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Grassley presses FBI to explain its monitoring of conservative women's group

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Sen. Charles E. Grassley, Iowa Republican, is pressing the FBI to explain the reasoning for its newly revealed probe into the conservative group Concerned Women for America (CWA), The Washington Times has learned.

The FBI's review of the pro-life women's group has prompted an outcry from the group's leadership and others concerned about law enforcement and intelligence community surveillance of Americans.

The FBI determined in July 2016 that there was nothing to investigate regarding CWA following a "charity assessment" for potential "embezzlement of non-profit organizations/corporate fraud," according to a document revealed by FBI in response to a Freedom of Information Act request from the Cato Institute.

The FBI Washington Field Office's determination cited a subpar rating from Charity Navigator, a group that grades organizations, to justify the bureau's digging into Concerned Women for America. Redactions to the FBI's July 5, 2016 determination prevent insight into what else prompted the investigation and how the FBI monitored the group.

Mr. Grassley wrote to FBI Director Christopher Wray and Attorney General Merrick Garland to obtain an unredacted copy of the FBI's determination. The Iowa lawmaker said he wants into why the Bureau was scrutinizing the conservative group and whom else the FBI may be watching.

"Based on the unredacted information that's been made public to-date, I'm concerned about the basis upon which the FBI initiated an assessment of CWA and the authorities it relied on to do so," wrote Mr. Grassley in the letter sent last week. "Unfortunately, as the country has witnessed in the recent past, including the Crossfire Hurricane investigation and the Larry Nassar investigation, the FBI has repeatedly failed in its mission and abused its authority. The federal government wields immense surveillance ability and Congress, especially [the Judiciary Committee], have an obligation to ensure that it is used properly and in accordance with all laws and regulations."

Mr. Grassley's office said Monday it had not received a response to the letter.

Concerned Women for America CEO Penny Nance said the revelation of the FBI's probe has prompted her and CWA officials to reevaluate their positions on surveillance-related issues. CWA has traditionally supported law enforcement and the intelligence community, but Ms. Nance said the newly revealed probe has raised doubts about the government's actions.

"You want to believe that the people of your intelligence agencies and at the top of the FBI are credible and you want to believe that they are only looking at Americans with probable cause, but I've learned that's not necessarily the case, that's what this has taught me," Ms. Nance said. "What this has taught me is that the FBI does not need probable cause to snoop on Americans, and that is a wake-up call."

Ms. Nance said the FBI should have used its resources on the sex abuse investigation of former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar instead of wasting time on her group of church women.

The bureau's assessment of Concerned Women for America is part of a larger effort to monitor many different kinds of groups, according to Cato Institute Senior Fellow Patrick Eddington, who uncovered the FBI's monitoring of CWA.

Mr. Eddington estimated that the FBI has made hundreds of thousands of assessments based on data obtained in 2011 by the New York Times suggesting that the FBI conducted more than 82,000 assessments of people and groups for potential wrongdoing in the preceding two years.

"There are a lot of reasons to be deeply concerned that the FBI is using assessments to engage in surveillance-related activities that clearly are at odds with the Fourth Amendment, and then also represent a giant waste of taxpayer money and investigative time that ought to be spent on real crime, real murderers, real embezzlers, real child pornographers, real human traffickers, all those kinds of things that I think most of us would agree are completely legitimate, areas of investigative activity for the FBI," Mr. Eddington said. "Using Charity Navigator to pick on Concerned Women for America — definitely not a legitimate use of FBI time and resources."

Mr. Eddington has studied the national security establishment from inside and outside its halls and has criticized its perceived failures. He formerly worked as a CIA analyst and later went public with accusations that the government hid evidence of potential chemical agent exposure among Desert Storm veterans.

He said FBI assessments can lead to physical surveillance and to organizations being improperly targeted, particularly in a way that triggers larger investigations.

Since 2019, Mr. Eddington said the Cato Institute has mounted a widespread effort through FOIA requests to unearth how the FBI and the federal government choose to keep tabs on domestic civil society groups of all different categories, including religious, professional, ethnic, academic, environmental and political organizations.

Mr. Eddington wrote earlier this year that the Cato Institute found evidence that FBI had opened assessments on the Massachusetts-based Muslim Justice League, a New York chapter of the League of Women Voters and a Colorado chapter of the International Rescue Committee.

In April 2021, the Cato Institute filed a lawsuit against the FBI to get the government to hand over details about its assessments in response to FOIA requests. The case is ongoing in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

The FBI's Washington Field Office declined to comment for this article and directed The Washington Times to the information it released via FOIA to Mr. Eddington.