Post 6·23·71

Poster

He Didn't Want To Die in Bed

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Fred Hampton flourished, as they used to say on the old Roman tombstones, between Aug. 30, 1948, and sometime around 4 a.m. of Dec. 4, 1969. Flourished may be too grand a word for this black son of a house painter, a young man who grew up in the industrial suburb of Maywood, Ill., and who was given two to five for robbing a Good Humor man of the contents of his vending cart.

"I am a big dude but I can't eat no $71 worth of ice cream," he was quoted as saying by Earl and Miriam Selby in their book, "Odyssey," (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1971, $7.95). Fred Hampton was the chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party and, although he said the customary ferocious things, the nonradical Selbys—he is an editor of the Reader's Digest—took to him and interviewed him when he virtually predicted he would die at the hands of Cook County State's Attorney Edward V. Hanrahan.

"We follow the things that relate to us right here in America. You have a beautiful example in Hanrahan and other people that wipe out the young people. What I'm mentioning are things you need to bring about a state of genocide: stop the communications, stop any time of freedom of speech. All these things are fascism. So with me, I don't look for any justice in this system, in the courts, or nowhere else until the people start feeling this s--- themselves.

He didn't look and he didn't get. On the night he died, 14 Chicago cops, attached to Hanrahan's office, raided the apartment where Hampton and eight other Panthers slept. They killed another man and shot young Hampton

See COMMENT, C5, Col. 1

to death probably in his sleep, unquestionably in his bed.

With the killings there began a train of serio-comic judicial events: A coroner's jury was convoked to declare the killings justifiable; the seven surviving Panthers were indicted by a grand jury for attempted murder; a federal grand jury investigated, indicted no one but then issued a report suggesting that Hanrahan's men had assasinated the two and the Chicago Police Department had tried to destroy the evidence of the alleged crime; next the seven indicted Panthers had their cases dismissed for lack of evidence, and then another grand jury was convened. This presumably was going to be the coat of whitewash that would adhere to Hanrahan's oily surface, but it was not to be.

Barnabas Sears, the special prosecutor appointed to work with the grand jury, apparently became convinced that it was the cops, not the Panthers, who were culprits with the results that reports out of Chicago had it that Hanrahan, the police commissioner and an unknown number of other officials would be indicted. The news of this sent the state's attorney running to his boss, Mayor Daley, which got things righted again.

In a sort of down home, American re-enactment of the movie "Z," Sears found himself pulled into court and ordered by Judge Joseph A. Power, an ex-Daley law partner, to bring new witnesses before the grand jury and, apparently, to keep on doing it until they vote to disindict Hanrahan and his official associates. Sears, a 68-year-old figure of white-haired rectitude, declined to obey this most unusual order of the court. So he was found in contempt and fined $50 an hour until he obeyed. That was back at the end of April; at this writ-

ing the fine has mounted to more than $64,000.

Through all this it hasn't been easy for the public to pick out the facts. The cops have tampered with the evidence; hokey, untrue stories as to what happened have been planted on television and in the papers by the officials. And, on top of everything else, the surviving people from the apartment have refused to tell their story.

But now we can find out through a documentary movie. Made by Mike Gray Associates of Chicago, it contains much footage of Fred Hampton, a re-enactment of the killings by the cops who did it, extensive photography of the physical evidence before it was messed over by the law enforcers and several statements by people who were in the apartment.

The movie, entitled "The Murder of Fred Hampton," opened in a Chicago art house in early May where it bombed out. Nobody came. "Z" is tough enough to see when it's about somebody else's country. Whether it will open anywhere else is problematic. It cost Mike Gray and his friends about a hundred grand to make it, but it costs twice that much to distribute a film nationally, and the money is gone.

This is too bad because "The Murder of Fred Hampton" is a movie everyone who cares for law and order under justice will want to look at and weep over. But since economics are what they are and you may never get a chance to see this solid piece of work, it is worth printing the words of Deborah Johnson as they come over the sound track. Deborah Johnson was in the apartment:

"Someone came into the room . . . started shakin' the chairman. Said 'Chairman, chairman, wake up! The pigs are vampin.' " Still half asleep I looked up and I saw bullets comin' from it looked like the front of the apartment—from the kitchen area. The pigs were just shootin'. And about this time I jumped on top of the chairman. He looked up—looked like all the pigs just converged at the entrance way to the bedroom area, the back bedroom area. The mattress was just goin'. You could feel the bullets goin' into it. I just knew we'd be dead, everybody in there. When he looked up—he just looked up—he didn't say a word and he didn't move 'cept for movin' his head up. He laid his head back down —to the side like that. He never said a word and he never got up off the bed.

"A person who was in the room kept hollerin' out 'Stop shootin'! Stop shootin'! We have a pregnant woman or a pregnant sister in here.' At that time I was 8½ to 9 months pregnant. My baby was to be delivered in two weeks.

"The pigs kept on shootin' so I kept on hollerin' out. Finally they stopped. They pushed me and the other brother by the kitchen door and told us to face the wall. I heard a pig say, 'He's barely alive, he'll barely make it.' I assumed they were talkin' about Chairman Fred. So then they started shootin'. The pigs started shootin', shootin' again. I heard a sister scream. They stopped shootin'. The pig said, 'He's good and dead now.' The pigs run around laughing, they were really happy, ya know, talkin' about Chairman Fred is dead. I never saw Chairman Fred again."

The papers carried a picture of a grinning police officer wheeling Fred Hampton's body into an ambulance.

Before Fred Hampton ceased flourishing, he spoke certain words that are on the sound track of this film:

"Like we always said, if you're asked to make a commitment at the age of 20 and you say, I don't want to make a commitment only because of the simple reason that I'm too young to die, I want to live a little bit longer. What you did is, you're dead already.

"I believe that I'm going to do my job, and I believe that I was born not to die in a car wreck; I don't believe I'm going to die slipping on a piece of ice; I don't believe I'm going to die because I've got a bad heart; I don't believe I'm going to die of lung cancer. I believe that I'm going to be able to die doing the things I was born for. I believe I'm going to be able to die high off the people."