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Taking Down the New Left: FBI Surveillance of Left and Right-Wing Extremist Groups

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Abstract

After World War II, large left-wing radical movements emerged in the United States, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-War Movement. Along with the Cold War which incited an anti-communist rhetoric amongst Americans, the New Left's radical ideas became a concern of the United States government. COINTELPRO was an illegal counterintelligence program run by the Federal Bureau of Investigations and director J. Edgar Hoover from 1957 to 1971. The focus of the program was to "eliminate possible threats" by illegally infiltrating and surveilling left-wing extremist groups, while the FBI actively dismissed right-wing extremist activity. This is due to Hoover's right-wing principles which leaked into the Bureau and helped define what the FBI considered a threat to national security. When scholars discuss COINTELPRO, it is Hoover's immense power over the FBI and anti-communist ideology in America that is focused on, while Hoover's unequal treatment of left-and right-wing extremist groups is often ignored. Using both COINTELPRO files and direct quotes from Hoover, COINTELPRO's surveillance of left- and right-wing groups will be analyzed. I will discuss the impact of Hoover's right-wing ideology on FBI surveillance and on what is identified as a threat to national security.

Keywords: COINTELPRO, John Birch Society, Ku Klux Klan, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, Students for a Democratic Society, The Weather Underground

Introduction

Just after the end of World War II, the Civil Rights movement emerged creating a new political climate in the United States, with prominent leaders such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. being at the forefront of this movement. Black liberation groups such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Nation of Islam (NOI) surfaced during this period. Protests routinely occurred within the Civil Rights movement, occasionally escalating to violence from both sides. Iconic historical events occurred during this time, such as the March on Washington with Dr. Martin Luther King's inspirational "I Have a Dream," speech. Soon after the Civil Rights movement, another left-wing movement emerged in the United States, and the world, against America's involvement in the Vietnam War. The anti-war movement is recognized as a student movement, protesting President Lyndon B. Johnson dispatching troops into Vietnam in 1965.¹ Political groups, largely composed of white students, such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) formed in response, protesting against the war, and often aligning themselves with black liberation groups such as the BPP. These groups are often referred to as the "New Left," including both civil rights and antiwar groups.²

In response to the New Left, there was a rise of right-wing extremism. The Ku Klux Klan is the most infamous far-right group, beginning in the 19th century, with the ideology focused on Christian white supremacy. They experienced a reemergence after the start of the Civil Rights movement. Other groups appeared as well, such as the Minutemen, who viewed themselves as "the last line of defense against communism."³ The FBI's involvement with the 'communist threat' in the United States began in 1938, when President Roosevelt gave the FBI permission to gather evidence on communist activities in the United States.⁴ As left-wing movements began to erupt, the FBI expanded this power given by the president to respond to both the communist threat and the development of left-wing movements creating a counterintelligence program titled COINTELPRO.

Formed under the authority of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, COINTELPRO was a campaign run between 1956-1971 which focused on what the Federal Bureau of Investigations deemed was a hostile domestic threat that needed particular counterintelligence techniques, specifically against communist threats.⁵ COINTELPRO used illegal surveillance tactics and often labeled leftist radical ideas as communist or extremist, as seen with FBI records released in 2017 that stated Martin Luther King Jr. was a "'whole-hearted' communist who followed a 'Marxist-Leninist' line."⁶ Comparatively, the influx of right-wing extremism emerging was not as much of

¹ Jesse Kindig, "Vietnam War," *Antiwar and Radical History Project – Pacific Northwest*. 2009. <https://depts.washington.edu/antiwar/pnwhistoryvietnam.shtml>.

² Ben A. Franklin, "Inquiry on New Left is Planned in Senate," *The New York Times*, 26 October, 1967, https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/117850008/8983C94EA4CF4B11PQ/12?accountid=14270/.

³ James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads, and the Rise of a New White Culture* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1995), 78.

⁴ Reign Schmidt, *Red Scare: FBI and the Origins of Anti-Communism in the United States* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculum Press, 2000), 10.

⁵ United States Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans," (Report, Washington DC, 1976), 4,15.

⁶ Kristine Phillips, "In the Latest JFK Files: The FBI's Ugly Analysis on Martin Luther King Jr., Filled with Falsehoods: The Newly Released FBI Document About Martin Luther King, Jr. Reveals More About Former Agency Director J.

a focus in COINTELPRO, or the FBI in general, during this period. Even when political violence occurred, such as the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing, organized by KKK members, the FBI turned a blind eye.

Much of the imbalance of treatment between left and right-wing groups is due to the right-wing views of the leader of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover. Many historians have spoken on Hoover, as he held the role of Director of the FBI for 48 years, from its creation in 1924 until 1972.⁷ Hoover had immense power in both the FBI and in government overall. How Hoover held his power is often up for debate, whether it was genuine support or through blackmail and intimidation.⁸ The 2006 documentary “The Dark Side of the FBI” explains that when President John F. Kennedy threatened to remove Hoover from his position as head of the FBI, Hoover brought to the President’s attention that he had received information about Kennedy’s mistress.⁹ This caused Kennedy to rethink his decision of removing Hoover.

