

Bomb Threats against HBCUs: A History of Domestic Terrorism

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The approach of Black History Month this year ignited the simmering bigotry underlying much of American domestic terrorism, with bomb threats sent to at least 17 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) between January 30 and February 1. At last count the number had risen to at least 19 targeted institutions, with most of them recording multiple incidents. These crimes are part of a long history of attacks on institutions that serve the Black community—churches, schools, and civil rights organizations—as well as on the individual men, women, and children associated with these institutions. Violent intimidation directed toward Black Americans has a long and bloody history, and recent events suggest that these acts have spawned not only a hateful legacy, but also a current, ongoing threat to the physical safety and emotional well-being of all Black Americans. Whether or not such threats indicate the presence of explosives on campuses, they are intended to terrorize, intimidate, and harass students, faculty, and staff.

The institution of chattel bondage had as its foundation physical violence or the threat of it against enslaved women, men, and children. After the Civil War, whites (especially but not exclusively those in the South) sought to replace the legal system of slavery with a form of social and legal control that relied on terrorism directed toward Black voters, school children and teachers, political activists, and anyone whose success or even mere demeanor appeared to threaten the imperatives of white supremacy. White vigilantes burned churches and schoolhouses in an effort to eliminate Black community centers and institutions of faith and formal education. Whites intended that lynching and the public burning and dismemberment of Black men and women and other horrific acts of violence should serve as a warning to all those who aspired to an education or sought to exercise their newly won rights as American citizens according to the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. Well into the 20th century throughout the United States, white Americans rioted to protest Blacks' attempts to integrate whites-only neighborhoods and public spaces, and burned and shot at places where Black activists gathered.

Today, the domestic terrorists issuing bomb threats against HBCUs hide behind the cloak of anonymity to instill fear in everyone connected with these institutions. The threats disrupt classes, upend the rhythm of the semester, and wreak havoc with the routines of everyday college life. Directed at pillars of Black higher education, the threats strike at the heart not only of the aspirations of Black students and the work of Black faculty and staff, but also at the ideal of higher education itself. The AHA condemns this latest in a centuries-old series of assaults on Black Americans and on the educational institutions that are integral to a diverse, free, informed, and open society.