

COINTELPRO: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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What is COINTELPRO? What were its true purposes and objectives? Did the federal government's COINTELPRO operations influence our current political and social opinions and if so how? These are but a few of the many questions we should ask ourselves as the final decade of the 20th century approaches. It is of considerable importance, especially for Blacks and other national "minorities" in the U.S., to awaken to the profound negative impact illegal government and police activity has had on the character and process of social change in U.S. society.

The acronym "COINTELPRO," from the F.B.I.'s abbreviation for "counter intelligence program" is itself a misnomer. The U.S. government itself defined the term "counterintelligence" as activities conducted to destroy the effectiveness of foreign intelligence operations and to protect information against espionage, individuals against subversion, and installations against sabotage. The term also refers to information developed by or used in counterintelligence operations." Clearly COINTELPRO as implemented by F.B.I. and other police and government agencies was not directed at "destroying the effectiveness of foreign intelligence operations," but instead at crushing political dissent in the U.S. In addition, the COINTELPRO acronym is better understood if it is seen as generic term which describes legalized or quasi-legal political repression.

Documented evidence vividly illustrates that COINTELPRO operations were carried out by scores of government agencies other than the F.B.I. Media-induced popular wisdom has portrayed the F.B.I.'s COINTELPRO activities as essentially the paranoid excesses of one man, former F.B.I. Director, J. Edgar Hoover. Yet it can be said, and documented by historical information, that Hoover, though a rabid racist and anti-communist, basically reflected the priorities, policies, and values of the system he protected. Were it not so, how would one explain the domestic "counterintelligence" programs directed at disruption of organizations and quashing legitimate dissent carried out the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) which were appropriately dubbed operation "CHAOS." Or the National Security Agency's (NSA) COINTELPRO spy operations implemented by local police intelligence units like the Los Angeles "Red Squad" or New York's Bureau of Special Services (BOSS). These programs of political and racial repression were not mere bureaucratic excesses or aberrations of the tumultuous sixties. These programs were well planned, ruthlessly implemented, and effectively concealed by the State from public scrutiny and in many forms continue to day under the pretext of the "war on drugs" and "anti-terrorism." COINTELPRO activities concern all U.S. citizens because such activity is an essential method of civil control and a strategy of racial warfare employed by the modern American "National Security State" (NSS), a state which by its very nature is anti-democratic, racist and elitist and therefore perceives the masses of its own people as the ultimate enemy.

Disclosure of previously secret government documents unmistakably establish that the primary target of COINTELPRO operations during the late sixties and early seventies was the Black community. This fact should come as no surprise to anyone remotely familiar with U.S. race relations. Indeed, U.S. history vividly illustrates that the most intense, amoral and ruthless forms of repression and "law" enforcement have been reserved for people of color and working people who challenged the inhumane basis of their national or economic subjugation. Nothing better substantiates this proposition than the long bloody and painful saga of the Black's struggle for freedom or the genocidal extermination of North America's aboriginal inhabitants the European settlers called "Indians."

Both the racist subjugation of African slaves and the genocidal treatment of the Native American peoples were essentially different features of an undeclared war centered around race and the economic consolidation of an European American nation-state and reflected the "colonial" flavor typical of European interaction with the majority of the world's peoples--who are people of color. COINTELPRO--if placed in this broader historical context, as well as in the context of the historical development of a eurocentric nation-state, e.g., the U.S. Republic-- can then be understood as a modern technique and strategy of racial domination and white political supremacy. Toward these ends the entire panoply of the modern American state is organized to diffuse militant protest and insure the powerlessness of peoples of color on the one hand and destroy those who disagree with the "system," on the other hand, all under the rubric of "protecting national security."

If such a proposition is correct, and ample historical evidence seems to suggest it is, then the condition of Black powerless is an historical condition tied to, and dependent upon the vitality of the U.S. nation-state. In short, "national security" equals Black political, economic and social insecurity. COINTELPRO would be just one of the most eloquent expressions of this equation at work, for its stated objectives were to "misdirect," "disrupt" and destroy Black efforts toward political and social unity.

While ample historical evidence exists to substantiate a claim that many of the techniques of COINTELPRO disruption used against the Black movements of the sixties and seventies had their genesis on the slave plantations of colonial America and the ante-bellum south, e.g., "racial informants," covert support of Black "leaders" tied to status quo interests, isolation and murder of outspoken and militant slaves to encourage passivism and fear, use of disinformation to generate disunity, creation of a privileged class of slaves with a corresponding ideology of accomodationism, corruption of moral and ethical values that unified the slaves. It was not until the early twentieth century that the U.S. government had occasion to develop a focused COINTELPRO type operation designed to derail an ideological, radical and mass Black movement for social change. This was the African nationalist movement led by Marcus Garvey.

