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# Understanding Covert Repressive Action

## THE CASE OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AGAINST THE REPUBLIC OF NEW AFRICA

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Although overt repression has been studied extensively (e.g., mass arrests), there have been no rigorous investigations of covert repressive action (CRA; e.g., electronic and physical surveillance). To better understand the latter behavior, the author uses new data about U.S. domestic intelligence activity directed against a Black Nationalist organization in Detroit, Michigan, during the late 1960s and early 1970s ( $N = 3,136$ , by neighborhood-month). In line with existing research, evidence reveals that CRA responds to dissent, lagged repression, and the level of economic development within a neighborhood. Differing from existing literature, however, results also disclose that CRA responds to where dissidents live and, most important, in accordance to the racial characteristics of the neighborhood within which potential targets are located. Wiretaps and tails are thus prompted by numerous factors, but the identity of challengers (i.e., political “profiling”) proves to be an essential part of the explanation.

**Keywords:** *Republic of New Africa; covert action; repression; African Americans; social movements; human rights violation; protest policing;*

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Most people are aware that governments use covert repressive action (CRA)<sup>1</sup> to collect information about social movement organizations (SMOs) that challenge their authority as well as suspected sympathizers of these movements for the purpose of general awareness, preparing overt repressive activity, legal prosecution, and blackmail. These acts of “domestic intelligence” include numerous techniques:

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1. This phrase must be clearly defined. Drawing on the work of Arthur Zuehlke (1980), one could divide the subject of covert repressive action into four topic areas: collection, analysis, counterintelligence, and covert action. Within the intelligence literature, *covert action* refers to directly influencing events within a target group (e.g., through propaganda, political action, paramilitary action, or intelligence assistance). In this article, I use the phrase in the more popularly understood manner (i.e., the collection of information).

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electronic and physical surveillance, mail openings, and the use of informants and agents provocateur. Despite the widespread awareness that such activity exists,<sup>2</sup> however, we generally do not know much about why such behavior is used. Do authorities direct CRA against only those actively engaged in dissent and relevant locations where this behavior has occurred? Do authorities direct CRA against locations where the greatest concentration of potential challengers exists? Do authorities direct covert action where other police/intelligence activity was already under way? We simply do not know because the subject has not been subject to rigorous investigation.<sup>3</sup>

Consulting existing literature, two possible explanations are found. On one hand, within quantitative analyses of overt repressive action (ORA)—political arrests and mass killings—one would be led to focus on three factors: (1) protest or the “challenge” (e.g., Hibbs 1973; Gurr 1986; Davenport 1995, 2000; Moore 1998; J. King 2000), (2) prior repression or “coercive habituation” (e.g., Poe and Tate 1994), and (3) diverse political-economic factors or, simply, “context” (e.g., Hibbs 1973; Franks 1989; Lopez and Stohl 1989; Gurr 1986; Poe and Tate 1994; Davenport 1995; Moore 1998; J. King 2000). Research discloses that each influences ORA across a wide range of databases, methodologies, and substantive interests. On the other hand, when one considers the qualitative literature relevant to covert activity (e.g., Marx 1974; Donner 1990; Klare and Kornbluh 1987; Zwerman 1990; Cunningham 2004), one is led in a completely different direction. Within this work, one would be led to focus on overt “challengers” (those directly involved with confronting authorities) and “sympathizers” (those who are not directly engaged in specific SMOs but who are believed to be supportive because of some shared characteristic such as race, ideology, or religion).

To investigate this topic, the article begins with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of existing quantitative research on ORA. Following this, I detail what qualitative literature on covert repression tells us about the topic and then make some initial tests of derived propositions. For the analysis, I use a new database of antiradical (“Anti-Red”), covert activity undertaken by fourteen police and intelligence organizations in the United States directed against a Black Nationalist organization named the Republic of New Africa (RNA) in Detroit, Michigan, between 1968 and 1973. Available by the neighborhood-month ( $N = 3,136$ ), this constitutes the only publicly accessible database on the subject. Results disclose that the use of electronic and physical surveillance was influenced by contemporaneous and contiguous dissent, prior and contiguous repressive activity, income level, and the number of dissidents (RNA members) who lived within a neighborhood. Results also disclose that these relationships vary according to the racial makeup of the locale in question. For example, within predominantly white neighborhoods, authorities used very little CRA, but within predominantly black neighborhoods, covert activity was more frequent in nature, influenced by the amount of RNA activity, overt repression, lagged CRA, and

2. Newspapers, government records, literature, television, and film provide this information.

3. Comparable issues were raised after the fall of communism with the release of information about the KGB (in the former Soviet Union) and the STASI (in East Berlin), as well as when information was distributed about the SAVAK of Iran, the UBK in Poland, and the NISA of the Philippines. All of these disclosures sparked discussion about the scope of state power—albeit for relatively brief moments.

income to more specifically target behavior. Based on these findings, the conclusion outlines several new areas of research relevant to state repression and protest policing.

### THE FUNDAMENTALS OF STATE REPRESSIVE ACTIVITY

Empirical research on overt repressive action has grown significantly over the past thirty years. During this time, a clearly defined class of behavior has developed that serves as the focus of investigation: *actions taken by authorities against individuals and/or groups within their territorial jurisdiction that either restrict the behavior and/or beliefs of citizens through the imposition of negative sanctions* (e.g., applying curfews, conducting mass arrests, and banning political organizations) or *that physically damage or eliminate citizens through the violation of personal integrity* (e.g., using torture, disappearances, and mass killing). Over the same time period, there has also developed a clear consensus on the appropriate theoretical framework for the behavior of interest. Within existing research, most scholars identify that repression results from a decision-calculus undertaken by political authorities (e.g., Dahl 1966; Walter 1969; Goldstein 1978; Duvall and Stohl 1983), where the costs of taking such action (e.g., decreased legitimacy, spent resources, and increased resistance) are weighed against the benefits (e.g., increased legitimacy, longevity, and decreased resistance). As conceived, if benefits exceed costs, then ORA is expected; if costs exceed benefits, then ORA is not anticipated.<sup>4</sup>

Unified conceptually and theoretically, all of the quantitative literature relevant to overt repression has been engaged in the systematic assessment of diverse explanatory variables. Within this work, three types of explanatory factors have received support. In an effort to understand CRA, it thus makes sense to begin our inquiry with identifying what research on the most comparable form of state behavior<sup>5</sup> has to tell us about causal determinants.

