House to oppose presidential clemency for political prisoner Leonard Peltier, the Native American activist who has been imprisoned for nearly a quarter of a century. Last month President Bill Clinton said he would review Peltier's case before leaving office. Peltier, 56, has been serving two consecutive life terms at the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas since his frame-up for the June 1975 killing of two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota.

Peltier, a member of the American Indian Movement (AIM), was convicted on the basis of coerced and false testimony from witnesses threatened by the FBI and the suppression of ballistic tests and other evidence that aided Peltier's case. Before his trial the government failed to convict two other AIM members after defense attorneys described to a jury the reign of terror carried out by government agents and their collaborators against Native Americans fighting poverty and political repression on the Pine Ridge reservation. The campaign for Peltier's freedom has won wide international support.

Friday's FBI protest was supported by the agency's director, Louis Freeh, who wrote President Clinton last week that the freeing of Peltier would "signal disrespect" for law enforcement and the public. In a separate letter to Attorney General Janet Reno, Freeh said he represented "the voices of thousands of FBI employees everywhere."

Freeh has the backing of House Republicans, including Illinois Representative Henry Hyde, the head of the House Judiciary Committee, who released the FBI director's letters to the public and is circulating a

letter against Peltier's clemency in Congress.

The officially sanctioned protest was particularly provocative given the fact that FBI agents are bound by law to remain neutral and abide by the decisions of Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno, their nominal employers. Nearly 500 agents, most of whom were current employees granted time off to protest, marched around the White House behind a banner reading "Never Forget." They went up to the White House gate and delivered a petition signed by 8,000 current and former agents opposing clemency for Peltier.

In El Paso, Texas another 100 FBI agents protested Peltier's clemency request Friday, standing behind the city's top FBI agent in front of the agency's local headquarters as he read a statement against Peltier.

Acknowledging that "public displays of our feelings are not typical for FBI agents" and at one time would have been "unthinkable," John Sennett, president of the FBI Agents Association, said the agents had decided they had to counter the "intense activism" of Peltier's supporters.

Peltier's attorneys correctly pointed out the threat the FBI protest posed to democratic rights. At a Washington, DC news conference Friday, Jennifer Harbury, an attorney for Peltier, said, "It's a sad day for democracy when our armed forces march through the streets to influence a decision for mercy and justice by a civilian president."

President Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno, who would have been within their rights to fire Freeh and the other agents for organizing such an open display of insubordination, chose instead to pander to the right-wing demonstrators. The White House

declined to issue any statement on the protest and Reno, asked Thursday about the planned demonstration, said, "Everybody ought to be able to speak out about something that they care about deeply in a thoughtful, professional and dignified manner."

In recent years, the law-and-order politics of both the Democratic and Republican parties have encouraged political activity by law enforcement agents, including demonstrations by police officers to demand the execution of former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal, and to defend fellow officers against charges of police brutality.

Friday's demonstration, however, was the culmination of increasingly open political interventions by FBI Director Freeh on behalf of the reactionary forces in the Republican Party that have sought to destabilize the Clinton White House.

In 1997 Freeh publicly opposed Reno's decision to rebuff appeals from congressional Republicans to appoint an independent counsel to investigate allegations of campaign finance violations by Clinton.

Then, in September 1999, Freeh joined the attack against Clinton after the president granted clemency to 12 members of the Puerto Rican FALN (Armed Forces of National Liberation), releasing 11 of them after they had served as much as 19 years in prison. The FBI director sent a letter to the House committee investigating the clemency decision, headed by right-wing Republican Congressman Dan Burton, outlining his strong opposition to the release of the Puerto Rican nationalists.

It is noteworthy that the American Indian Movement, the FALN, as well as the Black Panthers were all targets of the FBI's COINTELPRO operations, which involved infiltration and provocation of left-wing organizations as well as assassinations during the 1960s and 1970s. Peltier and other opponents of the US government's policies had well-founded fears that they could be killed for their political activities.

Friday's FBI protest is part of the agency's 25-year-long vendetta against Peltier and his supporters. But the brazenness of the protest, organized on the eve of the transfer of power in government, demonstrates that the most reactionary forces of the capitalist state have been emboldened by the Republicans' success in taking control of the White House by undemocratic means.



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