

J. Edgar Hoover and the American Civil Rights Movement

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Introduction

In this essay I contend that the government of the United States allowed its major federal law enforcement agency to conduct a war against its own black citizens during the period 1954 -1964. The government agency was the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the tactics employed included blackmail, smear campaigns, 'dirty tricks', and ultimately, armed attacks. In the process of often directing the 'white backlash' against perceived black militancy, the FBI and its Director, J. Edgar Hoover, prospered through organizational expansion and simultaneously established the most extensive system of covert domestic surveillance the United States has ever seen. When the Bureau of Investigation (its name did not change to FBI until 1935) was established in 1908, it was 'a minor division of a relatively minor federal department subject to the direct supervision of the attorney general'. Sixty years later the FBI was 'ubiquitous' with an all-powerful Director who had for half a century conducted an 'invisible witch-hunting campaign using guilt by association and far reaching innuendo

Hoover 'obsessively' used the vast resources of the FBI against black groups across the political spectrum, from the NAACP to the Black Panther Party. His justification was that African-Americans who objected to segregation were either 'communists' or susceptible to communist influence. Given Hoover's well-documented antipathy toward black people, which was typical of a man of his white, conservative, Southern upbringing, it is much more likely that his motivation was simply racism. Nevertheless, all of this was to have grave implications for the civil rights movement

and its leaders as they fought for self-determination and an end to segregation. Indeed, I maintain that the powerful resources deployed by the FBI and other government agencies against the civil rights substantially delayed the implementation of many major government reforms in racial policy and thus imposed unnecessary protracted suffering on the African-American community.

I shall approach these questions by briefly examining certain events in the history of the civil rights movement which focus on the emergence of Martin Luther King as a leader, and look at some instances of FBI activities designed to sabotage and undermine the work of King and the movement. I focus on the late 1950s and early 1960s, described as the 'classic phase of black protest', as these were the years when the movement achieved some of its greatest gains and also the period when the FBI war intensified. I shall conclude by examining the question of whether it was a genuinely held fear of communism and subversion, or a more fundamental underlying racism (that pervaded white America at the time) that enabled the US government to ignore (or condone) the war the FBI conducted against Black America.

Background

In the post-slavery era in America, it has been said that white power was consolidated around the end of the nineteenth century and that this meant that white America was 'able to shape the society and economy, to decide what would be the rules'. White power was also said to be able to 'reach into the black community itself and shape it'; to decide the aspirations of the black community and even determine the 'means devised to seek these goals'. In other words, despite a cardinal principle of Reconstruction being equality before the law (enshrined in the 14th Amendment in 1866, which conveyed citizenship on all born in the US regardless of race), African Americans still lacked even the most basic forms of

self-determination.

This absence of meaningful economic and political power was exacerbated by what historian Rayford Logan described as, 'the Nadir' in American race relations, in the form of the Jim Crow laws. During the period 1890 - 1910 'every state south of the Mason-Dixon Line established legislation that defined the place of African Americans in Southern society'. These segregation laws were upheld in the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of the Supreme Court in 1896, whereby the doctrine of separate but equal validated the second class citizenship that segregation bestowed on African Americans. Simultaneously a reign of terror and intimidation was unleashed on the black population by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in order to discourage resistance.

It was not until the Second World War that the first dramatic change in the status of black America occurred when, under pressure from civil rights activists, segregation was abandoned in war production industries (but not the armed services). The resultant employment and economic opportunities contributed to a further psychological boost and increased expectations in African-American communities. But, as Jack Bloom observed,

As the economic changes proceeded in the decades of the thirties and forties...racial patterns remained largely unchanged. Blacks were growing more aggressive and impatient, but they entered the decade of the fifties with the old system basically intact

The Emergence of Martin Luther King

The persistence of Jim Crow segregation in the south, combined with growing black aspirations and expectations, was to lead directly to the confrontation that is described by many as a 'crucial turning point' in the black struggle. Mao Zedong is supposed to have once said, "It takes a single spark to start a prairie fire". The

single spark, more than any other, that started the prairie fire of the civil rights movement in America was the day in 1955 that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. In the subsequent Montgomery Bus Boycott 'blacks scored an unequivocal victory over whites. A strategy, a new leadership and a new consciousness were the product of this episode'. The new leader was a young preacher at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, one Martin Luther King Jr.