### CHALLENGES, COERCIVE HABITUATION, AND CONTEXT

Research has consistently found that dissent (a “challenge”) compels authorities to apply some form of political sanction directly against those engaged in this behavior as well as against everyday citizens not directly connected with challengers/challenges (e.g., Hibbs 1973; Poe and Tate 1994; Davenport 1995; Moore 1998; J. King 2000). The perceived benefit of using ORA in the face of a challenge is simply the elimination of the threat confronted and the increased chance of political survival for leaders, policies, and existing political-economic relations.<sup>6</sup> Now, it should be clear that not all pro-

4. The essentially rationalist framework should not be accepted wholeheartedly, however, as there are elements of culture and habit that pervade the decision-making process (e.g., Gurr 1986; Della Porta and Reiter 1998).

5. It would seem that literature on criminal covert activity would be available, but this is not so.

6. I say *perceived* because these efforts are not always successful (see literature on the “conflict-repression nexus” [e.g., Lichbach 1987; Moore 1998]).

test influences ORA in the same manner. The magnitude and type of state response have been found to vary according to the frequency and type of protest confronted.<sup>7</sup> Despite these differences, however, all findings identify that protest increases repressive activity.

The second variable identified within the literature concerns the “coercive habituation” of political authorities (e.g., Hibbs 1973; Poe and Tate 1994; Davenport 1995). As stated by Gurr (1986, 160),

Once [specialized agencies] are in operation, elites are likely to calculate that the relative costs of relying on coercion are lower. . . . These strategic considerations tend to be reinforced by habituation. . . . [In addition to this], a bureaucratic “law of the instrument” may prevail . . . [where agencies of control] . . . recommend violent “solutions” to suspected opposition, or use their position to initiate them, as a means of justifying the agencies’ continued existence.

In this case, organizational benefits result from maintaining a link with organizational history. When authorities have previously engaged in ORA, they are likely to do so in the future.

The third explanation for overt repression concerns the broader political-economic context within which state-dissident interactions take place (e.g., the level of political democracy or the level of economic development). These variables are important because their presence influences the perceived costs and benefits of taking action. For instance, most research has found that the amount of democracy present during a nation-year reduces the responsiveness of authorities to dissent because the political system reduces the capability and willingness to engage in repression (e.g., Davenport 1995, 1999; J. King 2000; Davenport and Armstrong 2004).

### CHALLENGERS, BOTH REAL AND IMAGINED

Set within the framework of the decision-calculus above, the three variables identified are important for our understanding of why authorities use coercion. When one considers covert repression, however, then they come to question the importance of these variables. There are essentially two reasons for this.

First, although both ORA and CRA are concerned with neutralizing challenges and facilitating the survival of political leaders as well as existing political-economic structures, the objectives pursued by these techniques are distinct. As understood, ORA is used by repressive agents in an effort to directly control or eliminate overt challenges to authority (e.g., Walter 1969; Goldstein 1978). This action informs both targets/victims as well as bystanders that certain actions/beliefs are not deemed acceptable and that the state will sanction those who behave in this manner. In contrast, the purpose of CRA is to collect information about challengers within a particular territorial jurisdiction (e.g., Marx 1974; Wise 1976; Churchill and Vander Wall 1990;

7. For example, violent dissent tends to increase violent overt repressive action (ORA; e.g., Poe and Tate 1994), and diverse forms of dissident activity tend to increase the sheer volume of restrictions that states apply, while less diverse forms tend to be ignored by authorities (e.g., Davenport 1995).

Koehler 1999; Cunningham 2004). This action informs authorities about what is taking place and who is involved with these actions, so that they can better assess the threats and weaknesses within these organizations to initiate action against them.

Second, ORA and CRA use fundamentally different means. In the case of the former, arrest, intimidation, and killing are the strategies of choice. These activities involve public and frequently violent forms of state power (e.g., victims are physically arrested or beaten in view of some audience), and targets as well as potential targets are intended to know exactly what is being done to them and by whom. These activities are also generally collective in orientation: groups of authorities take action against groups of citizens. In the case of CRA, however, wiretapping, tails (following targets), and mail openings are the weapons of choice. These activities involve private as well as nonviolent forms of state power, and targets are not supposed to know anything about what occurred (reducing backlash—a consistent problem in the ORA literature).<sup>8</sup> In addition, these activities are more individual in orientation: they are undertaken by individual agents of the state against individual citizens and/or locales with some association with a social movement/political challenge.

Of course, the identification of targets is not straightforward. Previous work suggests that there are essentially two types: “real” and “imagined,” each with their own relationship to CRA. These are discussed below.

*Real targets.* For some, the primary focus of covert repression is with those individuals explicitly involved with challenging authority. These actors are the lifeblood of social movements for they are the ones who participate in group action. Monitoring these individuals (where they work, sleep, worship, shop, and “hang out”) provides crucial information about who dissidents are, what they are doing, and what they might do—a major benefit to authorities in countering protest. Now, one might ask, why apply CRA across so many aspects of a dissident’s life? The answer is simple. Within the mind of covert repressive agents, challengers do not stop being challengers when they leave a rally (something implicit within ORA literature). Rather, they are challengers all the time; consequently, information about domestic challenges might be revealed at any point during their daily life. In short, CRA does not privilege the public lives of targets; instead, it encompasses all aspects of them.

