

# If An Agent Knocks - Federal Investigators And Your Rights

## If an Agent Knocks

### Federal Investigators and Your Rights

Center for Constitutional Rights

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People opposing U.S. policies in Central America, giving sanctuary to refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador, struggling for Black liberation, and against nuclear weapons, are today more than ever likely to receive visits from FBI agents or other federal investigators. Increasingly, agents are also visiting the familist, friends, and employers of these activists.

This pamphlet is designed to answer the most frequent questions asked by people and groups experiencing government scrutiny, and to help them develop practical responses.

#### What is Political Intelligence?

Political intelligence is information collected by the government about individuals and groups. Files secure under the Freedom of Information Act disclose that government officials have long been interested in all forms of data. Information gathered by government agents ranges from the most personal data about sexual liaisons and preferences to estimates of the strength of groups opposing U.S. policies. Over the years, groups and individuals have developed various ways of limiting the collection of information and preventing such intelligence gathering from harming their work.

#### Do I have to talk to the FBI?

No. The FBI does not have the authority to make anyone answer questions (other than name and address [see [errata](#)]), to permit a search without a warrant, or to otherwise cooperate with an investigation. Agents are usually lawyers, and they are always trained as investigators; they have learned the power of persuasion, the ability to make a person feel scared, guilty, or impolite for refusing their requests for information. So remember, they have no legal authority to force people to do anything -- unless they have obtained an arrest or search warrant. Even when agents do have warrants, you still don't have to answer their question.

#### Under what laws do the agents operate?

In 1976, FBI guidelines regulating the investigation of political activities were issued by Attorney General Edward H. Levi. Criticized by liberals and conservatives alike, the guidelines were issued in the wake of a [Congressional committee's report](#) of highly questionable activities by the FBI: monitoring the activities of domestic political groups seeking to effect change.

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