By the time Marcus Garvey arrived on the U.S. political scene in 1914 and founded his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Blacks were undergoing profound and dramatic changes. Black society was changing and dividing into petty

classes, urbanization was in full swing and racism was exorcising the last legal vestiges of post reconstruction "freedom" for Blacks. The different strata of Black society began to perceive the solution to "Negro equality" in different and often conflicting ways. The period of post civil war reconstruction (1867-77) had given Blacks a taste of political power and the long descent into the racist terror and economic depressions of the late 19th century taught Blacks some hard lessons. In truth African-americans went from chattel slaves to tenant slaves (sharecroppers), from tools of production (property) to "free labor," all in the twinkling of an eye. Once the predominant white vested interests of north and south capital reached a compromise as to how best to pursue the great economic miracle of the industrial revolution, the condition of Black rights and liberties became a nonissue. It was at this historical moment that Garvey came to a people in the throes of the transformation of the 20th century and urged them forward with this declaration, "Up you mighty race! Accomplish what you will! And though undoubtedly the period of reconstruction witnessed many COINTELPRO-like techniques which were designed to disenfranchise the newly "emancipated" slave, the destruction of Garvey, the UNIA, and his movement required a completely new approach. What the U.S. Government had to do was not just destroy a man or a movement but destroy the idea that gave them both political life: enter modern COINTELPRO.

In the summer of 1919 violent racist attacks against Blacks raged across the U.S. landscape. The prospect of Black rebellion and revolt have historically terrified white America. Lynchings, racist terror by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and police brutalization of Blacks have always served an essential function, namely to smother the spark of concerted and militant Black resistance to racist subjugation and prevent it from becoming a raging firestorm that could scorch the feeble clapboard edifice of the white supremacist American state and culture. But the "Red Summer" of 1919 (so named because of the copious amount of Black blood spilled) was not so much the result of threatened Black revolt as it was the social expression of a racist culture subject to economic crises. In Longview, Texas, Chicago, Charleston, Washington, D.C. and across the southland, Black Blood flowed in the streets and watered the roots of Southern magnolia trees. Despite the racist terror Blacks fought back. Returning World War I veterans organized armed resistance as never before. The Garvey movement began to supply this resistance with a focus and mass appeal. Indeed, many WWI vets were at the core of the UNIA. From the U.S. government's perspective destruction of the Garvey movement was crucial to racial politics in the U.S. and the institution of European colonialism abroad. What began in the summer of 1919 as racist economic frustration could well get out of hand and end in wholesale Black armed insurrection. In the view of the U.S. it was Blacks who had the "potential for violence," KKK and racist police terror notwithstanding.

When the U.S. government mounted its COINTELPRO-like operation against the Garvey Movement it coordinated its various agencies as never before in a secret plan to not only discredit a Black leader but to neutralize the political ideas he espoused. The then fledgling F.B.I. began, what would become, a sixty year long obsession with destruction of Black dissidence and militant leadership. The U.S. government infiltrated U.N.I.A., conspired with Garvey's enemies in the Black community, and finally brought

fabricated charges against him. Once Garvey became preoccupied with the legal onslaught against him, his enemies, like jackals smelling blood, ganged up on him, neutralizing his contacts, until he was eventually railroaded into prison on trumped-up charges in 1925 and ultimately exiled in 1927. Marcus may have been the first COINTELPRO target because of his militant Black activism, but he would not be the last target of U.S. government reaction to radical advocates for changes.

During the heyday of Garveyism and its struggle for survival, U.S. communists denigrated Black nationalism. But of course their turn as COINTELPRO targets would also come. During the series of early 20th century depressions the U.S. communists, almost entirely white, seemed to be one of the few political forces who knew where they were headed and possessed enough organization to accomplish their objectives. Despite the fact that the U.S. Communist Party was the first "significant" American political party to nominate an Black, James W. Ford, for vice-president, their white skin privilege in a racist society prevented the communists from attracting the masses of Blacks to their platform as Garvey had done so effectively. Moreover, the U.S. communist party in the 1920s was not an independent force; they were under the heavy influence of a Moscow-oriented agenda. Communist involvement in the defense of the Scottsboro boys did not significantly alter their inability to inspire, attract and lead the Black masses. Indeed, the CPUSA could never touch the soul and yearnings of Black folks as Garvey so eloquently stirred. Therefore, when the U.S. government went after "communists" and "socialists" during the Great Depression years it did so primarily as a class reaction to Bolshevism and white labor discontent in America.

When the economic convulsions of the thirties seized western capitalism, throwing millions out of work and onto soup lines, the specter of the "Bolshevik Revolution" haunted the financial elites and their governments throughout the capitalist world. In Europe, fascism began its rise to eminence and ultimately State power in Germany and Italy. The financial elite of the U.S. did not choose naked fascism as the solution to the national challenge of the Great Depression. They reluctantly permitted a political program of liberal social pacification for the volatile unemployed to mask their continued looting of American wealth. This pacification was called the "New Deal." Its author was Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was a master stroke of quasi-socialism and labor cooptation. The appeal of "Bolshevism" for the unemployed, poor and non-union labor was undermined and replaced with public works projects, social security and unprecedented anti-communism, anti-semitism and jingoistic nationalism. It would be the three headed hydra of anti-communism, jingoistic nationalism and racism which would serve as the ideological rationale for modern COINTELPRO repression of dissent in the U.S. throughout the fifties, sixties and seventies and justify the organizations such as the Communist Party. Were it not for the intervention of WWII and the expediency of an alliance (military, political and economic) between capitalism and Bolshevism in their common struggle against Nazism and Japanese fascism, the destruction of the so called communist menace in the U.S. as personified in the U.S. as personified in the McCarthy witchhunts of the fifties would have, in all probability, occurred two decades earlier--apace with the programs of the "New Deal." With the end of WWII and the beginning of so called Cold War. The U.S. government, possessing a new sophisticated