Clearly, SMO participants would not only serve as the *subject* of information. Equally as important, these individuals could also serve as a *source* of information about other targets, as they meet previously unknown members of the SMO, supporters, and dissidents from other organizations and encounter places where members gather but do not engage in dissent. Monitoring these individuals and places provides crucial information about not only who dissidents are and what they do but also who might become a challenger as well as what locales might be used for recruitment, meetings, training, and protest in the future. The logic of applying CRA across all of these targets is simple as well: it is unclear exactly which “leads” produce valuable information, and thus authorities pursue many at the same time.

8. Authorities may want targets to suspect that they are being covertly monitored, but the technique does not rely on the awareness of the target.

From the discussion above, the benefits of applying CRA against “real” targets with CRA are straightforward. If these individuals and locales are put under surveillance, then authorities can increase knowledge about diverse aspects of challenges and challengers. The costs of applying CRA against real challengers are also straightforward. First, one must pay an agent to follow targets and plant wiretaps. Second, it is possible that if covert efforts were exposed, members of the challenging group would rally together in some sense, and it is possible that the opinion of bystanders would shift positively toward the social movement organization and negatively against political authorities as such activity might be judged intrusive and/or illegal.

*Imagined targets.* The previous section assumed that authorities have a general idea about who and what they were looking for (e.g., the identity of a challenger or a meeting place). If authorities did not have information that led them to specific individuals or locales, however, and they were still interested in identifying challenges/challengers, then they would have to engage in more vaguely targeted activity. Of course, it is not expected that this behavior would be random in nature for this would be far too costly. Rather, I expect that authorities would employ some quick reference guide to determine where they should place their efforts. In other words, it is expected that they would use some “profile” of the challenges and challengers (some simplistic, descriptive sorting mechanism) that divided the relevant population and geographic space into those people and places that were worthy of CRA and those that were not.

What could serve as a mechanism to develop a profile? Evidenced within the anti-red campaigns of the early 1900s, as well as by COINTELPRO and the “War on Terrorism” in the United States, it is clear that easily identifiable characteristics of the challengers being confronted provide guidance to repressive agents in their selection of targets such as race, age, income, or religion. If this information were known, then authorities could apply CRA to the locales within which similar individuals could be found (i.e., specific countries, regions, or neighborhoods) and attempt to obtain useful information. For example, if one were trying to confront a dissident group composed of radical Islamists, blacks, or poor people in the United States,<sup>9</sup> then one would direct covert repressive activities against locales where these people lived and/or where they gathered socially. This would allow authorities to find out about who was in (and who was not in) a particular social movement. In addition, it would allow authorities to observe preprotest and postprotest activity (e.g., recruitment, training, organizational meetings, etc.).

Clearly, the costs and benefits of such an investigation vary across locales in accordance to the ease with which profile characteristics could be identified and applied; this is especially the case in a democracy (the concern of this study), which would be extremely sensitive about political rights and popular legitimacy of government behavior. I discuss three scenarios below.

*Target-rich environments.* In areas where many individuals could be found who are similar to the targeted SMO, it is possible that the cost of CRA would be minimal and

9. The more obvious the descriptive characteristic, the better (e.g., physical characteristics).

that the use of this behavior would be extensive. Here, there are plenty of targets in close proximity to one another; the likelihood of some payoff from the investigation would be quite high, and authorities would easily be able to move from one suspect to another since potential targets would literally be on every corner. In addition, one could argue that CRA increases within target-rich environments because the ramifications of discovery within this context are low. Within this environment, repressive activity targets one community, and if only the designated targets were subject to this behavior, then (if exposed) it is likely that only this community would be upset and would attempt to sanction the authorities (at the ballot box or within the media).<sup>10</sup> Unless this group was extremely well connected or quite powerful (a category under which many targets of covert state repression would not qualify), such efforts would not be feared by authorities—further increasing the likelihood of CRA. Of course, density could work in the other direction as well. Target-rich environments might increase the costs of CRA as additional effort must be extended to separate those who have a connection with the relevant SMO from those who do not. In this case, CRA would be decreased, but the responsiveness of CRA to other information would increase as authorities use data about the amount of protest, the number of dissidents in residence, and the overall income of a particular locale to assist them with targeting.

*Unclear environments.* Within areas where profile characteristics are not clearly predominant, the likelihood of CRA is different. In these contexts, while the costs of searching decrease (because of the sheer number of potential targets involved), the costs of CRA exposure increase significantly.<sup>11</sup> In this context, if CRA were made public, then individuals within the nonprofiled group would come to realize that they were very close to this form of state power and might align themselves with the targeted community. Such a coordinated backlash is frequently the motivation for the withdrawal of CRA as well as ORA (Capos 1981). Because of this possibility, covert action is likely to be lower in these communities as widespread, undirected activity would be too risky. At the same time, in an effort to focus repression more effectively and to provide a justification for extending CRA to mixed locales, I expect government agents to be extremely sensitive to protest, the amount of other police/intelligence activity, and so forth. This information would assist authorities with targeting CRA to only “worthy” targets, and it would assist them with addressing any criticisms that might arise about covert activity if it were exposed later.

*Target-poor environments.* Within locales where profile characteristics of the group were in the minority, I expect government agents to use the least amount of CRA. In this context, although the sheer volume of challengers is low (facilitating investigation), the likelihood of payoff is minimal, and the costs of exposure are the greatest. In addition, within minority profile situations, I expect that the authorities

10. This draws on the point made by Jacobs (1979) and Duvall and Stohl (1983) that targets of repression are frequently selected because they are marginalized from the mainstream of society and lack connections to other groups.

11. I am suggesting that the likelihood of payoff for covert repressive action (CRA) is probably proportional to the percentage of the population fitting the profile.



would be the most responsive to other factors present at the time. For example, when protest occurred within these environments or when other police/intelligence activity was taking place, authorities would likely apply large amounts of CRA. These other factors would assist the authorities in better pinpointing targets within the locales being discussed. Equally, if not more important, these other factors would provide authorities with the necessary justification for CRA; if they were exposed, then they could simply provide the reason that they had “just cause” and be considered legitimate in their actions. Indeed, in these situations, if authorities did not take such action, then they might be deemed inefficient, uncaring, and undeserving of support (financial and otherwise).

