

**The Powers That Be:
The American Endeavor to Suppress Black Political Voices**

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Throughout the history of America, the suppression of black political power has taken numerous structural and institutional forms. But the most disconcerting is that which involves direct abuse of power by publicly funded government agencies. The American government has used silencing mechanisms involving espionage, framing, threats, forgery, and even assassination to “neutralize” Black voices and ideas, thus further advancing political interests. Moreover, federal government agencies have abused and violated the laws, the Constitution, and the civil rights and liberties of many citizens in order to achieve a goal of quelling political ideas and movements of Blacks, as they usually opposed those of the rich white authorities that run America. Specifically, the secretive practices of the United States FBI and CIA are particularly disturbing, not to mention unlawful. By admittedly spying on and disrupting selected political groups in America, the FBI assumed the role of “political police,” often acting as judge, jury, and executioner. They allocated to themselves the authority to decide which groups were acceptable and which were “a threat.” The government, in acting in such a secretive manner, completely undermined the political process that is fundamental in maintaining the primacy of democratic principles in the American political system. Procedural justice and civil liberties were compromised in the name of protecting the dominant views of the ruling. These assertions will be explored through a historical examination and analysis of U.S. government practices, which, funded by American tax dollars, sought with great resolve to subdue the robust yet desperate political voices of African Americans.

Foremost, almost all Blacks in early America experienced blatant structural and institutional racism. But even from early on in the history of the nation, and particularly early on, namely the 18th and 19th centuries, the authorities specifically targeted Blacks assuming leadership roles, and took drastic measures to silence fervent Black voices. One such early case is that of David Walker. Walker is known primarily as the revolutionary writer and lecturer who boldly stabbed at the practice of slavery. In 1829, his 75-page

article, "Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World," was published. In the article, he urges slaves to rise up and kill their masters, as he states that it is their duty (Sellman 2000). It was risky enough to publish the article in the North where abolitionist sentiment was increasing, but Walker then promoted the spreading and smuggling of the "Appeal" into the South. Shortly after, the Georgia State Legislature placed a price of \$10,000 on the head of the radical writer if he was captured alive, \$1,000 if he was dead (Sellman 2000). Within less than a year of the publication of his radical article, Walker was dead. His body found in the doorway of his secondhand clothing store, poison being the suspected reason for death (Microsoft Corporation 1999). The radical, extremist voice of Walker was successfully silenced, thus preventing him from ensuing any further damage to white supremacy in America.

Subsequently, the federal U.S. government also became involved in such activity through the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). One of the very first targets of the FBI was Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey. In efforts to "neutralize" Garvey in 1919, J. Edgar Hoover, then the Director of the FBI, wrote that the federal government should use vast amounts of legal resources to make a case, *any* case against Garvey and make him *appear* guilty. The primary provocation for this treatment was Garvey's "agitating of the negro movement" (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990). Despite their efforts and numerous other charges, the best the FBI could conjure up was a minor mail fraud conviction. But this conviction was sufficient in removing Garvey from the political sphere, as he was sent to an Atlanta federal prison. This also qualified him to be deported as an "undesirable alien." Consequently, he was deported from the United States in 1927 (O'Reilly 1994). The publicly funded FBI, originally created as a means of ensuring justice in the United States, now played an official role in ridding the country of political opposition to the views of the rich white powers that controlled America...and this was merely the beginning.

Further scrutiny can be focused on the infamous COINTELPRO operations, or counterintelligence programs of the FBI, which specifically targeted blacks. On August 25, 1967, the FBI officially launched a formal "counterintelligence" campaign against "black hate groups" (Carson 1994: 48). Agents were given authority to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, or otherwise neutralize the activities of Black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters" (Carson 1994: 48). In essence, COINTELPRO served to

disrupt and block political activity that departed from orthodoxy, or stood in opposition to state or federal authority. The agents that executed these programs were often ordered to forge documents, spy, and harass their targets (Blackstock 1988).