Initially reluctant to be involved because of other commitments, King eventually agreed to 'hold a meeting at his church which was attended by 70 black leaders'. They resolved to support the boycott called after local NAACP member Rosa Parks had been arrested for not complying with Alabama's segregation laws. From that moment King was, in the eyes of the world, transformed into the pre-eminent leader and symbol of the civil rights, non-violent protest movement. But, as Martin Riches points out, it was 'not just a protest led by a charismatic leader, but rather...it was a mass movement'.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott had come just one year after the *Brown v. Board of Education* judgment of the US Supreme Court that had ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional. This ruling had effectively dispensed with the 'separate but equal' doctrine that had prevailed in the southern education system since 1896. The *Brown* decision had thus set the stage for the Montgomery Bus Boycott as blacks gained new confidence sensing the 'winds of change'. Montgomery was also important in that it represented a departure from the previous NAACP (and Northern/Liberal dominated) strategy of legally challenging segregationist laws. The Montgomery boycott showed that 'southern blacks could be enlisted in their own liberation'.

With the success in Montgomery under his belt, Martin Luther King went on to found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with Rev. Ralph Abernathy and others in 1957. In the following decade the SCLC would become 'the most successful of the modern civil rights organizations in carrying out large scale, well coordinated, and well financed demonstrations'. A mere five years after its creation, the SCLC would begin to be subject to intense surveillance by Hoover's FBI as part of the COMINFIL (communist infiltration) program.

The FBI and the Civil Rights Struggle

In aftermath of the Brown decision and the Montgomery Bust Boycott, President Eisenhower demonstrated a marked reluctance to provide federal support to those seeking to overthrow Jim Crow segregation in the south. Eisenhower's vacillation was in significant part due to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover feeding him reports on the civil rights movement strongly suggesting communist infiltration. In March 1956 the President had asked Hoover for a briefing on 'Racial Tension and Civil Rights'. Hoover told the cabinet that 'delicate situations are aggravated by some overzealous but ill-advised leaders of the NAACP and by the Communist Party' According to O'Reilly,

Eisenhower expected Hoover to explain (not defend) the white South's point of view. For the most part that is what the director did, but his briefing paper indicated that he stood with the segregationists. "The specter of racial intermarriages" and "mixed education" that haunted the south also haunted the FBI.

Martin Riches points out the inconsistency between Hoover's report to Eisenhower and a previous report two years earlier in 1954 provided to the House of Un-American Activities (HUAC). In that report, titled The American Negro in the Communist Party, Hoover stated that because so few 'Negroes' were to be found in the upper

echelons of the American Communist Party it was 'strong evidence that the American Negro is not hoodwinked by these false messiahs'.

From 1956 Hoover's blatant hostility to the civil rights movement would be ingenuously represented as a concern about 'Communist' infiltration and manipulation. Whatever Hoover's motivation, he must have thought his fears confirmed by the emergence of what he perceived as increasingly more radical groups that advocated direct action to confront lingering American racism. The earliest of these groups to emerge from within the civil rights movement was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in North Carolina in April 1960. SNCC had emerged out of a student movement that was composed of a younger generation of blacks, many of who had participated in sit-ins and protests that in the preceding year had confronted segregation in southern schools and colleges.

In the summer of 1961 the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which had been established in 1942, began a new phase in one of the more dramatic actions of the civil rights era with a so-called 'Freedom Ride'. In May thirteen blacks and whites left Washington on a bus trip south to challenge segregation. The idea, according to CORE's founder and director James Farmer, was to 'provoke the southern authorities into arresting us and thereby prod the Justice Department into enforcing the law of the land'. On Mothers Day 1961 one bus was firebombed near Anniston, Alabama and other Freedom Riders were brutally attacked and bashed in Anniston, Birmingham and Alabama and arrested in Mississippi.

By now both Hoover and the civil rights movement were dealing with a new President. The new Kennedy administration in Washington had sought to prevent the Freedom Ride from going

ahead because it did not suit their political interests or agenda. When they were unable to prevent the Freedom Ride the administration called for FBI involvement. J. Edgar Hoover interpreted this to mean merely monitoring and surveillance that did nothing to assist Freedom Riders who were terrorized, brutally assaulted and firebombed. O'Reilly observed that the violence in Birmingham might have been averted if the FBI had acted on extensive prior intelligence from a Ku Klux Klan informer who had alerted the FBI about collusion between the Klan and the city's police officials. He says,

Aware of the planned violence weeks in advance, the FBI did nothing to stop it and had actually given the Birmingham police details regarding the Freedom Rider's schedule, knowing full well that at least one law enforcement officer relayed everything to the Klan.