### DATA AND METHOD

To conduct my investigation of the propositions identified above, I rely on data collected about the policing of a protest organization in the United States named the Republic of New Africa (Davenport 1999). This Detroit-based dissident organization, composed of a diverse group of African Americans,<sup>12</sup> explicitly challenged national, state, and local authorities during the period between March 1968 (the founding of the organization) and April 1973 (the last month of police activity reported in the files and when the organization shifted its base of operation to Mississippi). The primary goal of the RNA was to establish independence from the U.S. government (i.e., secession). This objective was to be achieved through a threefold strategy: (1) the holding of a plebiscite among African Americans to determine the “national status” of the “New Afrikan population in North America” as well as through the use of other consciousness-raising activities; (2) the purchase of five states from the U.S. government: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina (which would comprise the new country); and (3) the granting of reparations from the United States for the treatment of blacks as slaves (Republic of New Africa 1968).<sup>13</sup> Toward these ends, the RNA engaged in many legal forms of protest: rallies, petitions, political education courses, “self-defense” programs, food drives, lectures, conferences, and the publication of “independent” newsletters/newspapers. The organization also engaged in numerous illegal and violent activities as well: robberies, shootouts with police, plots to bomb state and federal buildings, and even a plane hijacking.

Of course, no one would be surprised to find out that the U.S. government did not sit idly by in the face of such behavior. Numerous authorities were engaged in the polic-

12. The core membership of the group ranged between 50 and 200, but the number who engaged in dissent reached upwards of 2,000 individuals at times. These individuals came from all walks of life (the U.S. military, teachers, lawyers, machinists, barbers, etc.).

13. The Republic of New Africa (RNA) had far-reaching plans. Internationally, the group’s leaders were in contact with a number of African governments and were attempting to establish trade and exchange programs with foreign countries. They also planned to make contact with the governments of Cuba, China, and Vietnam. The responses of authorities were far-reaching as well, casting a wide net. For example, the U.S. Department of State, the Internal Revenue Service, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) were tracking RNA activity nationally, and even local Detroit police departments were coordinating their efforts with other police departments as well as national organizations.

ing of the RNA: the Detroit Police Department (Special Investigations, Demonstration Detail, Detective Division, Homicide, Criminal Division, the Public Complaints Division, and Tactical Reconnaissance), the Michigan State Police (Special Investigation Bureau, Special Investigation Unit), the Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. Department of State, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Almost all of these organizations engaged in the arrest of RNA members for various offenses, conducted electronic and physical surveillance, opened mail, and placed informants as well as agents provocateur within the SMO for the purposes of obtaining information and disruption.

From reading the available literature, it is clear that race served as the dominant profile characteristic used by authorities in their confrontation with the RNA (and quite logically). As Donner's (1990, 291) preeminent study tells us,

A number of cities, of which Detroit is a prime example, reflected in their police structures and target priorities a similar "urban pathology": a decaying black ghetto, . . . the emergence of potentially violent black and white groups, and the development among white policemen of a "siege mentality" against the black community.

Both before and after the ghetto riots of the late sixties, self-help and violence inevitably came to be regarded in both camps—police and ghetto—as a vital means of survival. "Law and order" became a coded battle cry as the police were transformed into an army defending white power and the status quo. In this confrontation, the urban intelligence unit (the "Red Squad") played a key role. Blacks—their organizations and activities—became prime targets for ongoing surveillance regardless of their political views.<sup>14</sup>

This statement is important because it reveals that race was significant in authority-black relations, especially amid the backdrop of the 1967 riot in Detroit (Locke 1969)—an event "in which forty-three were killed, hundreds wounded, and 7,200 arrested, not to speak of the millions of dollars of property damage" (Donner 1990, 292). Within this environment, one would not expect that blacks and whites would generally receive similar treatment as authorities attempted to identify, monitor, and counter the RNA. Indeed, it seems likely that white authorities would not use CRA against other whites in the city or their segregated neighborhoods. In contrast, it seems quite reasonable to expect that white authorities would be much more likely to use CRA against African Americans (all throughout the city) in their efforts to investigate and counter the RNA. During the time, the African American population was commonly identified as the "enemy" of and the "threat" to the status quo. In part, this was because they had just recently engaged in violent activity in the form of a riot; CRA would thus be justified as a preventative measure. In part, this was due to the practice of institutional racism within police and intelligence organizations (frequently cited as the main reason for urban riots in the 1960s [Fogelson 1968; Locke 1969]). In addition to this, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, African Americans were not economically or politically powerful enough to the existing structure of authority in Detroit to compel coercive agents to fear being exposed (e.g., Darden 1987; Donner 1990; Dawson 1994). The costs of CRA would thus be minimal.

14. Interestingly, even black police officers were subject to surveillance when it was "perceived" that they were sympathetic to the challenging organization (Donner 1990, 293).

*Measures.* The data used to conduct this study came from two sources. First, the RNA's Red Squad file was used—a collection of documents from local, state, and federal police as well as intelligence organizations that identified the dissident group's activity and the authority's treatment of the group.<sup>15</sup> These were made available through the Freedom of Information Act and numerous lawsuits filed in the state of Michigan. The files describe, in elaborate detail, hourly meetings attended by informants; surveillance reports from police officers at members' homes, meeting halls, places of worship, and so on; and arrest reports. The files also include the strategic planning efforts of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, based in Washington, D.C., as well as periodic updates from field officers throughout Michigan. From this archive, I created an events-based data set of protest and repressive activity in Detroit (at the neighborhood-month).<sup>16</sup> Second, I used a demographic profile commissioned by the city of Detroit in 1965 across forty-nine neighborhoods (TALUS 1968; City of Detroit 1971). These data provide information about who was living in the city at the time (e.g., population size, age, and ethnicity) as well as how each community was doing across categories (e.g., occupancy/crowding within residences and median family income).