The political group that was most targeted and sought after by the FBI through COINTELPRO operations was the Black Panther Party (BPP). This was mainly because the government felt that the BPP posed the biggest threat of successfully commencing a united black liberation movement (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990). The BPP formed in 1966 and grew rather quickly, catching the concerned eye of the federal government through the FBI. An even greater concern to them was the party's ability to attract the attention and support of other black "extremist" political groups. The first of such activity was the engineering of a merger in 1968 with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a political organization formed in 1960 by black college students who were dedicated to overturning segregation in the South and giving young blacks a stronger voice in the civil rights movement (O'Reilly 1994; Microsoft Corporation 1999). This marked the joining of the two strongest radical black groups in the nation, which quickly prompted COINTELPRO action. The FBI had soon fabricated letters and documents, successfully creating the false impression that Stokely Carmichael, who had been designated honorary BPP Prime Minister, was actually an undercover CIA operative (Blackstock 1998). Fearing for his life, Carmichael fled the country. The Black Panther-SNCC alliance was successfully broken up. The federal government continued to execute their own non-public policies in America, allocating themselves powers that specifically violated the U.S. Constitution and federal laws. This list includes freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, equal protection under the law, libel, invasion of privacy, illegal search and seizure, ...and the list continues. It is imperative to be mindful of the fact that one of the main functions of the U.S. Constitution is to protect the American people from exactly this type of activity.

Moreover, the FBI also pitted the Panthers against other radical black groups. With means of prevention in mind, Hoover and the FBI decided to set the BPP against the United Slaves, a California Black nationalist group. This would also help the FBI in weakening the influence of both groups. Released COINTELPRO documents show that Hoover, in order to "provoke a vendetta" between the two groups, proposed writing a fictional, anonymous letter to the United Slaves divulging a BPP plot to kill their leader, Ron Karenga (Blackstock 1998). In addition, an onslaught of

defamatory cartoons of both groups was released by the Bureau, intensifying the tension between them. The tension escalated to a breaking point in 1969 when two LA Panthers were gunned down and killed inside UCLA's Campbell Hall by three United Slaves members (O'Reilly 1994; Churchill and Vanderwall 1990). The government pitted Black political groups against each other, essentially to let them destroy each other, or at least to weaken them and the legitimacy of their cause. This was yet another mechanism for silencing the radical black voices.

Additionally, the FBI soon resorted to raw acts of violence and murder against the Panther Party. Behind the façade of investigative police work, a team of federal agents raided the Chicago BPP headquarters and killed two Panther leaders, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. The Panthers who were not killed in the raid were beaten and arrested for "aggressive assault" and "attempted murder" of the raiding agents, even though none of them fired a single shot (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990). Here, the federal government took liberties with American lives, proving that the FBI was willing and highly capable of committing murder to further their political agenda. The government's war with the Panthers continued. The FBI's shoot-outs, beatings, arrests, trials, and continued harassment critically injured the party. By the early 1970s, the blows continuously dealt by the FBI became too much to overcome and the Black Panther Party collapsed. The government program against the BPP had succeeded, creating one more stepping-stone of success in ridding America of political freedom and minority voices.

Furthermore, throughout this same time period, the government and the Bureau had invested in ongoing counter-intelligence efforts against other political groups and leaders as well. They began surveillance on the Nation of Islam (NoI) and their leader, Elijah Muhammed. This monitoring was justified on the grounds that NoI members "disavow allegiance to the United States" and "are taught not to obey the laws of the United States" (Churchill and Vander Wall 1996: 96). The famous Black activist Malcolm X, also known as Malcolm Little, was a strong member of the group and one of Elijah Muhammad's head lieutenants, but Malcolm X decided to break away from the NoI in March of 1964. He then founded a separate church, the Muslim Mosque, Inc., as well as the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) (Carson 1991). Again, the FBI became concerned with the potential for these organizations to align with other strong groups. The Bureau undertook actions to block the development of alliances between the OAAU and white radical organizations such as the Socialist Workers

Party (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990). Once again, the money of the American taxpayers was hard at work.

Yet the ultimate silencing mechanism was yet to come. During a speech in Harlem on the night of February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated. By this time, the federal government had compiled at least 2,300 pages of material in just one of its files on him, the NoI and OAAU (O'Reilly 1994). The government alleges Malcolm X was murdered by his former NoI colleagues as a result of inter-group fighting, which supposedly was the cause of his parting from the organization. In addition, the NoI was apparently angry at Malcolm's establishment of rival groups (Carson 1991). But released COINTELPRO documents reveal that the NoI resentment did not "just happen," rather, it had "been developed" by deliberate FBI actions (Churchill and Vander Wall 1996: 103). They achieved this state of tension through the "sparking of acrimonious debates within the organization," as well as other tactics intended to cultivate internal disagreements (Churchill and Vander Wall 1996: 103). Four days after the assassination of Malcolm X, the FBI removed him from their Security Index (Carson 1991). To this day no one has been held legally accountable for the murder of Malcolm X, but one FBI agent wrote that he revered the murder as something of a model for "successful" counterintelligence operations (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990; Carson 1991). The bottom line is that, at least on some level, the American government was responsible for the death of Malcolm X. Even if a government agent did not pull the trigger or order a hit, which has never been ruled out, by intentionally and maliciously provoking factional fighting, the federal government is undoubtedly an underlying cause of the premature end to the life of Malcolm X. Kenneth O'Reilly (1994), historian and author of *Racial Matters* and *Black Americans: The FBI Files*, writes that Hoover and his men "in effect, did their best to incite the killing short of actually pulling triggers" (7). Unsurprisingly, the FBI also took aim on one of the most influential Black activists in our nation's history, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He first drew their attention with his formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a nonviolent Black civil rights organization. One of the group's primary concerns was Black voting rights in the South. Within a year of King's founding of the SCLC, a personal file had been opened on him. Before long the FBI had broken into every SCLC office, as well as Dr. King's house, and bugged and wiretapped the insides (O'Reilly 1994). In a 1963 FBI document, the Bureau wrote that their actions were necessary because their civil rights activism was posing a