The next significant flash-point in the struggle was in Birmingham, Alabama in April 1963, where King and the SCLC joined forces with an old King colleague, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and his Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). Together they sought to confront the city's rigid segregation laws and 'the man who aggressively led its defense, infamous Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor'. When King was arrested and placed in solitary confinement it not only sparked bigger demonstrations, but also prompted a phone call from President Kennedy to King's wife Coretta expressing concern. "Bull" Connor countered the demonstrators with police dogs, fire hoses and batons; scenes which were televised throughout the world. The impact of these images shocked America and Kennedy 'went on television to declare...that racial discrimination and injustice was a serious and profound moral evil'. He also announced that he would ask Congress to pass a Civil Rights Act, nevertheless his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, on October 10 1963 would covertly approve FBI technical surveillance on Martin Luther King's

residence and offices of the SCLC. This was a move that perfectly illustrated the ambiguity in Kennedy administration policy on civil rights.

King's next move was to support an idea by A. Philip Randolph to conduct a March on Washington. The march went ahead on 28th August 1963 and an estimated 250,000 people heard Martin Luther King deliver his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. The success of the March on Washington 'convinced Hoover that the civil rights movement would not wither away on its own, that he would have to smash it before it irreparably damaged his America'. Before the March on Washington, Hoover had requested from the FBI's Domestic Intelligence Division, a report on communist attempts to infiltrate the civil rights movement. On 23rd August the report was delivered to Hoover. It basically dismissed any notions of communist involvement in the movement.

Hoover's reaction was quite extraordinary and telling. According to O'Reilly, Hoover rejected outright the report's premise 'that Communist influence was infinitesimal', and simply refused to speak to the director of the Domestic Intelligence Division until a new report was produced. This new report stated 'The Director is correct. We were completely wrong...the Communist Party USA does wield substantial influence over Negroes which one day could become decisive'.

Thus here is a clear instance of Hoover's racial paranoia prevailing over the reality expressed in the original FBI report. Furthermore, at this point the FBI director had already begun his notorious campaign against Martin Luther King. Hoover's anger with King stemmed from a November 1962 article in the New York Times in which King was critical of FBI agents in the South.

Hoover's response was to describe King to journalists as, "the most notorious liar in the country", and conduct an intensive surveillance and 'dirty tricks' campaign against King until the day King was assassinated in Memphis. This campaign is said to have uncovered evidence of sexual impropriety on King's part, which only served to spur Hoover on. The FBI director distributed tape transcripts and other material derogatory of King to President Johnson and influential pro-segregationist members of Congress. In 1964 when King was invited to meet the Pope, Hoover approached his friend Cardinal Spellman and tried to get the Vatican to withdraw the invitation and was said to be "astonished" when the Pope did not accept his advice. He also went to the extent of instructing the FBI's overseas based agents to brief US embassies about 'the kind of guy' Hoover believed King to be.

Many historians have described the venom of Hoover's campaign against King, but only O'Reilly describes Hoover's motivation as 'racist'. Former senior FBI official, Cartha "Deke" DeLoach strongly refutes this and paints a more grandfatherly portrait of a director who was so concerned about the lack of black FBI agents that he sent DeLoach to lecture at law schools for the express purpose of attracting black agents. DeLoach also makes the bold assertion that Hoover was a man 'remarkably free of such prejudices'. This picture of "Deke" DeLoach's does not ring true in the face of overwhelming evidence offered by Kenneth O'Reilly and others which clearly demonstrates Hoover's antipathy to blacks over five decades.

Meanwhile, in Dallas on 22nd November 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated and the civil rights movement were initially concerned about the new President, Lyndon Baines Johnson, given that 'many in the North viewed him as a vulgar Texan from the region of the Deep South'. Johnson appeased many of those

concerned when he oversaw passage of the Civil Rights Act 1964, which banned segregation in all public facilities in America. But the passing of the Act did not remove the substantial barriers that still remained in hard-core white racist regimes in the south in states such as Mississippi and Alabama. Violence against civil rights activists in the south continued unabated. Then in June 1964, three student workers on the Mississippi Summer Project registering black voters disappeared and were later found murdered. Because two of the dead were young, white Northerners the FBI dispatched 150 agents to work on the case. Martin Riches observes,

Prior to the disappearance of (the three students) there had been over 150 cases of violence and intimidation against black civil rights workers and local residents who supported the movement. In none of these cases was there any action from the federal authorities.

