



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 11, 2011

Police, FBI Surround Peace Activists in Church

When a police SWAT team and an FBI anti-terrorism squad arrive in force at a local church, people might understandably be alarmed. They might reasonably suspect it is in response to some imminent and mortal danger — a bomb threat, perhaps, or an international terrorist with an automatic weapon, holding a prayer meeting hostage.

But [law enforcement's visit to a church in Memphis](#) on Tuesday of this week was nothing like that at all. The police and the FBI unit surrounded a church where antiwar activists were inside, filling out Freedom of Information forms to find out if the FBI or local police were keeping them under surveillance and monitoring their activities. They got their answer in prompt and unexpected fashion.



As reported in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 15 to 20 peace activists were in the First Congregational Church, where the Mid-South Peace and Justice Center rents an office. Three members of the FBI's local Joint Terrorism Task Force were the first law enforcement contingent to arrive on the scene, followed by Memphis Police Department patrol cars and members of the department's TACT (for Tactical Apprehension Containment Team) in unmarked black SUVs. The police surrounded the church, while the TACT unit drove slowly through the parking lot. That, not surprisingly, got the attention of those inside and a group of them went out to do a little investigating of their own. The *Commercial Appeal* quoted the following exchange between Jacob Flowers, executive director of the Peace and Justice Center, and Memphis Police Lieutenant Ernest Greenleaf, who was with the TACT unit:

"Can you tell me why you're here?" asked Flowers.

"We're just here to make sure nobody bothers y'all," Greenleaf replied.

A press release promoting the event said: "Demand an end to FBI harassment of peace, anti-war, solidarity activists.... Who else is being watched by 'the thought police?'"

Police director Larry Godwin told the Memphis paper the police were under the impression the gathering was going to be outdoors and that it is routine procedure to send police to keep an eye on demonstrations, both to protect the demonstrators and keep the peace. The officers were supposed to drive through the area and, if there were no problems, move on, he said.

"The next thing we know we've got four or five officers sitting down there. They weren't supposed to do that," Godwin told the paper. Both Godwin and FBI spokesman Joel Siskovic said they knew of no threats against the antiwar group and both told reporters the Memphis Police and FBI responses were not coordinated. Siskovic told the paper that the three Joint Terrorism Task Force agents were there for security, citing an increase in violence "against people expressing their opinions."



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"The last thing we wanted to do was to create some sort of misimpression that they're under investigation," he said. People might, indeed, get that "misimpression" when the FBI arrives to check out a gathering of peace activists. Even if there had been a threat of violence against "people expressing their opinions," isn't that a local police matter? Is the FBI a national police force, after all? And if it really is routine for the Memphis police to send a SWAT (or TACT) team every time a group of activists have an event, you might wonder how they respond to a bank robbery or a hostage crisis. Flowers maintained the response was anything but routine and was instead a case of police intimidation and surveillance.

"Never (before) have we encountered the situation where we've had eight to 10 marked and unmarked police cars, including tactical units, sitting there monitoring us," he told the *Commercial Appeal*.

"We find it too coincidental."



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