As stated through Reign Schmidt’s research on the relationship between the FBI and the Red Scare, accounts of Hoover “treat the FBI’s political surveillance superficially and isolated from the larger political problem.”¹⁰ In “Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover,” Richard Gid Powers mainly focuses on his anticommunist ideas rather than his mistreatment of left-wing radicals and the reasoning behind that. Powers describes, “Hoover’s thoughts, his feelings, his intentions, as he defined presidents and crushed Communists, the roots of the fierce intensity and determination that let him hold onto so much power for so long...”¹¹ To the government, communism was the number one threat towards capitalist society and American democracy, so it is logical that it would be the focus of an aspect of the government that works exclusively with state security. Although COINTELPRO was created to tackle the communist threat, Hoover later expanded the program to include any national security threats against which it was deemed necessary to use counterintelligence techniques, including White Hate Groups.¹²

Hoover’s mistreatment towards left wing versus right is known among scholars. James Ridgeway states that far-right conservatives had found a voice within the government through the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover, with Hoover’s focus on black radicals.¹³ Beverly Gage has written the most recent biography on Hoover in 2022, which dives into some of Hoover’s right-wing conservatism. She explains his conservative background, such as Hoover joining a Fraternity dedicated to Confederate General Robert E. Lee, and how it impacted his view of Black American leaders.¹⁴ Gage, however, stated that the FBI under Hoover destroyed the Ku Klux

Edgar Hoover’s Campaign to Discredit King, Historian Says,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2017, <http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/blogs-podcasts-websites/latest-jfk-files-fbi-s-ugly-analysis-on-martin/docview/1959917848/se-2/>.

⁷ Schmidt, *Red Scare*, 12.

⁸ Beverly Gage, *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2022), 12.

⁹ Julia Kuperberg, *The Dark Side of the FBI*, directed by Clara Kuperberg & Robert Kuperberg (2006; Wichita Films), Documentary.

¹⁰ Schmidt, *Red Scare*, 12.

¹¹ Richard G. Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: The Free Press, 1987) 4.

¹² Senate, “Supplementary Detailed Staff Report,” 462.

¹³ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 75.

¹⁴ Gage, *G-man*; Ivory Phillips, “The J. Edgar Hoover and FBI with whom Black America are Familiar,” *Jackson Advocate*, 9 November 2023,

Klan, which is not true. Hoover had successfully infiltrated chapters of the KKK but did little to stop any murders or violent acts by the KKK.¹⁵

The unequal treatment of right-wing and left-wing groups is attributed to the words radicalism and extremism being undefined. This allowed Hoover to interpret these words according to his agenda, leading to groups slipping through the cracks, while others, posing no threat, received undue attention. Hoover defined extremists as those advocating for change that differed from the traditional American values, which is a capitalist, nationalist, white society. In a letter Hoover wrote directed to college students, he described extremism as, “a small minority of students and faculty members who have lost faith in America. They ridicule the flag, poke fun at American institutions, seek to destroy our society.”¹⁶ The definitions of radicalism, terrorism, and extremism get lost, and are used interchangeably, despite having small but subtle differences. Each definition changes based on cultural and political context, including the country and region in which terms are defined, so it is important to differentiate the term for the context of American politics, but also for the time period to understand the full political context.¹⁷ As explained by Sebastian Jungkunz, these terms are even more misunderstood on the left, with terms such as left-wing radicalism and left-wing extremism being less commonly used than on the right. This is due to research on political extremism beginning in western Europe during the 20th century, during a heavy rise of right-wing extremism.¹⁸

The scholars Astrid Bötticher and Jungkunz discuss the definitions of radicalism and extremism, and both had the same opinion. Extremism is “an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment movements, which understand politics as struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing common good.”¹⁹ Extremists often view violence as a form of political action and aim to exterminate anyone or anything that opposes their cause. An example of this is the Ku Klux Klan, which is infamous for their lynchings and burnings of crosses. The violence of the group is directed at African Americans, since in their ideology white people reign supreme. An extremist ideology cannot function within the democratic system. Radicalism, on the other hand, is not anti-democratic, but is opposed to the system.²⁰ Some radicals use violence, but if so, it is only used as a last resort or self-defense. Examples of radical groups include the BPP, which only claimed to use violence as self-defense and would arm themselves in case they needed to protect themselves against the violent system, such as the police.²¹ The Civil Rights Movement was a radical movement, fighting against white supremacy and wanting

https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/2892343619/62517967E2474217PQ/6?accountid=14270&source type=Newspapers/.

¹⁵ Phillips, “The J. Edgar Hoover.”

¹⁶ J. Edgar Hoover, “An Open Letter to College Students” (Letter, Washington DC, 1970), 2.

¹⁷ Sebastian Jungkunz, “Chapter 2: What is Political Extremism?” in *The Nature and Origins of Political Extremism in Germany and Beyond* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), 20.

¹⁸ Jungkunz, “Chapter 2,” 18, 27.

¹⁹ Astrid Bötticher, “Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, 4 (August 2017): 74-75.

²⁰ Bötticher, “Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism,” 75; Jungkunz, “Chapter 2,” 20.

²¹ Jeremy P. Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 13.

to repair the democratic system. These terms must also be adjusted for the time period to which we are referring, as Civil Rights may have been viewed as radical ideas for the 1960's but would not be considered radical in the 21st century.