direct threat to “the established order of the U.S” (Churchill and Vander Wall 1996: 96). Following King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, on August 28, 1963, FBI official William C. Sullivan wrote the following:

We must mark [King] now, if we have not before as the most dangerous Negro in the future of this nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro, and national security...it may be unrealistic to limit [our actions against King] to legalistic proofs that would stand up in court or before congressional committees. (Churchill and Vander Wall 1996: 96)

Soon after, the Bureau attempted to destroy his credibility and ultimately his remarkable influence on political activity in America. They took “highlights” of King from their surveillance tapes and used them to create a tape that contained evidence of King engaging in sexual acts with prostitutes, attempting to destroy his character and make a mockery of his status as a reverend (O’Reilly 1994). The FBI then sent a copy of the tape to King anonymously, accompanied with a letter urging him to commit suicide before his acceptance of the Nobel Prize, for if he didn’t, the tapes would be made public (Pepper 1995). Apparently blackmail was permissible if exercised by those in official government positions. But despite the dirty tactics, King disregarded the letter. Fortunately, the fabricated tapes were refused by the news media, killing the FBI’s plan to eliminate the influence King possessed in America’s political arena.

But the war on Martin Luther King Jr. was far from over. On April 4, 1968, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot dead. A man by the name of James Earl Ray was arrested and convicted of the murder. But overwhelming evidence points elsewhere; directly at the federal government of the United States. First, following the assassination, using taxpayer money, the government footed the bill for thousands of dollars of bar tabs for one of the state’s principle witnesses, Charles Stephens. Stephens then changed his original descriptions of the assassin from an anonymous black man to James Earl Ray (O’Reilly 1994; Lane and Gregory 1993). Also, none of Ray’s defense attorneys have ever been allowed to examine the alleged murder weapon, and FBI and the House Select Committee on Assassinations were unable to verify that Ray’s rifle was the murder weapon (Lane and Gregory 1993). These facts are merely the beginning. The large amount of

evidence against U.S. government agencies in King's death caused the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978 to conclude that there was a 95% probability that King was killed by a conspiracy (Pepper 1995). The U.S. government successfully eliminated one of the greatest black leaders this country has ever seen, not only victimizing King, but also James Earl Ray and every citizen of the United States. Democracy, due process, and the most primary of American principles were completely disregarded and trampled, as a dominant few exercised their views through their own autocratic means.

In conclusion, the federal government is forever linked to African-American history through suppression of black political power and black leaders. The FBI and other agencies have been able to infiltrate and disrupt black political activity in America, eliminating the notion of political freedom. This is a direct result of the power structure that makes up the American political system. As illustrated time and again through agencies such as the FBI, the government has been able to influence political outcome. Those in power have been able to violate the very laws that they put forth to govern the country, as well as the civil liberties and rights of citizens, in order to promote their political ideas. Clearly, the government has lied, blackmailed, fabricated documents, and even murdered in its "programs" to counter growing black political strength. Primarily, it is vital to recognize the public nature of the government and their actions, as they are financed by tax dollars and therefore, powered by the money of the citizens. Democracy, being the foundation of America as a nation, ensures that the will of the people, which includes the voices of *all* people, will have the opportunity and the ability to be expressed. Thus, it is simply a reversion to aristocracy when a small group of individuals can set aside the Constitution and force their views on the country. Through their extensive control of information and their ability to act covertly, the American government can continue to serve the interests of the few elites who maintain political and authoritative clout, and continue to belittle and undermine the most fundamental and indispensable principles to the American model of democracy.

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