Within the larger research effort, I coded the following information for repression:

- the type of activity undertaken by state authorities (e.g., arrests, sentences, instances of physical and electronic surveillance, letter opening, and the forging of letters by authorities);
- the identity of the organization involved (e.g., Detroit Police Department—Reconnaissance Division, Criminal Division, and Special Investigation Bureau; Michigan State Police; and the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI]);
- the number of agents involved in each activity;
- the geographic location of activities—by street, longitude, and latitude;
- the date—by day, month, and year; and
- the time—by hour and minute.

To measure the dependent variable for this study, I counted the total number of covert events that took place within a neighborhood during a month (i.e., wiretaps, tails, and mail openings). The data identify 2,961 events in thirty-six neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup>

To measure “coercive habituation,” I used several other variables from the same database. Within ORA literature, bureaucratic inertia within repressive institutions is measured by lagged repression—repression at time  $t - 1$ . With the expectation that prior repression leads to later applications, such an indicator implies that all prior

15. These data are housed at the Radical Information Project at the following address: <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/davenport/proj2.htm>; these are also housed at the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Web page: [www.yale.edu/unsy/jcr/jcrdata.htm](http://www.yale.edu/unsy/jcr/jcrdata.htm).

16. The temporal aggregation was used in an effort to analyze a low level of aggregation. The spatial aggregation was used for three reasons: (1) beats and districts for the time period could not be identified, (2) neighborhoods are frequently used jurisdictions for many urban activities, and (3) I had access to other data at the neighborhood-level that allowed me to address context.

17. In an effort to avoid a problem with endogeneity, I have not considered the existence of an informant/agent provocateur in a meeting as an instance of covert repressive activity. Rather, I have used CRA only to refer to activities in which authorities have directed some agent of the state to take some action (e.g., to follow an RNA member or to plant a microphone in someone's home).

activity within a particular domain would be related to all other activity that occurs later, wherever it takes place. As I believe that authorities were more likely to act either where they have been before or very close to where they have been previously, I created a measure for lagged CRA in the same neighborhood as the dependent variable as well as two measures for the mean of contemporaneous and lagged CRA in neighborhoods that were contiguous. In an effort to capture another aspect of coercive habituation, I created two other measures of ORA as well. Specifically, I created two dummy variables that identified periods where overt repression reached a particularly high level, signaling a major shift in ORA. The first variable identifies the period after a raid and mass arrest that took place on March 29, 1969, at New Bethel Church (known as the “New Bethel incident”). This involved a rather large-scale confrontation between the RNA and the Detroit Police Department, which resulted in a shooting, standoff, and the single largest arrest of RNA members (approximately 100-200) for conspiracy to commit murder. The second variable identifies the period after a raid, shooting, and arrest that took place on August 18, 1971, at an RNA residence in Jackson, Mississippi, during which time one police officer was killed and 11 members (including the leader at the time) were arrested on charges of murder, assault with a deadly weapon, and “waging war on the State of Mississippi” (Obadele 1995).<sup>18</sup>

While the operationalization of these variables is clear, the impact of these variables on CRA is not. It is possible that overt activity would increase CRA. One would find this done in an effort to gauge the impact of overt activity and to figure out what should be done next. Alternatively, ORA might decrease CRA because it is not needed: why monitor a severely crippled group and waste resources?

Within the ORA literature, the wealth of a community decreases repression because it renders such behavior unnecessary. In line with existing literature, I attempt to gauge economic development by considering quartiles of median family income within the neighborhood in question. This indicator was obtained from the commissioned demographic profile identified earlier (TALUS 1968; City of Detroit 1971).

To measure challenges (dissident activity), I again use information from the Red Squad file. Within the larger effort, I coded the following characteristics:

- the activity undertaken by RNA members (e.g., business meetings, fund-raising, food shopping, shooting practice, riots, being at home, demonstrations, social gatherings, political education courses, petitions, speeches, mock trials, and rallies);
- the identity of specific individuals attending events;
- the approximate number of individuals in attendance at each event;
- the geographic location of the activity—by street, longitude, and latitude;
- the date—by day, month, and year; and
- the time—by hour and minute.

From this database, four indicators of challenge were created: the total number of RNA actions undertaken in a particular neighborhood, measured contemporaneously

18. The Red Squad file provided more information on overt activities. As a result, I was not able to construct an events-based database comparable to the information available on covert activity. I was able to use available information within the records as well as anecdotal information to identify two rather large ORA events that appeared to be the most important in the RNA case.

(variable 1); a one-month lag of this measure (variable 2); the mean of all RNA activities in contiguous neighborhoods, measured contemporaneously (variable 3); and a one-month lag of this measure (variable 4). In total, 763 events of RNA activity (including protests, mock trials, meetings, and political education courses) were identified in twenty-six different neighborhoods.

To assess challengers, two variables were used: one created from the Red Squad file (real) and one from the commissioned report (imagined). First, I consider the number of RNA members who lived in a particular neighborhood. According to the database, 208 RNA residences existed within thirty-six different neighborhoods throughout the time period examined.<sup>19</sup> Second, in an effort to capture the dominant profile characteristic applied during the campaign, I converted the percentage of the population that was black within a neighborhood (available within the TALUS report) into quartiles. Here, quartile 1 includes neighborhoods where the percentage of blacks was less than or equal to 25 percent, quartile 2 includes neighborhoods where the percentage of blacks was greater than or equal to 26 percent but less than 50 percent, quartile 3 includes neighborhoods where the percentage of blacks was greater than 50 percent but less than or equal to 75 percent, and quartile 4 includes neighborhoods where the percentage of blacks was greater than 75 percent.