Adding to the discussion of Hoover and the FBI, will be the direct comparison and analysis of his involvement of right and left-wing movements within COINTELPRO, defining extremism to fit Hoover's conservative agenda. This will be evidenced through not only quotes from Hoover, but FBI files and first-hand accounts of the events that occurred. Given Hoover's control over the FBI and the foundational principles, far-right ideas will be demonstrated to have been molded into the framework of the FBI and their definitions of what constitutes a threat to national security, giving leniency to far-right groups.

COINTELPRO

In 1971, a break-in, planned and committed by the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI, exposed illegal surveillance activities of the FBI to Americans.²² The group revealed files that showed surveillance activity had mainly targeted left-wing radical groups, such as the Civil Rights movement and the Anti-War movement, and Hoover directed the campaign directly.²³ The Commission also found the secret counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO, revealing the illegal operations of the FBI. Americans knew of Hoover's distaste against the New Left, so the shock of COINTELPRO revolved around the illegal surveillance techniques. Hoover did not discontinue the counterintelligence programs until after a Democratic Representative accused the FBI of using "secret police tactics."²⁴

The COINTELPRO files claim to be focused on five main groups: the Communist party, Socialist workers party, White hate group, Black nationalist- hate group, and the New Left. The definitions of these groups were not defined, causing groups that were not Black nationalist but had a majority Black members, or anti-war protesters not connected to socialism to be called a threat to security. As stated directly from the report on COINTELPRO by the United States Senate:

The White Hate COINTELPRO also used comparatively few techniques which carried a risk of serious physical, emotional, or economic, damage to the targets, while Black Nationalist COINTELPRO used such techniques extensively. The New Left COINTELPRO, on the other hand, had the highest proportion of proposals aimed at preventing the exercise of free speech.²⁵

The United States Senate broke down COINTELPRO into separate case studies, based on significance and quantity of information on topics within the program. Both Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the covert action plan to destroy the Black Panther Party has individual case studies

²² "Anti-War Activists Recall 1971 FBI Break-in," *University Wire*, February 2, 2015

²³ "The Burglary That Exposed FBI Surveillance," *New York Public Radio*, January 7, 2014.

²⁴ Jack Nelson, "Hoover Harassed Both Left, Right," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 March 1974, <https://www.proquest.com/cv701361/docview/157419859/fulltextPDF/509C313DC6FB4FB6PQ/1?accountid=14270#&sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers/>.

²⁵ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," 16.

The Senate identified different techniques used by COINTELPRO, such as informants, warrantless electronic surveillance and break-ins, and mail opening.²⁶ As the Assistant to the Director of the FBI, William Sullivan, stated, "It was dangerous at times. No holds were barred... We have used [these techniques] against Soviet Agents... [The same methods were] brought home against any organization against which we were targeted. We did not differentiate."²⁷ One technique used was attempting to spread false information to friends, family, or the media. An example of this is a letter sent to the wife of a leader in the United Klans of America stating he was cheating on her.²⁸ Comparatively, someone leaked to a gossip column that actress Jean Seberg was pregnant with a Black Panther's baby after wiretapping revealed the two had an extramarital affair and that Seberg donated large sums to the group.²⁹ The main difference between the spread of false information against the Klan and Seberg is the letter sent to the Klansman's wife was an attempt to directly disrupt Klan activity, while Seberg was an indirect attempt, harming and invading the privacy of an innocent citizen. The action against Seberg was to directly disrupt her career and her life as an attempt to intimidate her to stop donating to the BPP. Due to stress of the intimidation from the Bureau, Seberg went into preterm labor, giving birth to a still born, then killing herself on the anniversary of her child's death.³⁰ Comparing how the FBI and Hoover decided to spread false information about a right- and left-wing group, the Bureau viewed someone who simply donated to a left-wing group as a threat, warranting attempts to disrupt their life. This pattern is seen throughout the counterintelligence program, with left-wing groups and those associated with them are viewed as more of a threat, justifying the use of counterintelligence tactics against them.

LEFT-WING GROUPS

Students for a Democratic Society and Weather Underground

Formed in 1960, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) took inspiration from the Civil Rights movement and provided a voice for the left-wing student movement. With the United States's increased involvement in Vietnam, SDS became more involved in the Anti-War movement, protesting against United States intervention and becoming one of the primary depictions of the New Left.³¹ The FBI responded to the group by publishing negative images of the group to attempt to diminish the power the group had.³² The FBI, under approval from director J. Edgar Hoover, took mugshots taken at a demonstration by the Princeton Police Department of disheveled SDS members with a caption stating, "The above Princeton students do not and will never represent the student body."³³ After receiving consent from Hoover, the FBI office in Newark, New Jersey decided that the SDS members did not look unkempt enough,

²⁶ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," III.

²⁷ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," 7.

²⁸ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," 51.

²⁹ Benedict Andrews, *Seberg*, performed by Kristen Stewart (2019; Venice, Amazon Studios) Film.

³⁰ "How the FBI Destroyed Hollywood Star Jean Seberg," *The Independent*, August 30, 2019.

³¹ "SDS 1960," *Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)*, Accessed 13 December 2023, <https://www.sds-1960s.org/>.

³² David Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here: The New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.

