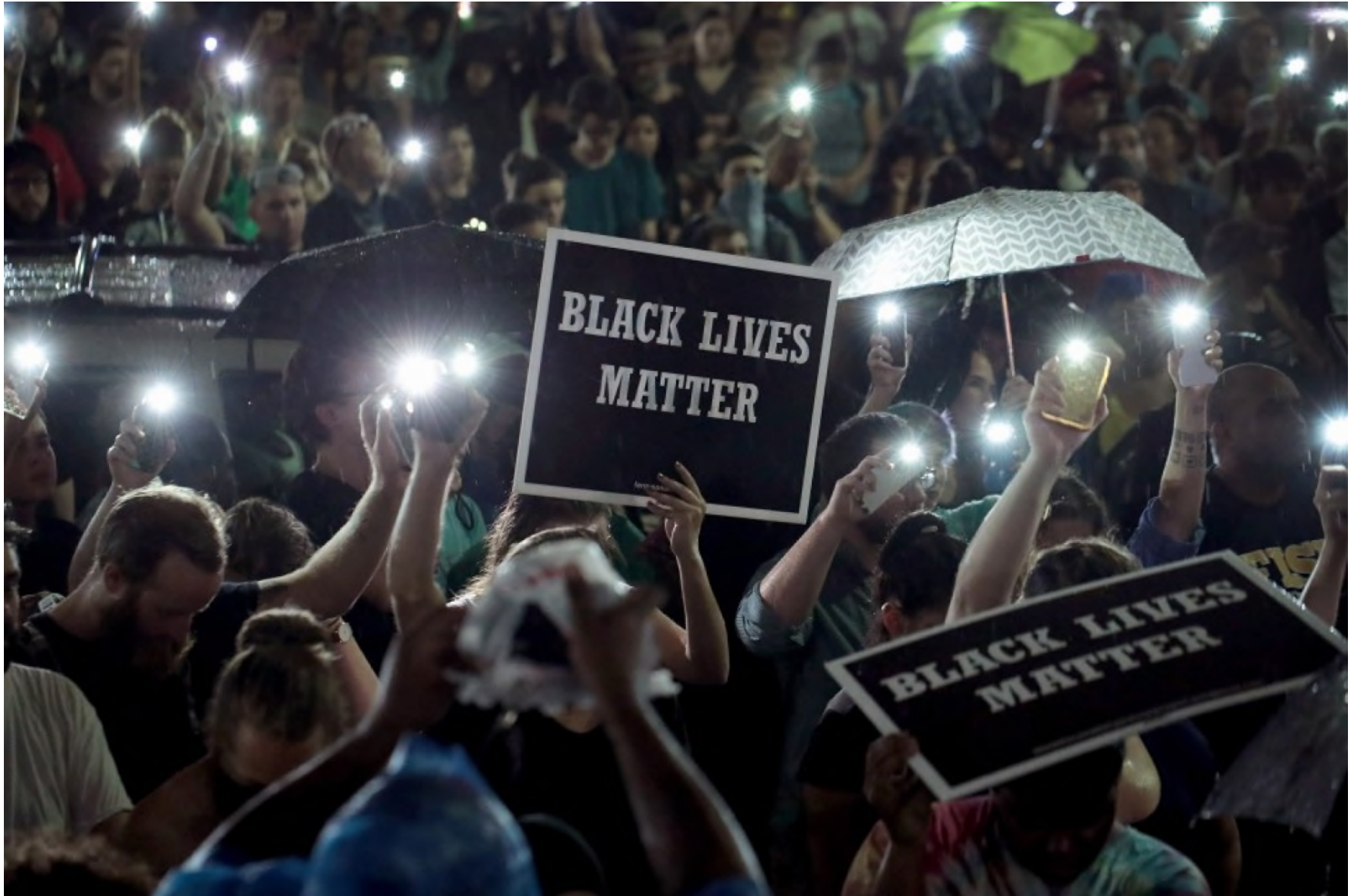


We say black lives matter. The FBI says that makes us a security threat.



Demonstrators outside the St. Louis city jail in September. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)

This past summer, the FBI's Counterterrorism Division, which investigates terrorist threats from groups such as al-Qaeda, invented a brand new label and a brand new threat. In an [intelligence assessment](#) written in August but first [disclosed by Foreign Policy](#) last week, the FBI designated a new group of domestic terrorists: "Black Identity Extremists," or BIEs. The report broadly categorizes black activists as threats to national security. It uses unrelated acts of violence, such as the July 2016 shootings of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge, as justification for targeting black dissident voices. And it labels black activists — whose central demands are that government officials

be responsible stewards of their power, accountable to the people who elect them and transparent about decision-making — as a threat to national security.

[According to sources](#) close to the FBI, the term “Black Identity Extremist” didn’t exist before the Trump administration. But while the designation is newly manufactured, the strategies and tactics behind it are not. For anyone who remembers how the FBI used extrajudicial means to [target civil rights leaders](#) and other activists through [COINTELPRO](#), the pretext is clear: Neutralize people or organizations whose attitudes or beliefs the federal government perceives as threatening.

