

## The Civil Rights & Black Liberation Movements & COINTELPRO

**Preface:** There is a great deal of information, and a number of excellent curriculum projects and activities on the civil rights movement. More establishment-type lessons tend to focus on telling only a small part of the story and not to present a complete picture of those individuals they do tend to focus on, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. (whose ideas became increasingly radical and internationalist before his assassination) and Rosa Parks (a lifelong militant activist and conscious organizer, not just a tired woman coming home from work).

The references in the film to Dr. King and Malcolm X, to organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party, and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) could provide an opening platform for teaching a deeper, more accurate, and more fundamentally radical history of the civil rights and Black liberation movements. There are a growing number of books, films, academic articles, and websites that could be mined for such a curriculum to be developed. The Freedom Archives would welcome hearing about ways teachers are approaching this in today's classrooms; over time we hope to revise and extend all of the curricular options we've suggested for the film.

In order to focus more directly on content from the film, on the omnipresent and murderous repression visited upon the civil rights and Black liberation movements, as represented by COINTELPRO and all of its many counterparts, the following is a suggestion for one possible approach for this set of lessons.

For these activities, it's very important for you to select from and provide students with sources they can do the assigned research from, such as many sites, books, and articles listed as "Resources" for the film ([http://www.freedomarchives.org/Cointel\\_Resources.html](http://www.freedomarchives.org/Cointel_Resources.html)), especially *COINTELPRO: The Untold Story*, which can be found in PDF format on several sites and whose contributors include a number of the film's participants. It will greatly strengthen the lesson if you (or your school library) are able to acquire multiple copies of *The COINTELPRO Papers*, by film participant Ward Churchill and co-author Jim Vander Wall, from South End Press. They have also written the *FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States*. Don't forget *FBI Secrets: An Agent's Exposé* by M. Wesley Swearingen, South End Press. The Church Committee report would be excellent (see the Resources listing) Gather any additional books or other resources you can on those times, COINTELPRO, the FBI, and leaders—including film participants such as Kathleen Cleaver and Muhammad Ahmad (Max Stanford)—to aid students in their investigations. The site list we provide at the end of this document is far from complete; you should review it in advance and only recommend any you think most helpful.

**1. Explain the three-stage plan for student groups.** Tell students that in this series of activities, each group's assignment will be three-fold. **First** they will learn more about some important African-American organizations (and leading individuals) of the 1960s and 1970s. **Second**, they will deepen their understanding of and investigate the many ways that the FBI's COINTELPRO program of the FBI and related government and police agencies undertook often illegal means to oppose these organizations, "neutralize" their leadership, and frustrate their goals. Third—from what they have learned they will determine whether or not criminal indictments should be brought against the FBI and/or related agencies and, if so, to present, both orally and in writing, a

summary of the charges involved. This can have elements of actual legal process—based on evidence, witness or participant testimony, reports from books, websites, sources, etc.—but it can be loosely and informally organized, rather than be restricted to all the rules of an actual legal proceeding. (Please feel free to adapt and modify these suggestions, and to freely exercise your own creative curriculum- building in order to inspire student involvement and strengthen their learning.)

**2. Orient students to the first task.** Let the class know in some detail about the resources you've assembled and encourage groups to also seek out other sources, whether from the Internet or by other means, including using initiative in finding out more about the impact of COINTELPRO in your local region or state, and the possibility of contacting people who may have experienced it, or were activists during those times. You may want to bring in guest speakers to discuss the civil rights and Black liberation movement in this context.

**3. Before students begin research.** Give students any guidelines for how they might best do and record their research, how individuals might share their findings with the group, overall time frame, time frames for each stage of the assignment, and so on. Suggest that before beginning to do the research, groups should meet and carefully discuss their thoughts about how they will work and roles group members might play.

**4. Introduce main organizations/some possible individuals.** While you can vary this as you choose, we include, following these instructions one possible organization list for students to learn more about, probably with each student group investigating one organization and, as appropriate and as they determine, individuals associated with that group. (You may want add that people could be connected to more than one organization, for various reasons—for example, sometimes a person's ideas changed so they moved to another organization more in line with their new thinking, such as Malcolm X leaving the Nation of Islam to build his own organization—but for this assignment at least individuals are included in connection with the organization they are most frequently identified with—students can decide how best to handle such issues.)

**5. Investigate the investigators.** Now that students have learned more about the six (or more) organizations, have them investigate what is known about how the US government, via the FBI and other agencies, police departments and vigilante groups, moved against the organizations, their leaders, and their goals. You could cite a few examples, such as the effort to brand Martin Luther King, Jr. as a Communist, or, as is seen in the film, the political assassination of Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago.

