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## Introducing “American Big Brother: A Century of Political Surveillance and Repression”

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The public relations and legal battle between the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Apple over the company's use of encryption has put the focus on executive branch surveillance in a way not seen since Edward Snowden's revelations almost three years ago. However, as the historical record demonstrates, the FBI's domestic spying on the American public dates almost from the Bureau's creation in July 1908. In the years that followed the FBI's birth, other federal agencies – some civilian, some military – initiated their own warrantless domestic surveillance operations. Throughout this period, Congress was more frequently aiding and abetting this surveillance and repression, rather than preventing it or reining it in.

As the showdown between Apple and the FBI illustrates, what has changed is the technology used to accomplish the surveillance – technology that now gives federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies the ability to surreptitiously access the computers, smartphones and even home appliances of tens of millions of Americans.

On Thursday, the Cato Institute launched a timeline that chronicles the history and implications of these developments: “American Big Brother: A Century of Political Surveillance and Repression.”

Too often, federal domestic surveillance of citizens was a prelude to government actions aimed at subverting civil society organizations opposed to American involvement in foreign wars, aiding conscientious objectors, advancing civil rights and political autonomy for people of color, the creation of labor unions and even surveillance of candidates running for or holding office – including members of Congress and presidential contenders.

As political scientist Robert Justin Goldstein noted in his 1978 book, “Political Repression in Modern America: 1870-1976,” “American social scientists have not seriously considered political repression as one important factor which helps explain the narrowness of the American political spectrum...” Put differently, through the use of surveillance, agent provocateurs and outright violence, federal officials often decided what political views were or were not permissible to hold and practice in the American political system.

Indeed, the theme that emerges clearly from the timeline's episodes is that in many of these cases, federal surveillance and political repression were directed most forcefully at individuals and organizations that challenged the prevailing political paradigm on the issue at hand. Occasionally, the domestic surveillance was aimed squarely at the political opponents of the president then occupying the White House (FDR ordering surveillance against isolationists, LBJ ordering Goldwater's campaign plane bugged). In other cases, simply the perception by federal officials that an individual or group might be a "threat to national security" (think Japanese-Americans in World War II or Arab/Muslim-Americans today) was enough to trigger an unwarranted federal attack on the target's constitutional rights.

The individuals and organizations subjected to these tactics often found themselves either politically crushed or so badly damaged as to be rendered politically marginalized and ineffective. The personal and professional costs of these federal attacks on the constitutional rights of these citizens were usually life-long, and belated apologies by federal officials decades removed from the actions of their predecessors did little if anything to actually right the original wrong, much less preclude a repeat of such surveillance and repression against others.

Indeed, just three years after the passage of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance act in 1978, then-President Ronald Reagan promulgated an executive order that one recent State Department whistleblower alleged has been used to conduct warrantless surveillance of the overseas communications of Americans in the post-9/11 era. Whether the practice goes back farther is an issue that should be, but currently is not, the subject of a Congressional inquiry – just as all government surveillance activities initiated since the Church Committee should be investigated.

The timeline endeavors to provide a wide range of examples of federal misconduct in this area. It will be updated regularly on the basis of archival research and new revelations of current federal domestic surveillance and political repression of Americans— citizens whose only "crime" was or is to challenge governmental policies they oppose but that are carried out in their name.

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