³³ Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here*, 1.

and decided to go a different route such as adding their faces to the bodies of apes. The FBI gave these leaflets to a member of the Conservative Club at Princeton University, who was outspokenly nationalist and a supporter of the John Birch Society, a far-right radical group that formed in response to the Civil Rights movement.³⁴ The Bureau released this propaganda against the student movements in hopes that the parents of these students would see the negative views of the group in the media, and discourage their children from supporting the movement. This is not the first occurrence of the Bureau spreading propaganda; they previously sent an article to different university and college administrators, “comparing the New Left to ‘Hitler’s New Order.’”³⁵

The Weathermen, later known as Weather Underground, is a left-wing extremist group, which splintered off the radical anti-war group SDS in 1969 with an aggressive militant ideology. The group ideologically aligned themselves with the BPP, attempting to show solidarity with the black revolutionaries who were targets of brutality from police and the government.³⁶ The Weathermen first became known for organizing the “Days of Rage” riots in Chicago resulting in 287 student protesters arrested.³⁷ Following the events in Chicago, the Weathermen began their move to Washington DC, believing they could “bring the war home” and force the United States government to withdrawal from Vietnam with violence domestically.³⁸ The FBI used this opportunity to place illegal wiretaps to track the Weathermen’s move to Washington.³⁹

In 1970, the Weathermen set off an explosive bomb in a Greenwich Village Townhouse, killing three of their members and pushing the FBI to start taking action when it came to the group.⁴⁰ In the same year, Hoover stated, “[The Weathermen are] ...in the forefront of much of the violent activity deliberately calculated to provoke violent confrontations.”⁴¹ Often, due to the Weathermen aligning with the BPP, Hoover talked about both of the groups together, saying, “[The Weathermen policy] ...continues to support the enemies of our country,” referring to their support of the BPP.⁴² Hoover viewed and discussed the groups similarly, as left-wing militant extremists that threatened national security. A newspaper article quoted Hoover to

³⁴ Cunningham, *There’s Something Happening Here*, 1; Ridgeway, “Chapter 2,” 76.

³⁵ Cunningham, *There’s Something Happening Here*, 2.

³⁶ Mark Rudd, “Opinion: I Was Part of the Weather Underground. Violence is Not the Answer,” *The New York Times*, 5 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/opinion/weathermen-greenwich-village-explosion.html/>.

³⁷ Claire Suddath, “A Brief History Of: The Weathermen,” *Time Canada*, 20 October 2008, <https://web-s-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy.temple.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=d85b158b-da20-41d4-b611-c8b463ca6955%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbGl2ZS5yY29wZT1zaXRI#AN=35287949&db=ulh/>.

³⁸ Todd Gitlin, “What Was the Protest Group Students for a Democratic Society? Five Questions Answered,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 4 May 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-was-protest-group-students-democratic-society-five-questions-answered-180963138/>.

³⁹ Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, 99.

⁴⁰ Senate, “Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports,” 933; Suddath, “A Brief History Of.”

⁴¹ “Hoover Attacks SDS Weathermen,” *The Sun*, 14 July 1970, https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/541219104/25C74918B51E4770PQ/2?accountid=14270&source=Historical%20Newspapers/.

⁴² “FBI’s Hoover: ‘Panthers Most Dangerous’: FBI Chief Raps Black Panthers Weathermen also Hit in Hoover’s Annual Report,” *New Journal and Guide*, 18 July 1970, https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/569087747/F3247FF6806C4090PQ/1?accountid=14270&source=Historical%20Newspapers/.

have said, “[Black Panthers are] ... the most dangerous and violence prone of all extremist groups,” and “[The Weathermen have emerged] ... as a principal force guiding the country’s violence-prone young militants.”⁴³

After the death of their members in the bombing, the Weathermen went into hiding and changed their name to the Weather Underground. On May 21, 1970, the Weather Underground issued a “Declaration of War” against imperialism, promising an armed act against the United States within two weeks, and highlighting the black revolutionaries that inspired them.⁴⁴ The main bombings the Weather Underground are known for are the bombing of the New York City police department in response to the invasion of Cambodia and the death of Black Panther Fred Hampton on February 16, 1970; the bombing of the US Capital to protest the invasion of Laos in 1971; and in 1972, the bombing of the Pentagon in response to the bombing of Hanoi.⁴⁵ In each of the bombings, since the loss of their members in Greenwich Village, the Weathermen would issue a formal warning beforehand to prevent any injury, only attacking property rather than people. One former Weatherman stated, “We were and continue to be very proud of the fact that we didn’t injure anybody in any of those actions.”⁴⁶

The Weather Underground began extremist activities as COINTELPRO was in its final years. COINTELPRO ended only two years after the initial formation of the Weather Underground, and the extremist group continued their actions after the conclusion of the program, so the impact of counterintelligence techniques on this left-wing group is not as prominent as other groups. Even so, in 1970, indictments for weapons possession and bombing plans were placed against the Weather Underground, and members of the Weathermen were put on the FBI Top-10 Most Wanted List, with Hoover calling them, “most violent, persistent, and pernicious of revolutionary groups.”⁴⁷ All charges were eventually dropped, due to the illegal surveillance material that was used while preparing the indictments and illegal searches revolving friends and family of those underground.⁴⁸

Black Liberation Groups

The Black Liberation Movement focused on Black power in relation to racial equality from the middle to the end of the 1960’s. The FBI kept wiretaps on leaders throughout the Black liberation movement such as Malcom X, former member of NOI. In 1964, the Bureau reported receiving audio on a wire where Malcolm X stated that he planned to form a more aggressive group to participate in radical activities. The Bureau gained more surveillance privileges on Malcolm X as a result. Nothing he had said showed any inclination of making a new group, with him only being recorded stating he, “recommended the possession of firearms by members for their self-protection.”⁴⁹

⁴³ “FBI’s Hoover,” *New Journal and Guide*.