**6. Remind students of the resources you have on hand or those they could find for themselves from a library or the Internet.** For this assignment they will need to focus on the information that has been released due to the COINTELPRO files from Media, Pennsylvania, other media investigations, and the Church committee, as well as other files, such as those acquired through the Freedom of Information Act, which you may need to briefly explain. Also remind them, if needed, about the uses of an index, ways to do web searches, and other research strategies. Include the fact that the FBI itself has some information from their files on line.

**7. Critical literacy and evaluation of evidence.** Depending on the level of your class, their previous experience, and your own preferences, you could also use this exercise as a way to introduce or reinforce some of the main elements of “critical literacy.” From the old saying about “don’t believe everything you read in the papers” to the modern era where we are deluged with information from many directions via many media, remind them to determine as well as possible the sources of their information, whether or not references are cited, and the possible bias or other limitations of the material they unearth.

*You may want to add that even though it may seem like a lot of information is known about COINTELPRO, there is a lot that is not known, some of it hidden for “national security” or other reasons, some never documented on paper, some perhaps so shocking that its revelation would rock the foundations of the FBI and US government claims related to democratic rights. There is also likely some, such as information that remains hidden in the case of the Omaha 2, that would lead to freedom of wrongfully convicted political prisoners, up to and including Mumia Abu Jamal, Leonard Peltier, and many others. Some students may want to include in their research cases of political prisoners.*

**8. Again, encourage each group to plan how they will conduct the research into the tactics and strategies, means, and methods that were used against these organizations, and how they will divide the tasks.** Add that while the film emphasizes some of the most destructive examples, including assassination, make it clear that these illegal and unconstitutional practices (at that time) included: wiretapping of phones, opening of private mail, spreading false rumors, following and other surveillance of individuals, sending false messages to try to divide people within organizations and divide organizations from each other, infiltration, provocation, and the list goes on. Remind them of the time frame for their investigatory efforts.

**9. Evidence and Accountability.** After groups have collected and analyzed the information, you may want to have the class come up with ways to share what they have found out. Based on their findings, and in whatever format you and they decide works best for the class, have them make well-organized presentations of the evidence. Pose questions about the consequences that those who ordered, planned, and conducted such actions should face. Should they be indicted and charged with crimes? What would different groups or the entire class think might be the most appropriate measures to take about the FBI itself or other implicated agencies or individuals? Should those responsible be held accountable? How?

## Civil Rights & Black Liberation Organizations and People

### Organizations

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)  
Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)  
Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM)  
The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP)  
Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU)

### Individuals (optional for this activity and there are many others)

Martin Luther King, Jr.—SCLC  
el-Hajj Malik El- Shabazz (Malcolm X)—OAAU  
James Forman (SNCC), quoted in film by Kathleen Cleaver: “We will win without a doubt.”  
Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael)—SNCC  
Fannie Lou Hamer (SNCC, also founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party)  
Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (formerly known as H. Rap Brown)—SNCC  
Muhammad Ahmad (formerly known as Max Stanford)—RAM  
Kathleen Cleaver (BPP)  
Fred Hampton (BPP)  
Elmer “Geronimo” Pratt (BPP)  
Assata Shakur (formerly Joanne Chesimard)—BPP/Black Liberation Army

**There are many other possibilities.** For example, some of the other organizations that could be researched include: Deacons for Defense and Justice (mentioned by Elmer “Geronimo” Pratt in the film); National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); The Nation of Islam; The League of Revolutionary Black Workers; The MOVE Organization (many of whose imprisoned members appear in the film’s images of political prisoners). The list of individuals could also extend, including, for example other Black Panther Party leaders such as Eldridge Cleaver, Huey P. Newton, and Bobby Seale, as well as Ella Baker, Julian Bond, Bob Moses, and John Lewis of SNCC, Jesse Jackson and Andrew Young of the SCLC, Elijah Muhammad and Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, and many others.

*There are three women in the short list of individuals. There could be more, although it should be noted that the presence of sexism, both within the movements, and on the part of the FBI, that “leadership” was assumed to be primarily assumed by men. There were, however, many enormously important women leaders in the civil rights movement and the Black liberation struggle. Students could learn more through research about, for example, Septima Clark, Ella Mae Baker, Anne Braden, and gain a more complete understanding of Rosa Parks, and many others. One recent book addresses this issue, as do other books, articles, and studies. It is called *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, edited by Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, New York University Press, 2009.*

## Some Selected Websites That Could Be Helpful

First, make sure to refer students to the many sites related to COINTELPRO that appear in the “Resources” section for these curriculum suggestions:

[http://www.freedomarchives.org/Cointel\\_Resources.html](http://www.freedomarchives.org/Cointel_Resources.html)

Review the following in advance and select for usefulness for your class:

Evolution of a Revolution: contains succinct information on the transition from civil rights to Black liberation, with information, photographs, and video on “two tendencies of Black struggle,” as well as summaries of and links about the early civil rights period, Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, SNCC, RAM, and the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and many prominent leaders

