

Thursday, September 21, 1989

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Reflections on Huey Newton

BY THE TIME Richard Nixon assumed the presidency, the Black Panthers were trying to purge themselves of criminal elements and shift their resources and organizational talents toward establishing a legitimate social agenda. The Panthers did develop a program of community control of the police and schools, organized tenant strikes, and helped provide free breakfasts for ghetto children, clothing drives, community day care and health clinics.

For many blacks, Huey Newton is still regarded as a righteous hero and the Panthers a dedicated black liberation movement. Many whites, especially those with law enforcement backgrounds, eagerly dismiss Newton and the Panthers as contemptible and lawless gangsters. Each view is simplistic and conveniently overlooks larger and sadly forgotten lessons.

The divisive way in which we remember Newton — in stark caricature as hero or renegade — points out the divisions that still threaten our country.

Only recently — mostly through the slow release of government documents under the Freedom of Information Act — has the true and full account of our government's polarizing reaction to racial struggle in the 1960s become apparent. These materials reveal a chilling story of racial and political repression by federal authorities.

When J. Edgar Hoover's racism was not casual, it was primitive. He referred to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as a "burr head" and as a "Tom cat with obsessive degenerate sexual urges." After the 1963 March on Washington, Hoover decided to marshal the full weight of the Bureau's resources to neutralize King and destroy the civil rights movement. The director judged that blacks had gone too far with their protests and now loomed as a

threat to the established social order.

From 1963 to his assassination in 1968, Dr. King was subjected to the most intensive surveillance that any American citizen has ever experienced. Hoover dreamed of destroying King and replacing him with a "more manageable leader" hand-picked, of course, by the director himself. Ironically, the prime candidate was Samuel R. Pierce, Jr. — yes, the same "Silent Sam" who during the Reagan administration presided over a scandal-plagued HUD.

The FBI vendetta against King was part of the government's larger effort to disrupt the momentum of the civil rights movement. In the summer of 1967, with the Great Society consensus in shambles amidst burning cities and a failed war in Vietnam, an embattled Lyndon Johnson — the self-proclaimed "Civil Right President" — gave Hoover free rein to deal with

In February of 1968, anticipating another hot summer of racial violence, the FBI's Domestic Intelligence Division unveiled a newly conceived counterintelligence program designed to "neutralize militant black nationalists and prevent violence on their part."

These strategies were communicated to all major FBI offices in a six-page memorandum which FBI

The Panthers were targets of chilling racial and political repression.

insiders named the "black Messiah" letter. Dr. King, Stokley Carmichael and Elijah Muhammed were identified as the most likely black "messiahs." The Black Panthers became the most targeted militant group.

One FBI ploy was the "snitch jacket" technique, whereby agents would falsely implicate a Panther as an FBI informant. The "snitch jacket" was used against Panther chapters in more than a dozen cities, and at least one falsely accused Panther, Alex Rackley, was tortured and murdered by Panthers because they thought he was a government snitch.

Now, Huey Newton is dead, but the same conditions of poverty, discrimination and hopelessness that gave him a forum are fully alive. And repeatedly, from scandals such as Watergate to Iran-contra, our government has demonstrated its willingness to act covertly and illegally when "national security" is at stake.

In the 1990s, let us strive not to repeat the history of the 1960s in the name of some new law-and-order politics of race. That, I think, should be the lesson of Huey Newton's life.



the black menace. Unfettered, the FBI launched a two-pronged program of surveillance and counterintelligence against black communities across the country. Civil rights leaders and black power advocates were targeted under the heading "Black Hate Groups."

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