

Denver Police Keeps "Spy Files" on Peaceful Protesters

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document

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Glen Morris, a Native American activist, learned in early February of 2003 that a rival faction of the American Indian Movement had once staged a plot to kill him. He learned this after reading a secret file the Denver Police Department had kept on him for 16 years. The Denver Police knew about the plot but never bothered contacting him.

His file was only the tip of an iceberg.

On February 7, 2003, the Denver Police made public 1,500 pages of the so-called "Spy File". More than 300 people jammed police headquarters, wondering whether they were the focus of police intelligence. Representatives of 70 groups also showed up. The document was the product of nearly five decades of intelligence-gathering and contained more than 3,200 people and 208 organizations.

Many of those people did nothing more than attending peaceful protests and conferences. Some of them did more activist work, such as volunteering with Amnesty International and the American Friends Service Committee (both of which are recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize).

"These kind of practices have the potential to harm people's ability or willingness to freely express criticism of government policies, chilling free speech." – Mark Silverstein, Legal Director of the ACLU of Colorado

The ACLU filed a class action in state court to challenge the Denver Police Department's custom and practice of spying on peaceful protesters, maintaining the "Spy Files" and disseminating information from the files to third parties.

Another released [document](#) showed that Denver intelligence officers spied on the participants of a conference by collecting the license plate numbers of their vehicles in the parking lot, and then listed their corresponding names and home addresses in the Spy Files.

At yet another instance, the Colorado Springs Police Department supplied the information of 80 participants of a peaceful demonstration, along with the license plate numbers of 30 of them, to the Denver intelligence Bureau. James Wattles, a Denver Intelligence officer

subsequently produced a document that listed the corresponding names and addresses of the 30 participants.

The ACLU of Colorado also obtained documents that indicate that the FBI's Joint Terrorist Task Force (JTTF) has been gathering information and creating files on the activities of peaceful protesters who have no connection to terrorism or any other criminal activity.

The terms of agreement ACLU reached with the Denver Police to resolve the Spy Files lawsuit became effective on May 7, 2003 with Judge Nottingham's signed order:

“Denver has agreed to put an end to its decades-long practice of monitoring and keeping files on peaceful critics of government policy who have no connection to criminal activity,” said Mark Silverstein, Legal Director of the ACLU of Colorado. “The end of this political spying enhances the professionalism of the police department and is a victory for the First Amendment and for the civil liberties of all people in Denver.

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Sources:

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- Owen S. Good, “CB lands man in spy files – Case one of many released by police in purge of records,” *Rocky Mountain News, February 8, 2003.*
- John Ingold and Amy Herdy, “Activist blames spy files on bias – Morris: Police targeted liberals,” *Denver Post, February 09, 2003.*
- ACLU of Colorado, “ACLU and Denver Officials Agree to Resolve Lawsuit over Denver Police Spy Files,” *Press Release, Apr 17, 2003.*

Related stories:

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