<http://www.zimbio.com/Black+History+Month/articles/69/Evolution+Revolution+Jim+Crow+Civil+Rights> **Please note:** *Some of these “Zimbio” sites seem to have, in addition to good information, Hollywood style gossip and sexist photographs. These are not overtly pornographic but you should go to this and the next two sites in advance and perhaps select and print out just the relevant material.*

The RGB Street Scholars “Think Tank” on State of Black America is a companion site to above, with information and video on the massive incarceration of Black youth and issues in poverty, health, housing, and education:

<http://www.zimbio.com/RGB+Afrikan+Centered+Cultural+Development+and+Education/notes/409/RGB+Street+Scholars+Think+Tank+State+Black>

In turn, this same site references along the bottom, a number of others on Martin Luther King, Black Nationalism, Malcolm X, the group Public Enemy, and Tupac Shakur. This site, also connected, provides information on the 1971 film “The Murder of Fred Hampton” and much information videos, posters, and sites for further reference:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/26742855/The-Murder-of-Chairman-Fred-Hampton-Sr-by-Chicago-Police-and-F-B-I>

This is a pdf document of a student essay assignment on Martin Luther King’s “Giant Triplets of Racism, Extreme Materialism, and Militarism” (includes a number of quotations)

[http://urbandreams.ousd.k12.ca.us/lessonplans/mlk2/L\\_Essay.pdf](http://urbandreams.ousd.k12.ca.us/lessonplans/mlk2/L_Essay.pdf)

Full text of Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous speech on Vietnam at Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination:

<http://www.ssc.msu.edu/~sw/mlk/brkslnc.htm>

“... I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered...A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism.” — “Beyond Vietnam,” Address,” Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967.

SNCC: Six Year of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1960–1966 (includes audio files of Fannie Lou Hamer and others, and lots of other information):

<http://www.ibiblio.org/sncc/index.html>

Civil Rights Leader James Forman Dies/Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A1621-2005Jan11.html>

About Muhammad Ahmad (Max Stanford) and RAM

<http://peacecomrade.org/2009/07/24/dr-muhammad-ahmads-formerly-max-stanford-message-to-the-2nd-annual-black-star-games/> and

[http://keywiki.org/index.php/Max\\_Stanford](http://keywiki.org/index.php/Max_Stanford)

About Kathleen Neal Cleaver

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathleen\\_Neal\\_Cleaver](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathleen_Neal_Cleaver)

Excerpt from her book *Memories of Love and War* and from several interviews

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USACcleaverK.htm>

World History Archives: The history of the Black Panther Party (BPP)

<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/index-be.html>

The FBI's War on the Black Panther Party's Southern California Chapter

(On site above, but from Maoist International Movement, *Theory* #11, October, 1999)

<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/077.html>

An FBI memo on seeking to cause a rift between the Black Panther Party and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

<http://thereareno sunglasses.wordpress.com/cointelpro-counter-intelligence-program-actions-against-protesters-vietnam/>

The “Art” of the FBI: Fake Letters and Bad Poetry: Highlights from the FBI’s Secret War on Dissent. Includes a so-called “Black Panther Coloring Book” and attacks on Martin Luther King

<http://www.ibiblio.org/pub/electronic-publications/stay-free/archives/19/fbi.html>

### **An Interesting Curriculum You May Want to Consider**

Two Controversial Cases in New Haven History: The Amistad Affair (1839) and The Black Panther Trials (1970) by Verdell M. Roberts. This is a very interesting curriculum that unites related strands in African-American resistance history in two events separated by more than one hundred years—the slave rebellion on the Amistad slave ship and the Black Panther Party. Herman Melville’s great short story, *Benito Cereno*, was modeled on the Amistad Rebellion, which had just taken place. A feature film named *Amistad* was made by Steven Spielberg in 1997. **Ruchell “Cinque” Magee—the longest-held political prisoner in the US, made the victorious Amistad case a central foundation in his case for freedom. He remains in prison. See sites immediately below this one for more on Ruchell Magee.**

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1978/2/78.02.09.x.html> - a

(be sure to scroll to the top of the page for the start of the curriculum)

More on Ruchell “Cinque” Magee (Cinque was the leader of the 1839 Amistad rebellion)

[http://www.freedomarchives.org/audio\\_samples/Ruchell\\_Magee.html](http://www.freedomarchives.org/audio_samples/Ruchell_Magee.html) (includes audio of Ruchell)

[http://www.prisonactivist.org/archive/blackaugust/BlackAugust\\_1\\_KN.shtml](http://www.prisonactivist.org/archive/blackaugust/BlackAugust_1_KN.shtml)

<http://www.abu-jamal-news.com/article.php?name=kn>

<http://denverabc.wordpress.com/political-prisoners-database/ruchell-cinque-magee/>