

# New York police conducted massive international spying on anti-Bush demonstrators

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Secret documents obtained by the *New York Times* have exposed a massive international spying operation that was mounted by the New York Police Department (NYPD) in advance of the last Republican National Convention (RNC), held in the city in August 2004.

According to the documents leaked to the *Times*, the NYPD sent agents from its Intelligence Division to illegally infiltrate organizations and meetings around the United States and internationally in an attempt to prepare the suppression of demonstrations planned against the Bush administration.

These files, marked “NYPD Secret,” reveal that the police infiltrated the meetings of non-violent protest groups in at least 15 places outside of New York, including California, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas and Washington, as well as Canada, Europe and the Middle East.

Church groups, organizations opposed to capital punishment, street theater ensembles, as well as at least three New York City elected officials were among the targets of the investigation.

According to the files, police trawled the Internet for information on potential protesters and created files on their past criminal records, if any. Undercover police who attended meetings filed daily report forms known as DD5s, which described the meetings, the attendees, and the leaders and the plans of the group.

Police reported on one group called “Men-and-Women-in-Black Bloc,” which planned a peaceful protest outside of the auction house Sotheby’s during an event attended by RNC delegates.

The innocuous theater group “Billionaires for Bush,” which satirizes the connections between the Bush administration and big business, were also targeted when police agents attended its weekly meetings in downtown Manhattan.

When the group filed a Freedom of Information Act

petition with FBI, a response came stating the government could “neither confirm nor deny” surveillance of the group, according to spokesman Marco Ceglie.

Police files noted that a meeting marking Martin Luther King’s birthday in January 2003 was a protest against “The RNC, the war in Iraq, and the Bush administration” and listed endorsements by three city council members, Charles Barron, Bill Perkins, and Larry B. Seabrook.

One police document published by the *Times*, dated October 9, 2003, shows spying on a group called “Bands against Bush” that had planned concerts in New York, Washington, San Francisco, and Seattle. It notes, “Activists are showing a well-organized network made up of anti-Bush sentiment; the mixing of music and political rhetoric indicates sophisticated skills with a specific agenda.” It continues, “Police Departments in above-listed areas have been contacted.”

Other groups targeted were the New York City AIDS Housing Network, the Arab Muslim American Foundation, Activists for a Free Palestine, Queers for Peace and Justice, and the 1199 hospital workers union’s Bread and Roses Cultural Project.

Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, said, “What we are seeing here appears to be spying on lawful political protest and it’s the kind of spying that really has no place in a free and open society.”

The NYPD has defended its surveillance, claiming that it focused on small groups that planned to disrupt the convention or prevent delegates from attending. Police spokesman Paul Brown, appearing on the news program “Democracy Now!,” repeatedly avoided the question of the legality of the surveillance. “It was simply a matter of keeping the department informed,” he said.

On Monday, city attorneys asked a federal court not to unseal police files “because the media will “fixate upon them and sensationalize them.” Judge James C. Francis of

the Federal District Court in Manhattan declined to reissue an order that banned disclosure of police documents, saying that his earlier prohibition still stood. The New York Civil Liberties Union has sought the release of the so-called DD5s, the raw field reports submitted by undercover detectives, insisting that they would reveal the real nature of the NYPD spying operation.

The files disclosed thus far reveal only one aspect of the wide-ranging dismantling of democratic rights by city authorities since the September 11 terrorist attacks. In 2003, the NYPD obtained a ruling from a federal judge effectively abrogating the so-called Handschu agreement, which placed some restrictions on police spying and infiltration of political organizations.

Named after one of the plaintiffs in a case brought against NYPD surveillance of the Black Panther Party, anti-Vietnam War protest groups and others, Handschu required that police present some evidence of criminal activity before sending its undercover agents into political organizations. Reached in 1985 after 14 years of litigation, the agreement was a tacit recognition of the gross abuses carried out by the NYPD's old "red squad," which utilized agents provocateurs in attempting to frame up left-wing activists on terror charges.

Invoking the September 11 terrorist attacks, the NYPD argued successfully that these restrictions were now outmoded, and that the police needed unfettered power to conduct counterterrorism investigations. As the documents leaked to the *Times* make clear, this power is now being employed to spy upon and repress all manner of political dissent.

Jethro Eisenstein, an attorney who was involved in the Handschu agreement, described the purely political surveillance and interrogation that are now routinely practiced by the NYPD. In an interview on "Democracy Now!" he stated: "In early 2003...the police started debriefing—they used that word—everyone who had been arrested for disorderly conduct. They got a whole raft...of questions about their political beliefs, the political associations, their political views, what did they think about Israel and Palestine, had they voted for Bush, what organizations did they belong to."

More than 900 pages of police files have already been released in suits over the arrest and detention of nearly 2,000 people in August 2004.

These documents show that the NYPD had made preparations for mass arrests, securing an unused—and filthy—bus depot on the Hudson River as a makeshift detention center. The department made the decision to arrest—as opposed to the usual procedure of ticketing—protesters so that they could be taken off the

streets and imprisoned for the duration of the RNC.

Video footage shot by both police and demonstrators show that on August 31, 2004, police made mass arrests of protesters by corralling them in crowds with nets. Some 96 lawsuits against the police department have been initiated by those arrested.

On Wednesday, lawyers for these plaintiffs will depose the head of the NYPD's Intelligence Division, David Cohen, who before joining the department spent 35 years in the CIA, rising to the level of director of operations.

The techniques employed by the NYPD are a part of a general response by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States to rising opposition to the war and the general conditions of American society.

In a recent article in the *Village Voice*, Seth Gardner quoted Brooklyn College Sociology Professor Alex Vitale, who summed up the so-called "Miami Model"—named after the preparations of the Miami police for protests against the November 2003 Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting held in that city—which has now become universal:

"Surveillance and infiltration prior to the event, lots of negative publicity targeting the demonstrators prior to the event, mass arrests that are usually preventive in the sense that they occur before any illegal act actually occurs, and then extended detentions."

Gardner further notes, "A compliant news media is needed for the 'Miami Model' to work effectively.... In New York stories touting potential violence by 'anarchists' at the convention first appeared in April 2004 and steadily increased with the passing months. Days before the RNC, one story proclaimed that '50 of the country's leading anarchists were expected.'"

The NYPD's spying on political dissenters, its routine political "debriefings" and its use of mass arrests and detentions of peaceful protesters constitute an abrogation of fundamental democratic rights in the largest city in the US. Together with the shootings of innocent victims such as Sean Bell, and the recent fivefold increase in police "stop-and-frisks," these methods point to a conscious and concerted plan for dealing with the mass unrest that will inevitably result from the deepening social inequality that pervades every aspect of life in the city as well as from the growing popular opposition to the policies pursued by the government both at home and abroad.



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