

F.B.I. Says at Least 7 Agents Attended Gatherings Displaying Racist Paraphernalia

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The Federal Bureau of Investigation said today that at least seven agents had attended annual "Good Ol' Boys Roundups" in recent years and that at least one was among the 300 law-enforcement officers who attended the gathering this year in the Tennessee mountains, where racist paraphernalia was displayed and sold.

The three-day gathering, organized by a retired agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, was attended by Federal, state and local law-enforcement officers, including agents from the firearms bureau, Government officials said.

In addition to barbecues and beer, the event reportedly featured vendors' selling T-shirts showing the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was murdered in Memphis in 1968, in the crosshairs of a gunsight and other racist signs, symbols and messages like hunting licenses for "niggers."

A videotape of the event shows posted signs, including one that read, "Nigger Checkpoint," and another with a red slash signifying "no" drawn through a caricature of a black face.

The Director of the F.B.I., Louis J. Freeh said today: "The racist activities reported to be part of the Good Ol' Boys Roundup are repugnant. Anyone who attended this event with knowledge of any racist overtones and themes should reconsider whether they are suited to a career in law enforcement."

Mr. Freeh added that the Inspector General of the Justice Department would pursue the case.

That inquiry is part of a widening search by several agencies for Federal law-enforcement officers suspected of having participated in the gathering. The investigations could not occur at a worse time for the F.B.I. and the firearms agency.

Congress is holding hearings this week on how the agencies handled the siege of the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Tex., in 1993 that ended in a fire that killed about 80 members of the group and a confrontation in 1992 at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in which F.B.I. agents shot and killed the wife and son of a white separatist wanted on firearms charges.

The Senate Judiciary Committee has scheduled a hearing for Friday on the attendance of Federal law-enforcement agents at the gathering, which ran from May 18 to May 20 near Ocoee, a small town in the Appalachian foothills 30 miles east of Chattanooga. The gathering was a well-known event in the firearms bureau and it has been organized every year since 1979 by the former agent, Gene Rightmyer.

The event this year was taped by a member of a paramilitary group, the Alabama Minutemen, who documented the racist paraphernalia with the intent of embarrassing the firearms bureau. Such groups fault the firearms agency for the Branch Davidian deaths, and they have gained support from groups like the National Rifle Association.

The F.B.I. and the firearms agency have been accused of institutional racism by their own agents. A Federal discrimination suit by black agents of the firearms bureau documents the posting of a "nigger hunting license" and a Ku Klux Klan business card on a bulletin board in the field office of the agency in Oklahoma City. Black firearms bureau agents in Chicago said they had found a picture of the Rev. Jesse Jackson defaced with the words "jungle bunny" taped near a copying machine.

The F.B.I. under J. Edgar Hoover, who led the agency for 48 years until he died in 1972, was almost entirely an all-white all-male agency, and change came slowly. The bureau moved in 1992 to settle a suit by black agents that contended the bureau had systemic racism. Among the accounts that black F.B.I. agents reported was that of Donald Rochon, who arrived at his office in Omaha 10 years ago to find an ape's face taped on a desktop photograph of his son.

A spokesman for the Justice Department, John Russell, said Federal employees found to have attended the roundup in Tennessee could be subject to discipline like letters of reprimand and dismissals. Whether they can be accused of violating Federal law is a murky question. The law prohibits "discriminatory conduct," and it prohibits the illegal use of Government equipment and buildings.

The telephone number of the Greenville, S.C., office of the firearms bureau appears on the invitation to the roundup this year as a point of contact for inquiries. The organizer of the gathering, Mr. Rightmyer, once worked at that office.

Several Government officials said the problem with law-enforcement agents' attending the event was less a matter of Federal law than of simple decency.

Mr. Russell said Inspector General Michael R. Bromwich was investigating how many Justice Department employees -- including agents of the F.B.I., the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Marshals Service, the Immigration and Naturalization Service and Federal prosecutors -- had attended the event. Others under investigation include agents of the firearms bureau, the Internal Revenue Service, the Customs Service and the Secret Service. Those agencies are under the jurisdiction of Treasury Secretary Robert E. Rubin.

Mr. Rubin said on Monday that the Treasury Department was also mounting a large-scale internal investigation of the gathering. "Law-enforcement officials must demonstrate, in perception and reality, that they are free from bias," he said.

John Magaw, a former Secret Service director who took over the firearms agency in 1993, has said he is working to eliminate racial discrimination in his agency. He said last week that he was appalled at the idea that his agents would attend an openly racist event.