⁴⁴ David Gilbert, *Love and Struggle: My Life in SDS, the Weather Underground, and Beyond* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 161.

⁴⁵ Suddath, “A Brief History Of.”

⁴⁶ Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, 148.

⁴⁷ Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, 142, 252.

⁴⁸ Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, 252.

⁴⁹ Senate, “Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports,” 333.

The FBI had a covert action program dedicated to destroying the Black Panther Party. The BPP did not categorize under the Black Nationalists according to Hoover.⁵⁰ He stated:

[The Black Panther Party is the] greatest threat to the internal security of the country. Schooled in the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the teaching of Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-tung. Its members have perpetrated numerous assaults on police officers and have engaged in violent confrontations with police throughout the country. Leaders and representatives of the Black Panther Party travel extensively all over the United States preaching their gospel of hate and violence not only to ghetto residents, but to students in colleges, universities, and high schools as well.⁵¹

The BPP's main ideology is armed self-defense of African American communities, in situations such as police assaults at demonstrations. Some groups did splinter off with militant ideology, but the main American Black Panther Party both preached and practiced the use of violence only in self-defense.⁵² The party focused on providing resources to the African American community such as free food programs and aid to low-income communities.⁵³ Hoover claimed that the BPP's actions towards the community had ulterior motives:

...the Black Panther party continues to receive substantial monetary contributions from prominent donors. With these funds, its representatives have been able to travel widely and make frequent appearances at colleges, universities, and even secondary schools. In this way, they are able to spread their doctrine of hate and revolutions and further aggravate the volatile situation on our campuses.⁵⁴

Associating the Panthers with communism then linked any BPP action with communist ideology, painting the view of the Black Panthers as Black extremists intending to spread communist propaganda.

Along with the Bureau's focus on the BPP, Hoover highlighted preventing the rise of a "black messiah." The section of COINTELPRO dedicated to Black Nationalist Hate Groups listed their goals with the program stating:

To prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify and electrify the militant Black nationalist movement. Malcolm X might have been such a 'messiah;' he is the martyr of the movement today. Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, and Elijah Muhammed all aspire to this position. King could be a real contender for this position should he abandon his supposed 'obedience' to 'white, liberal doctrines' ...and embrace black nationalism.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," 185.

⁵¹ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," 187-188.

⁵² Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, 13.

⁵³ "The Black Panther Party: Challenging Police and Promoting Social Change," *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, Accessed 12 December 2023, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/black-panther-party-challenging-police-and-promoting-social-change/>.

⁵⁴ "FBI's Hoover," *New Journal and Guide*.

⁵⁵ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," 25.

A memo sent by Hoover in 1968 specified that Stokely Carmichael had the “necessary charisma to be a real threat,” stating Carmichael as the most likely to be the “messiah.”⁵⁶ Carmichael was a member of the BPP and most known for his previous role in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. FBI files report Carmichael advocating for the arming of Black Americans, with Carmichael stating, “We are advocating simply that every black man in this country should get a gun. The only reason the honkie (white man) is able to rule is because he has a gun.”⁵⁷ The Bureau placed an anonymous call to the Carmichael residence stating that BPP members were out to kill him. His mother answered the call, and she responded that she would tell her son. It was reported that he left for Africa the next day and denounced the Panthers claiming they were, “dishonest and vicious.”⁵⁸ Hoover’s action against Carmichael proved successful.

COINTELPRO also focused on BPP leader Fred Hampton in attempts to destroy the party. Hampton denounced the Weathermen, differentiating the radical BPP from the extremist Weathermen, speaking out against the Days of Rage.⁵⁹ Even so, the Bureau sent Hampton anonymous letters attempting to start dissension within the BPP and between other black liberation groups.⁶⁰ Along with the attempts to cause conflict between black liberation groups, the Bureau sought to restrict the BPP from sharing their views with the public. In 1969, the FBI with the Chicago police department arrested Hampton at a television station where Hampton was scheduled to make an appearance.⁶¹ The FBI was reported to have been involved with Fred Hampton’s death in 1969, with the raid that caused his death based on FBI informant information.⁶² Police raids, both with FBI support and without, were conducted against the BPP regularly; Hampton was killed in one of these raids. It is reported in the 1972 criminal trial that Hampton was pulled from his bed and shot dead after the BPP had surrendered, with there being evidence in his autopsy of Hampton being drugged before the raid.⁶³ Hampton’s death caused riots and protests from New Left groups, such as the Weather Underground, which bombed the New York City Police Department in response to Hampton’s murder⁶⁴. His death became a symbol for police brutality, and the FBI’s overinvolvement with left-wing radical groups.

Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King was a prime focus of Hoover and COINTELPRO. King led the Civil Rights Movement, and an organization called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Hoover despised King, sending him an anonymous letter stating,

⁵⁶ Rob Warden, “Carmichael as ‘Black Messiah’,” *Chicago Daily News*, 10 February 1976, <http://jfk.hood.edu/Collection/Weisberg%20Subject%20Index%20Files/F%20Disk/FBI/FBI%20Hampton%20Case%2000Neil%20William%20Jr/Item%2005.pdf/>.

⁵⁷ “The FBI’s War,” *APM Reports*, <https://features.apmreports.org/arw/king/d1.html/>.

⁵⁸ Warden, “Carmichael as ‘Black Messiah’;” “Senate, “Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports,” 199.

⁵⁹ Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, 71, 73.

⁶⁰ Senate, “Supplementary Detail Staff Reports,” 198.

⁶¹ Senate, “Supplementary Detail Staff Reports,” 217.

⁶² Senate, “Supplementary Detail Staff Reports,” 223.

⁶³ Ted Lacy, “Hampton was Drugged,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, 6 January 1970.

⁶⁴ Suddath, “A Brief History Of: The Weathermen.”

King, look into your heart. You know you are a complete fraud and...like all frauds your end is approaching...You, even at an early age, have turned out to be not a leader but a dissolute abnormal imbecile...You are done...King, I repeat you are done.⁶⁵

In Hoover's eyes, King was the biggest threat to the American vision of a white Christian state.⁶⁶ He feared unity among Black people in America, believing if they all formed together under a leader such as King progressive change could be made. The FBI wire tapped King and kept consistent surveillance on him. Hoover had attempted to send a tape of King being intimate with another woman to King's wife, with his goal being breaking up the marriage and denting the Civil Rights movement, causing King to commit suicide, or both.⁶⁷ On March 4th, 1968, Hoover sent an internal memo which doubled the offices dedicated to COINTELPRO, highlighting Dr. King as the focus to neutralize him as a civil rights leader.

While the FBI was attempting to discredit King, the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) supported by the SCLC planned a March on Washington in 1968. This expanded King's movement beyond just civil rights to also include overall equal rights for all races and classes. The PPC then became a focus of the FBI, with FBI files stating, "[Washington DC is] not sure what will happen when Dr. Martin Luther King's 'Poor Peoples Campaign' begins in April. Even though Dr. King has asked the militants to stay out of the activities, there is no assurance the request will be honored."⁶⁸ Hoover emphasized the need for information regarding the campaign, with agents having case files on SCLC workers, setting up "listening posts", and having inside informants to spy on the movement, working to discredit the organization.⁶⁹ The Bureau was focused on the PPC when King was assassinated.

The Weather Underground is the only legitimate left-wing extremist group included in COINTELPRO. Compared to left-wing radical groups/leaders such as the Black Panther Party or Martin Luther King Jr., the Weather Underground has significantly less counterintelligence techniques used against them. This may be due to situational reasons, such as the timing of when the Weathermen emerged, or the group being based underground. A prominent aspect to look at is the difference in race between the groups. The Weather Underground and the BPP are the two groups most often labeled the most dangerous by Hoover, but the levels of violence used by the two groups differ greatly. The Weather Underground placed bombs in government buildings with the intent of harming property, while the BPP states to use violence only as self-defense.

The reason Hoover views these two groups as similar threats is not due to the amount of violence, but rather due to race. Hoover deemed the Black Panthers as a security threat because they were black, and he had overall fear of an organized Black liberation/civil rights movement gaining momentum in the United States. The BPP claimed only to arm themselves

⁶⁵ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 73.

⁶⁶ Gerald McKnight, *The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People's Campaign* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 3.

⁶⁷ Carl Rowan, *Breaking Barriers: A Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1991), 259;; Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 92.

⁶⁸ "The FBI's War on King," *APM Reports*, Accessed 13 December 2023, <https://features.apmreports.org/arw/king/d2b.html/>.

⁶⁹ McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 22-23; Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 92.

for self-defense against the system that is systemically violent against Black Americans but did not preach violence in their ideology. Nevertheless, Hoover did not see the difference between them and the Weather Underground, a violent extremist group, due to his far-right ideology classifying black radicals as an equal threat as extremists to United States security.

The BPP, a radical group on the other side of the political spectrum was considered by Hoover, “the most dangerous and violence prone of all extremist groups.”⁷⁰ In 1970, the *Philadelphia Tribune* published interviews with Americans calling out Hoover’s focus on the BPP and leniency with right-wing groups, with an insurance manager stating, “I can think of a few more groups that are much more dangerous [than the BPP], like the Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society, and the Minutemen.”⁷¹ The lack of focus on groups such as the John Birch Society brings to attention Hoover’s focus on communism, and the fact that the Society held a right-wing anti-communist ideology caused Hoover to ignore their radical militant actions compared to left-wing groups.