John Lewis of SNCC said, "It's a shame that national concern is aroused only after two white boys are missing". Nevertheless, Hoover remained more interested in trying to discredit King and the civil rights movement. The FBI director blandly asserted, "We don't guard anybody. We are fact-finders. The FBI can't wet-nurse everybody who goes down and tries to reform or educate the Negroes in the South."

King meanwhile was heading for Selma, Alabama, where on 7th March 1965 civil rights marchers had been clubbed and tear gassed by mounted police in an incident that came to be known as 'Bloody Sunday'. The violence of that incident had angered many of the SNCC activists who were eager to retaliate, and when King flew in from Atlanta and said he wanted to lead only a 'symbolic march' and avoid confrontation, the young activists of SNCC were scornful. This was the beginning for many in the movement of a disillusionment with King's preferred tactic of Gandhian non-violence, and the following years saw the emergence of more

radical voices and groups advocating a more direct form of political confrontation. King himself gradually showed signs of considering more radical actions as he became interested in the anti-Vietnam war movement and he called on President Johnson to 'Stop the bombing of North Vietnam and seek negotiations with the Viet Cong' As O'Reilly noted,

It was one thing to challenge Bull Connor and the City of Birmingham or J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation; quite another to challenge Lyndon Johnson and the United States.

Hoover's response was to further expand and intensify surveillance and harassment of civil rights activists. The emergence of more radical groups such as the Black Panther Party gave new credence to Hoover's assertions of communist infiltration of Black America in the minds of an increasingly paranoid white America. The FBI was to go on to subvert the civil rights movement till the day King was assassinated in Memphis and beyond. Indeed, when J. Edgar Hoover died in office on May 2 1972, the truth of the extent of his domestic surveillance program and subversion of the civil rights movement was slowly beginning to be revealed.

Conclusion

Kenneth O'Reilly puts it bluntly; "J. Edgar Hoover had always been a racist". The society he was born into and the world he inhabited as a child and an adult was one where white supremacy was taken for granted. Hoover carried these notions with him throughout his life, and only adjusted his expression of them when it was politically advantageous to him. Thus, as attitudes begin to change in America at the peak of the civil rights movement, Hoover disingenuously claims his harassment and surveillance of black civil rights groups is part of the FBI's hunt for 'communists'.

Hoover biographer Anthony Summers goes so far as to suggest

that Hoover's antipathy to Blacks was due to him having black blood. He bases this assertion primarily on a comment by Gore Vidal suggesting Hoover was a mulatto. But given the tendency by Summers to focus on sensationalist claims with minimal or unreliable documentation throughout his book, we should treat his assertion with caution, no matter how appealing such a theory might be. Instead, the reluctance of Hoover to allow the FBI to become involved in civil rights issues; the apparent unwillingness to upset the white supremacist status-quo in the South; The FBI's own effectively segregationist employment policies; and Hoover's obsessive pursuit of Martin Luther King, Paul Robeson and Marcus Garvey and his anxiety about their black male sexual prowess; all point to O'Reilly being correct in his assessment of Hoover as a 'racist'. As even Summers observed,

Edgar's pursuit of Garvey and Robeson was a blueprint for the future. The attempts to establish they were Communists, the use of black stool pigeons as penetration agents, and electronic bugging to snoop on their private lives were all tactics that Edgar would use against King.

But whatever his motivation, Hoover can be said to have had a detrimental effect on race relations and the civil rights movement in America. O'Reilly states,

Because of its antagonistic attitudes and positions, the FBI adversely affected the course of black history in the time of Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. The FBI fed the internal tensions and rivalries among the...civil rights movement, making it harder for the movement to present a united front during the years of urban riots and white backlash.

It has also been suggested that Hoover 'contributed to the rise of a more sophisticated and perhaps more damaging racism as an intractable force in national politics'. If this is the case it seems extraordinary that one man in a system like that of the United States could assemble so much power and then use it ruthlessly, unchecked for almost five decades. Without doubt some of the

greatest losers were members of the civil rights movement, particularly all of those who were harassed by the FBI's massive domestic surveillance program. But the ultimate loser must have been American society where today race remains one of the great-unresolved contradictions of American history.

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