*Method.* As I contemplated analyzing causal relationships, I was sensitive to the fact that the dependent variable was an event count. In addition, I was also sensitive to the fact that with data on forty-nine neighborhoods over a span of sixty-four months (total  $N = 3,136$ ), this data set was comparable to the cross-national, time-series databases used within comparative studies of ORA, in which the nation-year was the unit of analysis (e.g., Hibbs 1973; Poe and Tate 1994; Davenport 1995). Given the data structure, this study relies on a variant of negative binomial maximum likelihood regression (Long 1997), which was specifically created to deal with panel data—in particular, the “xtnbreg” command in STATA (STATA 2001, 386-94).<sup>20</sup> The equation is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Covert Repressive Action} = & \text{constant} + b1(\text{dissident activity}) \\ & + b2(\text{lagged activity}) + b3(\text{mean of contiguous dissident activity}) \\ & + b4(\text{lagged covert activity}) + b5(\text{contiguous covert activity}) \\ & + b6(\text{New Bethel incident}) + b7(\text{Mississippi incident}) \\ & + b8(\text{median family income}) + b9(\text{RNA members in residence}) \\ & + b10(\text{percentage of blacks in neighborhood}) + \text{error.} \end{aligned}$$

To allow for the investigation of political “profiling” based on race, I also parse the database into quartiles and reestimate relationships. Although this approach deviates from much of the literature on ORA that has come to rely on some form of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (e.g., Hibbs 1973; Poe and Tate 1994; Davenport

19. The number of addresses assigned to each neighborhood is the same across the full time period for I have not yet pinpointed (on a monthly basis) which individuals were and were not active members in the organization. Within future research, I am exploring this spatial dimension more intensely (e.g., employing street addresses and the Geographic Information System [GIS]).

20. Likelihood ratio tests were used to determine the appropriateness of the technique.

1995), in line with research by G. King (1989) and Krain (1997), I believe that the procedure adopted here is valid.

## THE FUNDAMENTALS OF COVERT REPRESSION

To begin the analysis of covert activity, I follow in the tradition of the overt repression literature by pooling all observations and regressing the different measures of dissent, lagged repressive action, income, RNA residential concentration, and the percentage of African Americans in a neighborhood on the dependent variable. When estimated in this manner (Table 1, column 1),<sup>21</sup> the model reveals some interesting results.

Significantly deviating from the research on overt repressive action, CRA was not influenced by when and where dissent took place (either contemporaneously, delayed by one month, or within surrounding neighborhoods). While CRA did not respond to dissent, however, it did respond to dissidents. According to the results, the number of RNA members in residence within a neighborhood increases the amount of physical and electronic surveillance directed against the RNA. Evidently, it did not matter what dissidents did with regard to the application of wiretaps, mail openings, and tails but only where they were located.

Even more important (as gauged by the incident rate ratio), CRA was influenced by the behavior of repressive agents. As found, prior covert action in the same locale as well as contiguous behavior increased covert activity. Authorities were led to engage in CRA where they had done so before and nearby to other repressive action. Interestingly, large-scale ORA was found to decrease the application of CRA. When efforts were taken, which likely significantly hindered the Republic of New Africa (e.g., raids as well as the mass arrests at New Bethel and in Mississippi), authorities decreased the amount of covert behavior directed against the dissident organization.

Results also disclose that the application of CRA was influenced by income and race. Specifically, it is found that wealthy neighborhoods were less prone to be put under physical and electronic surveillance as authorities confronted the RNA. In addition, the number of blacks within a neighborhood decreased the amount of covert activity applied. This suggests that target-rich environments (which could potentially lead to extensive costs being extended) generally resulted in a diminished effort on behalf of authorities.

### COVERT ACTIVITY AGAINST ETHNIC TARGETS

Up to this point (and similar to existing literature on ORA), limited attention has been given to the fact that costs and benefits for repressive activity would be perceived distinctly across contexts and that causal relationships might vary across territorial jurisdictions (in this case, neighborhoods). Within the RNA case, however, I would

21. The particular variant of the negative binomial regression for the cross-sectional time series that I employed (“xtnbreg”) does not report conventional goodness-of-fit measures such as  $R^2$  or even pseudo- $R^2$ . Consequently, I focus attention on statistical significance and causal direction.

TABLE 1  
Explaining Covert Repression, by Neighborhood-Months (Negative Binomial Regression)

	Full Model					
	≤ 25 Percent	≥ 26 Percent to ≤ 50 Percent	≥ 51 Percent to ≤ 75 Percent	≥ 76 Percent		
Dissent	0.01 (0.02)	0.18 (0.26)	0.16 (0.06)** [1.18]	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.02)	
Dissent lagged	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.27)	-0.25 (0.10)** [0.77]	0.06 (0.04)	0.02 (0.02)	
Dissent contiguous	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.13)	-0.43 (0.08)** [0.64]	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.06)	
Number of RNA homes	0.06 (0.01)** [1.06]	0.36 (0.05)** [1.44]	0.12 (0.12)	0.02 (0.01)	0.06 (0.01)** [0.32]	
Covert activity lagged	0.02 (0.00)** [1.02]	0.16 (0.04)** [1.18]	0.05 (0.00)** [1.05]	0.01 (0.00)* [1.01]	0.04 (0.00)** [1.04]	
Covert activity contiguous	0.11 (0.04)** [1.11]	0.00 (0.14)	0.08 (0.06)	0.21 (0.09)** [1.24]	0.12 (0.06)	
New Bethel incident	-0.32 (0.11)** [0.72]	0.23 (0.29)	-0.11 (0.16)	-0.39 (0.24)	-0.41 (0.18)	
Mississippi raid	-1.45 (0.20)** [0.23]	-26.03 (369.02)	-0.97 (0.24)** [0.37]	-1.82 (0.61)** [0.16]	-1.13 (0.24)** [0.65]	
Income	-0.00 (0.00)** [0.99]	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)** [1.02]	-0.00 (0.00)** [0.99]	
Percentage nonwhite	-0.00 (0.00)** [0.99]	NA	NA	NA	NA	
Constant	-0.50 (0.32)	-3.26 (0.90)	0.09 (0.88)	-0.04 (1.94)	-0.04 (1.94)	
<i>n</i>	3,087	1,261	458	521	847	
Neighborhoods	49	27	13	14	16	