RIGHT-WING GROUPS

John Birch Society and Minutemen

The John Birch Society and the Minutemen are the two far-right groups that formed in reaction to the New Left, in fear of ideas such as communism or the black liberation movement.⁷² The John Birch Society was a right-wing radical group founded in 1958 to “save ‘our inheritance’ from an ‘international communist plot.’”⁷³ They opposed many governmental organizations such as the United Nations and NATO. It was not until 1966 that the John Birch Society expanded its views from just fighting against the communist plot to also attacking the Civil Rights movement, stating that the movement was influenced by communist ideas.⁷⁴

The John Birch Society created a subgroup called Truth About Civil Turmoil (TACT), which had black right-wing members, and even an FBI agent, who posed as a black support group member but in reality spread hateful rhetoric about the Civil Rights movement, describing a Civil Rights march led by King in 1965 as, “a hoard of termites from all over the country, led by half-crazed ministers and professors..., in a typical demonstration of communism.”⁷⁵ The FBI denies any “security type investigation” on the John Birch Society and stated they only checked the background of the founder of the group, due to the lack of violence demonstrated by the group.⁷⁶ The Bureau described the John Birch Society as a “militant anticommunist right wing organization, more of an activist group,” and used this definition on at least four separate

⁷⁰ “FBI’s Hoover,” *New Journal and Guide*.

⁷¹ Len Lear, “Is J. Edgar Hoover Right About the Black Panthers?” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 11 August 1970, https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/532621200/D874155F5B4E4D59PQ/3?accountid=14270&sourcetyp=Historical%20Newspapers/.

⁷² Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 76.

⁷³ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 76.

⁷⁴ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 77.

⁷⁵ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 77.

⁷⁶ Senate, “Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports,” 455.

occasions.⁷⁷ Due to the group's anti- communist ideology, they were not considered threats by Hoover.

The Minutemen viewed themselves as "a national organization of patriotic Americans who are preparing themselves as a last line of defense against communism."⁷⁸ Similarly to the John Birch Society, much of the lack of surveillance on the Minutemen had to do with their anti- communist ideology, ignoring the clear extremist actions. The Minutemen had the means to create a guerilla army, with ties to the National Rifle Association allowing them unlimited ammunition and the ability to buy bulk weapons through the United States government. They had attempted to assassinate Democratic Senator William Fullbright, who was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.⁷⁹ Hoover declared them a "paper organization," meaning they exist more in theory rather than in reality, and not a threat to national security.⁸⁰ In fact, the Minutemen symbol was utilized by the Bureau, placing it on cars and mailing letters to the BPP with their symbol on the stationery to attempt to scare members into ceasing their actions.⁸¹ This shows that the Bureau was aware of the Minutemen's anti-civil rights ideology, and rather than identifying the possible threat of their ideology, used it against the BPP within COINTELPRO.

Ku Klux Klan

With the focus of the Ku Klux Klan being white supremacy, the Civil Rights movement was viewed to them as extremist, attempting to break the system and destroy their idea of a white society. As the Civil Rights movement began gaining more traction, The Klan was gaining more members, with roughly 40,000 members in 1965.⁸² The one difference with the KKK compared to other groups discussed is rather than being one organized group, it was comprised of multiple smaller groups under the name of the Ku Klux Klan.⁸³ The Bureau declared that they were effective with the Klan COINTELPRO, but the United States Senate stated the work done, "appears to have been limited."⁸⁴ An FBI informant that infiltrated one of the Klans reported the plan and police involvement in the attack on the Freedom Riders in 1961 and did nothing.⁸⁵ This happened again with the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, a black church in Birmingham, Alabama. Witnesses saw two Klansmen before the bombing near the church and informed the FBI. Hoover himself discouraged them from acting saying that the men would not

⁷⁷ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," 49.

⁷⁸ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 78.

⁷⁹ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 76, 80-81.

⁸⁰ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 80.

⁸¹ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," 215, 268

⁸² Popham, "KKK in the Civil Rights Era: Organized Resistance to Racial Laws Grows," *The New York Times*, 2 December 1956, https://link-gale-com.libproxy.temple.edu/apps/doc/CX3456600143/OVIC?u=temple_main&sid=primo&xid=6ec818cb/.

⁸³ KKK Report by the Anti-defamation League of B'nai B'rith (1965), CULR-Series3, Sub-series 8.E, Box 232, Folder 2482, Chicago Urban League Records, University of Illinois at Chicago Library, Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois.

⁸⁴ Senate, "Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports," 19.

⁸⁵ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 90.

get prosecuted. When agents came forward saying they did have the information to charge a Klansmen, Hoover still disapproved claiming that it would only fuel the Civil Rights Movement.⁸⁶

In comparison to left-wing extremist groups such as the Weather Underground, the Bureau's actions towards Klan violent activity differed strongly. Part of Hoover's dismissal of Klan activity had to do with his dismissal of right-wing threats, along with his focus on preventing the rise of a civil rights/Black liberation movement. Hoover was hesitant to charge and investigate right-wing extremism, particularly groups that acted against civil rights, fearing it would ignite the movement more. Claiming that black extremism was the biggest threat to state security and associating their ideology with communism pushed right-wing threats to the sideline. Hoover was concerned that investigating and prosecuting right-wing threats would furthermore assist black radicals' ideology and push the "communist plot."

Looking overall at the comparison of Hoover's treatment of right- and left-wing groups, whether radical or extreme, illustrates Hoover's dismissal of right-wing threats. Hoover's far-right view formed the Bureau's definition of a security threat through CONTELPRO, as those whose ideals differed from the white capitalist conservative society were considered the largest threat to internal security. This highlights groups such as the BPP as "black extremists," while dismissing the impact of groups such as the KKK, whose ideology is focused on removing civil rights from people of color, specifically Black Americans. Hoover's focus on left-wing radicals, especially black radicals, blinded him to the right-wing threat, dismissing groups with similar actions to Black radical groups due to ideology based in far-right ideas.