intelligence police, began its suppression of the communists and socialists in earnest. By 1964, the CPUSA was completely decimated and in full retreat. Thus F.B.I. Director, J. Edgar Hoover, could confidently state in a 1964 memorandum extolling the utility of COINTELPRO techniques that, "since initiated in 1956 the Counter Intelligence Program directed against the Communist Party U.S.A. (CPUSA) and related organizations, through a variety of techniques has disrupted, exposed and neutralized the communists." Hoover went on to gloat by saying "COINTELPRO initiated publicity has been a tremendous deterrent to comrades, while at the same time it has alerted the general public to their insidious maneuvers."

Clearly, from a U.S. government standpoint, COINTELPRO was not solely designed and implemented to monitor and internally disrupt groups that opposed the U.S. government but also mold and manufacture public opinion. The anti-Garvey repression of the twenties, the infiltration and public pillorying of the Nation of Islam or so called "Black Muslims" as well as government orchestrated attacks on Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X in the late fifties and early sixties, not to mention the anti-communist inquisitions of the Cold War Mccarthy era, were all supported by COINTELPRO manipulation of legal institutions and the mass media.

With the upsurge of the Black struggle for civil and human rights in the fifties and sixties COINTELPRO increased its focus on the Black community. By the mid to late sixties every Black leader who had not been slain, imprisoned or hounded into exile was a target for COINTELPRO "neutralization." Ideology seldom mattered. As long as the Black leader or activist group advocated Black empowerment, organization or self-defense from racist attack, COINTELPRO-type operations were launched to "discredit" or "neutralize" that leader or group. National Black organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Black Panther Party (BPP) and scores of other activist groups were targeted for destruction by COINTELPRO. Many of these activist groups were white or "New Left" formations that espoused radical or revolutionary reforms such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Peace and Freedom Party, and Youth Against War and Fascism, while other merely opposed U.S. involvement in Vietnam. However, by 1968 the BPP and its leadership had become the major FBI target for destruction: a full eighty percent of government COINTELPRO efforts directed at the Black movement were in fact aimed at the Black Panthers.

The basic reason for the U.S. government's preoccupation with the BPP had less to do with the Panthers' ability to overthrow the system of the American state and more to do with the true nature of that State. The fear that the Panthers struck in the heart of the U.S. system was the terror of an idea. The idea of the gun and its relationship to the politics of racial subjugation. What the U.S. government and a racist culture instinctively feared most from the Panthers was that the grassroots Black community would understand and accept the concept that political empowerment and Black self-defense were inseparable in a racist culture and society. This concept had to be discredited--destroyed root and branch along with the Panthers and their appeal for Black youth.

That the destruction of the Panthers was mirrored by the larger psychosexual cooptation and destruction of Black womanhood and manhood as well as the degeneration of the Black community's social infrastructure is no coincidence. Today's Black youth, for the most part, hardly know of the struggles of the sixties, least of all the Black Panther Party. The portrayal of that turbulent era is left to the white establishment media. Moreover, this lack of historical consciousness is probably related to the irrelevancy and purposelessness of many of today's Black youth and help deepen the marginal economic malaise of the Black community which the economy of the drug culture thrives upon. COINTELPRO played a pivotal, if not crucial role in bringing about these conditions by fostering the contrived historical amnesia rampant in the Black community today.

When the F.B.I.'s San Francisco field office wrote in a April 3, 1968 memorandum (after propounding a racist myth or two, one of which stated, "it should be borne in mind that the two things foremost in the militant Negro's mind are sex and money") that "the Negro wants and needs something to be proud of," the F.B.I. fully understood that what was at stake was the minds of Black folk--especially Black youth. That it was ideas that COINTELPRO targeted is clearly set out as the memorandum continues:

"The Negro youth and moderate must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teachings, they will be dead revolutionaries. Is it not better to be a sports hero, a well paid professional athlete or entertainer, a regularly paid white or blue collar worker, a peaceful human being with a family, or a person who at least is being accepted, than a Negro who may have got even with the establishment by burning it down, but who along with this, burned down his own home and gained for him and his people the hatred and distrust of whites for years to come."

Thus the primary objectives of COINTELPRO were to intimidate and frighten the masses of Blacks away from militant or radical solutions to the myriad of problems which beset them in a racist and hostile culture, and to make them willing in their own continued domination: singing, dancing, and entertaining themselves to individual "freedom" at the expense of group freedom. COINTELPRO was a smashing success.

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