NOTE: A random effects model was estimated. Values presented as reported coefficients; parameter estimates (standard error) [incident rate ratios]. NA = not available for the particular equation; RNA = Republic of New Africa.  
\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

argue that race plays an important role in the use of CRA—a role very similar to the role of age during the period of campus radicalism in the 1960s within the United States and Western Europe or that played by religion and ethnicity in the current “War on Terrorism.” When one reads about the case, it is hard to ignore the fact that the authorities were predominantly white, “serving” a small white community in the city, and that the RNA was exclusively black, “serving” a large black community in the same place. From available information, it is also readily apparent that those neighborhoods with higher concentrations of African Americans within them would likely be perceived as more “threatening” to existing authorities—being particularly vulnerable to the claims-making efforts of the RNA and having just recently participated in the racially charged riot of 1967. In many respects, it seems fair to suggest that the racial issue was one of, if not, the most important factor underlying the political-dissident interaction (e.g., Fogelson 1968; Locke 1969; Bergeson 1982).

An element such as race is something that is generally missed within a literature in which neither “dissidents” nor “authorities” are given identities outside of the roles/functions that they have as “challenger” and “defenders of the status quo.” Recently, however, a call has been made by Sidney Tarrow (1998) to invoke such issues into investigations of contentious politics. Specifically, he invites researchers to move away from “eventless” (abstract/decontextualized) investigations toward those that are “eventful” (historically and contextually rich). Such an effort makes a great deal of sense in the RNA case because it is possible that our understanding of how and why covert action is applied relates to the targets of such behavior.

To address the possibility that CRA varied according to the percentage of the neighborhood that was African American, I divided the data into quartiles (see Table 2). When the forty-nine neighborhoods of Detroit were divided in this manner, unsurprisingly I found that within principally white areas with the highest mean income (quartile 1), RNA-related protest and covert activity related to the RNA were limited. Actually, it is rather surprising to find that there was any at all. In the second quartile, one can observe a bit more protest and covert action. The highest amount of CRA existed where the percentage of blacks was between 51 and 75 percent of the neighborhood (quartile 3). This quartile also had the largest single number of RNA members in residence at one time (tied with the next quartile at twenty-seven), as well as the highest single value of contiguous covert activity. Within black neighborhoods (in the fourth quartile), RNA-related contentious behavior was at its highest level. Here, one finds the largest number of dissident events and the highest concentration of members’ homes (in both the highest single value [tied with the third quartile] as well as the overall mean of the period). In addition, one finds the largest amount of contiguous dissident activity (in both the highest single value and mean of the period), the largest amount of contiguous covert action (considering only the mean), and smallest mean income. CRA does not generally follow dissident activity, but it does follow dissidents. How does this variation influence the model applied earlier? This is explored below.

Reestimating the model by quartile (Table 1, columns 2-5), the empirical findings reveal patterns that are generally different from the pooled analysis.



TABLE 2  
 Understanding the Varied Behavioral Characteristics of Detroit, by Ethnicity

<i>Characteristics of Interest</i>	<i>Percentage of Population Black</i>			
	<i>Quartile 1: ≤ 25 Percent (n = 1,288)</i>	<i>Quartile 2: ≥ 26 Percent to ≤ 50 (n = 464)</i>	<i>Quartile 3: ≥ 51 Percent to ≤ 75 Percent (n = 528)</i>	<i>Quartile 4: ≥ 76 Percent (n = 856)</i>
Dissident activity	0.01; 0; 3	0.09; 0; 6	0.33; 0; 17	0.52; 0; 24
Contiguous dissident activity	-0.27; -1.14; 3.63	-0.05; -1.03; 4.15	0.13; -1.14; 5.95	0.40; -1.03; 4.84
Covert activity	0.13; 0; 13	0.54; 0; 30	1.78; 0; 104	1.27; 0; 66
Contiguous covert activity	-0.29; -1.09; 3.32	-0.03; -1.01; 3.91	0.13; -0.91; 4.29	0.50; -0.91; 5.13
Members' homes	1.08; 0; 9	2.81; 0; 11	5; 1; 27	9.30; 0; 27
Average income (U.S. dollars)	7,613; 3,900; 10,150	6,719; 3,110; 10,310	6,604; 3,970; 11,630	6,172; 2,620; 8,340
Examples of relevant neighborhoods	Baby Creek, Denby, Warrendale	Cass, Mt. Elliot, State Fair	Cadillac, Indian Village, Mackenzie	Algonquin, Center, Lawton, Mack

NOTE: Values are presented (in order) as follows: mean for time period; lowest value; highest value.

Within neighborhoods where the percentage of the black population was less than 26 percent, authorities only responded to the number of RNA homes and prior covert activity, both of which had a positive influence on the likelihood that CRA would be used. When potential targets were fewer in number, authorities restricted covert activity to hard and previous targets.

Within neighborhoods where the black population was slightly larger (i.e., where the percentage is between 26 and 50 percent), authorities responded to dissent as well as overt and covert behavior. For instance, results disclose that contemporaneous dissent increased CRA—maintaining the largest influence in the model (again gauged by the incident rate ratio). The influence is short-lived, however, as lagged dissent tends to decrease repressive behavior. This likely reflects the fact that protest locales shifted over time. Again, prior CRA increased contemporaneous activity. In fact, the incident rate ratio for this variable reveals that while less important than contemporaneous protest, it was more important than either lagged or contiguous dissent—repression tended to stay put after it had been applied, regardless of whether protest continued at this locale. Finally, and consistent with the full model, the Mississippi raid decreased the amount of CRA—albeit with a relatively small influence on the dependent variable.

