

Hoover Made Major Contributions to Civil Rights

FBI Director Gave KKK Fits All the 48 Years He Was in Office

EDITOR'S NOTE: The author, Joseph D. Purvis, is a native Georgian who joined the FBI in January, 1941, after five years as a reporter and Assistant City Editor of the *Savannah Evening Press*. Prior to his retirement in 1973 as an Assistant Director he had served successively as Special Agent, Resident Agent, Supervisor at National Headquarters, Field Supervisor, Assistant Special Agent in Charge (Cleveland, Milwaukee, Boston), and Special Agent in Charge at Norfolk, Richmond, Washington and Savannah. He wrote a Sunday column for the

News-Press from 1974 to 1984. From 1977 to 1985 he was Chairman of the Chatham County Board of Registrars. Previously he had held various offices in the little town of Vernonburg, including Intendant. This is the last of a four-part series.

There were many many investigations under Hoover which furthered the progress of integration in various fields — public accommodations, public facilities, public schools and employment — too many to attempt to summarize here. I cite one notable example, in Louisiana,

The REAL J. Edgar



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By JOSEPH D. PURVIS

where in July, 1966, a Federal court directed 93 restaurants to begin serving black customers. As a result of FBI investigation the court found their claim of being an association of private clubs was nothing more than a sham concocted for one purpose: to exclude blacks.

Stories were heard here and there following Dr. King's murder on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tenn., that the FBI would not choose to conduct a vigorous investigation. Actually, Hoover committed the Bureau's entire facilities and personnel and demanded a solution. Yes, demanded. I never knew him to follow an investigation more closely.

Within a week a man then known as Eric S. Galt was developed as a suspect. Within the second week enough evidence had been gathered to warrant the issuance of process authorized by the Attorney General.

Three more days and the FBI's Identification Division, starting with latent fingerprints from the murder weapon, had determined that Galt was in fact James Earl Ray, an escaped convict. Using the name of Ramon George Sneyd he had obtained a passport. The investigation then spread to a dozen foreign countries.

On June 8, 1968, Ray was arrested by officers of New Scotland Yard, on the basis of information provided by the FBI, when he attempted to leave London for Brussels. Then in an extraordinary step the FBI Director called upon me to dispatch two agents to London to escort Ray back to the United States. On March 10, 1969, having been released for state prosecution, Ray pleaded

guilty to murder and was sentenced to serve 99 years in prison.

I submit that none of this could have represented action by a man who harbored a grudge. J. Edgar Hoover's life commitment was to honorable and effective law enforcement. This was as true in his reverence for civil liberties as in any other of the many aspects of law enforcement and innovations made a lasting difference in the quality of public service and domestic security.

Yet there are those who would intentionally, and some unintentionally, lead the public to believe otherwise. A few years after retiring I began to hear questions about Hoover's integrity from people who had been his supporters. After a lot of aspersions, defamation had long become ingrained. How else could the woman in Illinois be moved to ask not if but why Hoover hated Robeson? As silly as the question was, the magazine's answer was sillier.

Or why would Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun Times, a motion picture critic, write in this newspaper on March 12, 1989, that although he thought "Mississippi Burning" was the best film of 1988 it had been tainted with controversy and would not win the Oscar? The portrayal of two FBI men as heroes, he reported, "has been criticized by many veterans of the civil rights struggle, who say the FBI and its director, J. Edgar Hoover, were more enemy than friend at the time."

Or why would the writer of a letter to *The New York Times* (2-27-89) assert "The FBI devoted its energies to investigating, harassing, threatening, intimidating, doing all in its power to undermine those who fought to make a world in which one's skin color would become meaningless"?

Or why do many wonder about Mr. Hoover's "secret files" when there has never been any such thing?

Or why would Ms. Zellner declare it was "a sad irony" to depict FBI agents caring about the civil rights of black people?

And so on and so on and so on.

On June 22, 1989, the *Times* devoted two columns to coverage of the 25th anniversary of the murders of the civil rights workers in Mississippi. The FBI was not mentioned.

The omission was obviously a calculated snub based upon long-nurtured bias, lest anyone get the idea that Hoover and his agency were on the job.

The *Times* disliked Hoover. Hoover disliked King. Draw your own conclusion as to the justness and professionalism with which their respective obligations were discharged once the subjects of their enmity were dead and defenseless.

If *The New York Times*, one of the great newspapers of the world, is not above a touch of venality perhaps it is folly to expect much from television. That young medium, so unlimited in potential, thrives on show business, not journalism, and has yet to find its place under the First Amendment. The crown jewel of our Constitution shines forth in the right we and the press have to express ourselves freely but the overwhelming masses think this right carries a responsibility. For every Gregory Johnson who would defile the American flag there are millions who would defend it.

The one-sided "Specials" seem never to end, as if television is trying to convince itself that J. Edgar Hoover really was an ogre. As recently as December 6, 1989, there was a two-hour syndicated program called "The Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover". (To repeat, there never has been any such thing).

Abusing the Freedom of Information Act the syndicate, based in California, put together a scurrilous offering of unprecedented malignance. It was so bad that substantial advertising was withdrawn from additional showings.

A further word about the Ku Klux Klan slayings in Mississippi. JEH gave that barbaric organization fits during all the 48 years he was in office. Several times he forced it to disband. Had not the FBI penetrated the Klan long beforehand the bodies of those three courageous young

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men would beyond any reasonable doubt still be buried beneath an earthen dam, their killers unidentified, their loved ones not only still grieving but forever disconsolate over the failed resolution.

According to Roy K. Moore, then Special Agent in Charge at Jackson, there were six other murders in the general area within a relatively short time frame. All related to the KKK and all were solved by the FBI. Still Mr. Daly of TIME presumes to assert the FBI was not responsible for its own efforts there in the field of civil rights.

The biggest complaint by activists against the FBI was its failure to provide physical "protection" in their campaigns of civil disobedience. This was true even of Dr. King himself. All his life the Director of the FBI opposed the idea of a national police force and, I think, properly so. The consequences would be disastrous in a democracy.

The FBI is an investigative agency of the federal government. It had not authority in the '60's and it has none now to protect people in the

sense of crowd control. Its protection lay in the competency of its investigations. These enabled remarkable changes to come about through the judiciary in the lives and work and liberties of blacks and other minorities.

Therein lies a heritage more attributable to J. Edgar Hoover than to any other individual, or group or agency, or to any combination of these. Based upon more than three decades of experience in 15 states I know that before his influence became apparent blacks could not and did not, as a general rule, look for equal treatment in our courts of law. Since his time they can look for it, and they do get it.