That technique was used against the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the Black Panthers — against every major advocate for the rights of black people in the nation’s history. Those of us in existing resistance movements [saw it coming](#), and we are warning the rest of you before it goes too far.

The history lesson couldn’t have been starker, in fact. Just a few days before news of the new label broke, The Washington Post [had reported](#) on the cold case of a civil rights activist named Alberta Jones. Sixty years ago, Jones, the first black prosecutor in Louisville, was beaten over the head with a brick and drowned in the Ohio River. Despite sufficient evidence, her killers were never found and brought to justice.

Her death was just one of dozens of well-documented stories of civil rights leaders who were profiled, targeted and killed for insisting that black people receive equitable treatment under the law in a country whose Constitution guarantees it.

Decades later, unarmed black people are still [disproportionately the victims of police shootings](#). Just since the Black Lives Matter movement got started, [hundreds of us have been killed](#). But the FBI’s report claiming how dangerous black activism is begins by asserting that violence inflicted on black people at the hands of police is “perceived” or “alleged,” not real. And it suggests that

“BIE ideology” was birthed from frustrations after the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. — a not-so-subtle reference to the sustained resistance of black leaders in that city, the Black Lives Matter Network, and the broader movement for black lives and our allies.

[\[I yelled ‘Black lives matter!’ at a Trump rally. This is what happened next.\]](#)

In the four years since Brown was killed by police officer Darren Wilson, black organizers and [allies](#) have used protest, direct action and other forms of dissent to demand equitable treatment under the law, and equally important, to see our dead receive the dignity they were refused while alive. We have faced pushback from the start, but this new designation takes it up a notch — by suggesting that it is our demand for less violence by the state against civilians that leads to more violence against the state by civilians.

Designating protesters as terrorists makes clear that the Trump administration thinks the government bears no responsibility to end deadly police violence and other state abuses of power against everyday Americans. It suggests that simply demanding the right to live free of police profiling and violence and to have equitable access to food, health care and education can land you on an FBI watchlist. And it raises a fundamental question: What constitutes a threat to national security — and who decides?

Journalists and [government officials](#) have warned about the rising deadly threat of white supremacists in the United States for years, and even the Trump administration must surely be aware of the problem. A [joint intelligence bulletin](#) warned this spring that “white supremacist groups had already carried out more attacks than any other domestic extremist group over the past 16 years and were likely to carry out more attacks over the next year.”

Two months after the report, white supremacists descended on Charlottesville with firearms and tiki torches, killing anti-racist activist Heather Heyer and injuring 19 people. The FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force

said the white supremacist accused of killing Heyer — James Alex Fields Jr. of Ohio — will not face domestic terror charges. Shortly after, [House Democrats](#) called for hearings to examine racist fringe groups, including those that organized the deadly attack. But the Trump administration's allies in Congress have failed to take decisive or meaningful action.

[\[White people think racism is getting worse. Against white people.\]](#)

The warning from the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security appears to be all smoke and mirrors. [According](#) to journalist and activist Shaun King, the FBI has done little to pursue the brutal beating of 20-year-old DeAndre Harris in a parking garage next to the Charlottesville police station.

And since taking office, President Trump and his administration have [reversed](#) Obama-era policies that would have otherwise protected everyday Americans from pervasive police violence. The administration has resumed giving police access to military surplus equipment typically used in warfare, such as grenade launchers, armored vehicles and bayonets. In February, Attorney General Jeff Sessions and his hard-line sidekick, [Steven A. Cook](#), catapulted America back decades by overturning hard-fought, bipartisan sentencing policies for nonviolent offenders. Instead, Sessions instructed federal prosecutors nationwide to seek the strongest possible charges and sentences against targeted defendants. And just last month, [he withdrew](#) the Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Services program, which provided training and accountability measures for police departments plagued with cultures of violence. Taken together, these actions have dramatically increased the possibility of violence at the hands of police — and decreased the security of ordinary Americans.

Yet the FBI's new designation sends a clear message to anyone, but especially to black organizers, who would dissent that we had better lay down and take it or else.

While this gaslighting approach targets black activists, we are certainly not

the only ones. Resistance organizers working to [keep Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients safe](#), those [fighting back](#) against fascism and white supremacy, Muslim communities and even [animal rights organizers](#) are being surveilled and threatened with jail time and deportation. Of course, none of this is novel to our current era of resistance. History has shown us that FBI tactics perfected against one movement can be used against other movements. This is why, together, we must stand up and say that we won't let it happen again.

Before she reached her quest for justice, Alberta Jones was murdered, and her killers went scot-free. History tells us that today's pattern of surveillance, harassment and violence against political activists is frighteningly reminiscent of her era. Must we wait for the bodies of today's black activists to fall before we take unchecked police and vigilante power seriously?

Read more:

[Black America should stop forgiving white racists](#)

[Don't criticize Black Lives Matter for provoking violence. The civil rights movement did, too.](#)