Within locales where the African American population was greater than or equal to 51 percent but less than or equal to 75 percent, dissident behavior was not deemed relevant at all. Contiguous and lagged covert repression were found to increase contemporaneous behavior—again revealing that authorities using covert action were more likely to “chase” themselves, with contiguous activity wielding the greatest explanatory weight within the model. Similar to the full model and the previous quartile, the raid in Mississippi again decreased CRA. Interestingly, income decreased covert repressive activity when the number of potential targets (as defined by race) was increased; authorities thus sorted the relevant group according to income—the wealthiest of the blacks were spared covert action, while the poorest were targeted.

When the number of African Americans was greater than 76 percent and the number of potential targets was at their highest level, the explanatory model looks quite similar to the previous quartile: lagged CRA had a positive influence on covert activity, while the raid in Mississippi and income decreased its application. The only difference exists with reference to the number of RNA homes. As found, when confronted with a large number of potential targets within a neighborhood, authorities used explicit involvement with the dissident organization as a means to select targets. Participation is less significant than lagged CRA (as gauged by the incident rate ratio), and thus it is more important where CRA has been used before than where an RNA member lived; nevertheless, involvement was an important factor in influencing authorities.

## CONCLUSION

The present study attempts to improve our understanding of state repression by considering CRA. This form of state behavior is perhaps the most frequently used by political authorities against those within their territorial jurisdiction, and it is the most

invasive of citizens' lives, extending into where they sleep, worship, meet, work, and so forth. At the same time, this form of state behavior is also the least well understood. Indeed, unlike overt activity, CRA has never been rigorously analyzed. Using a new database on U.S. domestic intelligence activity applied against a Black Nationalist organization during the 1960s and 1970s (the Republic of New Africa), there are several lessons that could be drawn from this research.

First, we have learned that CRA is comprehensible within a framework that includes insights from both quantitative literature on overt repressive activity as well as qualitative literature on covert action. Both are useful, but it is clear that more effort needs to be taken to understand the latter since the explanatory model that was developed from this synthesis was only able to account for moderate levels of variation within the dependent variable.

Second, we have learned that any approach that characterizes repression as a series of isolated events in space, time, and context should be treated as suspect. This study reveals that covert repression is enacted by specific authorities, against specific subsets of a population, in a specific social-geographic space. While pursuing the Republic of New Africa, for example, it was clear that not all parts of Detroit were targeted; rather, particular sections were highlighted (those deemed "threatening"). Far too little effort has been spent discussing the importance of place as well as diffusion across space within domestic conflict situations. It is clear that this must be explored further because our research must begin to address the complex realities that one sees within relevant sociopolitical phenomena.

One of the most important keys to improving our comprehension of covert (as well as overt) repression appears to reside in better identifying the underlying logic of the repressive agents themselves, identifying "benefits" as well as "costs" and placing these actors into diverse contexts. For my case, the answer rested in understanding white agents involved in Red Squad activity and assessing their relationship to the RNA, blacks in general, and the rest of the white community in Detroit. This is something not frequently addressed within a literature that tends to shy away from pinpointing perpetrators and one that is generally more interested in investigating events or conditions applied across a wide geographic area without disaggregating the spatial domain in question. Upon reflection, however, this approach is quite unreasonable for no one would assume that in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, that New York would see the same type of overt or covert activity against diverse social movement organizations and/or citizens as that observed in Milwaukee or San Diego. Indeed, existing research on state repression tends to characterize events as something of an agentless enterprise where compelled by large macroforces; things just happen. We can no longer treat repression as actorless and devoid of context; as the present study reveals (and as the September 11 situation compels us to see almost daily), the "who," the "where," and the "when" are essential to understanding the "why."

Following the suggestion made above, this study also leads me to recommend that further research should focus more on the targets of repressive activity. Without such information, we cannot begin to understand the logic behind CRA or its impact on society. For example, within the post-September 11 context in the United States, by not paying attention to the target of covert behavior, we would be unable to determine

the degree to which individuals of Arab descent would be targeted relative to other groups and how long the targeting would persist, whether other individuals who approximated the targeted group would be subject to investigation (i.e., all “others” who fit the physical characteristics: Latinos, light-skinned blacks, etc.), and if covert activity worked (i.e., if it led to arrests and diminished terrorism undertaken by the relevant dissident organizations). Without this information, we would be unable to identify what actually led to the imposition of CRA in the first place (e.g., speech, association, and/or action). This last point is particularly important for it may be the case that individual-level activities better account for variation in CRA than the more group-level factors highlighted within this article.

The issues identified here are by no means marginal in importance to those who study (or are subject to) coercive forms of state power and those interested in democracy. As but one example, in a recent *New York Times* article by David Johnston and Don Van Natta (2001), it was noted that “some officials are now saying they need broader authority to conduct surveillance of potential terrorists, no matter where they are” (e.g., homes, religious institutions, meeting places); these are now no longer conversations but actual government policies. This raises important issues about freedom of speech, assembly, and so forth. Authorities are suggesting that state power should be extended into diverse areas throughout society, without clear criteria for initiation or withdrawal. Unless we begin to direct attention to such matters, however, we will be left without a clear understanding of how wide a net is cast over society in the search for “challengers,” how long such a net is cast, and what is caught within this net.

Disclosure of such activity is never an easy matter. In the RNA case, Red Squad files were released only after a series of media reports and diverse individuals brought cases against the state (Capos 1981). The files used within this study are important because they leave us with a decent understanding of what happened, but unfortunately, this disclosure took place after about twenty to twenty-five years. While this is too late to address any abuses that existed in Detroit at the time (on both sides), it does prompt us to be more concerned with such issues in the current context. It is hoped that we will have a greater commitment to monitor and investigate covert repressive activity in the present as well as to understand what it means for the state, the challengers (both real and imagined), and the everyday citizens who all too frequently end up being caught between the two.

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