Conclusion

J. Edgar Hoover passed away May 2nd, 1972, having been the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigations for 48 years.⁸⁷ Hoover had been Director of the Bureau since its creation in 1924, and therefore had a significant impact of its founding principles. His far-right conservative ideology forced him to focus on black left-wing radicals, with the counterintelligence program's main investigations focused on leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Panther Party. Comparing Hoover's focus on left-wing radical group, the BPP, and the known right-wing extremist group the KKK, Hoover allowed civil rights infringement by the Klan, such as the bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, to not empower the Civil Rights movement and passively used informants to gain information on the group. With the BPP Hoover arranged illegal wiretaps and attempting internal dissention of the party by sending anonymous letters and threats. Even comparing the Bureau's actions between right-and left-wing extremist groups, with the Weather Underground, the level of counterintelligence tactics used against the Klan is severely less than the Weathermen, which included ordering break-ins of homes belonging to friends and family of the Weathermen. Under COINTELPRO, Hoover defined national security threats as any group or individual whose ideas deviated from his vision of a white, capitalist, conservative society rather than focusing on extremist ideologies or acts of violence against civilians as threats.

⁸⁶ Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face*, 90.

⁸⁷ "J. Edgar Hoover," *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, Accessed 13 December 2023, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/directors/j-edgar-hoover/>.

After Hoover's death, the United States government and Americans had to rethink the power given to governmental entities and place guidelines to prevent illegal FBI surveillance on groups or individuals. The early 2000s changed the way America viewed a national security threat with the plane crashes on September 11th, 2001, shifting focus towards Islamic terrorism, with the FBI creating and releasing the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists on October 10, 2001. It was not until the 2010s that there was another radical movement shifting the FBI's focus back to domestic security. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a radical left-wing movement focused on police brutality. The movement began in 2013 in response to the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by a white police officer, building off of events such as the death of Fred Hampton in 1969.⁸⁸ The movement is based on non-violence, however a few protests that turned into riots convinced people otherwise. The movement expanded in 2020, especially after the infamous death of George Floyd by police, with an average of 140 protests a day speaking out on Floyd's death.

The January 6th insurrection is the most recent large-scale display of right-wing extremism, with the riot and intended insurrection at the Capital being based on conspiracy theories pushed by Donald Trump after his loss in the 2020 presidential election.⁸⁹ The January 6th insurrection pulled in far-right groups such as the Proud Boys, a right-wing organization aligning themselves with white supremacists and Neo-Nazis. After being asked if he would condemn white supremacy, Trump stated, "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by, but I'll tell you what, somebody's gotta do something about Antifa and the left because this is not a right-wing problem, this is a left-wing problem."⁹⁰ FBI Director Wray disagreed with Trump and condemned Jan. 6th stating that white supremacy forms, "the biggest chunk of our domestic terrorism portfolio overall...have been responsible for the most lethal attacks over the last decade."⁹¹

Although the Bureau has started stating that right-wing extremism is the biggest threat to national security, that does not mean it has been implemented into action. Comparing both BLM protests at the Capitol in Washington DC and the January 6th insurrection, the reaction by the government differed greatly. The National Guard did not anticipate having to defend the Capitol against right-wing protestors. The rioters pushed against the Capitol Hill police who attempted to protect the Capitol building against the insurrectionists, many of which were armed with weapons.⁹² Conversely, when BLM protests moved to DC in June 2020, the National Guard waited at the Lincoln Memorial for the peaceful movement to arrive. Demonstrators

⁸⁸ "Black Lives Matter Movement," *Vernon E. Jordan Law Library*, Accessed 13 December 2023, <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM/>.

⁸⁹ Ralph Young, "Must the Capitol Riots be Included in the Legacy of American Dissent?" *History News Network*, 21 February 2021, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/179261/>.

⁹⁰ Ben Sales, "Are the Proud Boys Antisemitic?" *The Jerusalem Post (Online)*, 30 September 2020, https://www.proquest.com/cv_701361/docview/2515497608/EA037DC843E04C1DPQ/9?accountid=14270&source=type=Blogs,%20Podcasts,%20%20Websites/.

⁹¹ Joanna Walters, "Far-Right Terror Poses a Bigger Threat to US than Islamic Extremism Post-911," *The Guardian*, 8 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/sep/08/post-911-domestic-terror/>.

⁹² Byron York, "'Armed insurrection': What Weapons Did the Capitol Rioters Carry?" *Washington Examiner*, 11 October 2021, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/armed-insurrection-what-weapons-capitol-rioters-carry/>.

were tear gassed by local police and a protest led to 88 arrests.⁹³ Using protests at the Capitol in Washington DC as a reference, the FBI has made little action beyond stating right-wing extremism is a threat, continuing to treat left-wing radical groups as more of a threat than right-wing extremist groups. As political movements continue to evolve, and groups such as the Proud Boys emerge, it does bring to question whether the FBI will continue to follow in Hoover's footsteps and focus on left-wing groups, or if they will treat right-wing extremism as an equal threat.

⁹³ Nicole Chavez, "Rioters Breached US Capitol Security on Wednesday," *CNN*, 10 January, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/07/us/police-response-black-lives-matter-protest-us-capitol/index.html/>.

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