

**Silence of the Liberty Bell: The FBI's
Harassment of Black Power
Organizations in Philadelphia between
1964-1971**

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Introduction

In 1956, the Federal Bureau of Investigation under the orders of Director J. Edgar Hoover began a widespread counterintelligence program to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” perceived threats to national security.¹ This program was officially titled COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program). While it began with attempts to disrupt the American Communist Party, it grew to target a whole range of individuals and organizations associated with the Black

Power movement, civil rights movement, the “New Left, White Hate Groups, Puerto Rican Independence Groups, the American Indian Movement,” and more.² This program would formally last until 1971 when it was shut down after internal documents were leaked to the press by the Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI. Meanwhile, police departments across the United States had established their own counterintelligence units such as Chicago and LA’s “Red Squads” or Philadelphia’s Civil Disobedience Unit.³

Law enforcement saw Black Power and Black Nationalist organizations as genuine threats to the United States. The FBI’s ideologically charged war on Black Nationalist affiliated organizations was influenced by the FBI’s belief in their

¹ Internal Memo, Director to SAC, Albany and all other field offices, 08/25/1967

² Internal Memo, Director to SAC, Albany and all other field offices, 08/25/1967

³ Ellen W Schrecker, "Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America."

Monthly Review, November 1991, 57+. Gale Academic OneFile (accessed November 9, 2021). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A11559671/AONE?u=temple_main&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=d543f20b.

protection of American morality, paranoia of communism and Black Nationalism, and racist sentiments against Black Americans. This influence is evident when exploring the FBI's effort to target two very different organizations – the Black Coalition and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). RAM was a militant revolutionary Black Nationalist organization that advocated for the overthrow of the American government while the Black Coalition was a community improvement organization that crowdfunded money to develop essential services to improve the conditions of Black Philadelphians. These two groups emerged from the social unrest of the 60s as people of color mobilized against systematic racism and unequal treatment.

Philadelphia's civil rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's was incredibly focused on local issues facing the city's

Black community. National organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had local chapters involved in changing racist city, business, and union policies. Philadelphia activists, after the Second World War, had participated in large scale civil disobedience, mass protest, strikes, electoral mobilization, and militant action in response to economic and housing inequality as well as general discrimination. This resistance resulted in scrutiny from the white population as well as local and federal law enforcement.⁴ Many Black Philadelphians were denied job opportunities in both union and nonunion workplaces and were discriminated against by banks and financial institutions.⁵ Additionally, Philadelphia was experiencing

⁴ Matthew Countryman. *South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 215.

⁵ Matthew Countryman. *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

a housing inaccessibility and affordable housing crisis for many Black Philadelphians. For example, only “1,044 of the 140,000 housing units built were available to Black Philadelphians.”⁶ These issues resulted in the formation of many militant and non-militant organizations who adhered to ideologies of Marxist-Leninism and Black Power. Manifesting these ideologies into direct action, they attempted to create their own solutions for these problems. Some of these solutions were militant and revolutionary and attempted to create mass social movements that directly confronted law enforcement and discriminatory businesses. Other organizations took to policy and electoral influence as well as the creation of community resources within the Black community.

Scholars have given attention to the large national organizations such as the Nation of Islam, the Black Panthers, and the SNCC as opposed to smaller, local organizations. Smaller organizations provide a snapshot into the extent the FBI was willing to go to satiate their paranoia. Local organizations such as the Black Coalition were no threat to the FBI but reveal that the FBI was willing to expend tremendous amounts of resources to neutralize organizations that were hardly influencing national movements. It demonstrates their willingness to forgo resources on other matters to focus on their ideologically motivated campaign against Black Nationalist and Black Power organizations. There were thousands of various national and local organizations that had a wide range of goals but advocated for some form of Black Power or Black Nationalism. The

⁶ Pedro Regalado, “Fair Housing.” Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia. Encyclopedia of Greater

Philadelphia, 2014.
<https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/fair-housing/>.

Black Coalition and RAM made up some of the few smaller organizations targeted by the FBI in the unorganized and scattered, digitally released file, “COINTELPRO: Black Extremist.”⁷

Black Power and Black Nationalism are distinct ideologies that manifested differently but were viewed similarly by the FBI. Stokely Carmichael, as an influential leader within the Black Panther Party, was one of the leading figures of the early Black Power movement. His position made him a target of COINTELPRO for being a possible “Black Messiah.”⁸ Carmichael described Black Power as the “call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations. It is a call to reject the racist

institutions and values of this society.”⁹ Black Power was about building consciousness within Black communities based on race rather than purely class. It opposed the civil rights movement’s prioritization of building of an interracial coalition and instead believed that success would be met by having Black communities empower themselves while whites who allied themselves with the movement focused on educating and organizing the white community.

Black Power was an overarching ideology which sought to improve the conditions of Black Americans by focusing on coalition building within the Black community. Examples include buying products from local businesses, voting as a bloc for specific representatives, protesting together, and forming their own

⁷ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Various Authors. “COINTELPRO: Black Extremists.” Department of Justice, 1967-1971. FBI Vault.

⁸ Internal Memo, G.C Moore, to W. C Sullivan. 2/29/68. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁹ Donald J McCormack, “Stokely Carmichael and Pan-Africanism: Back to Black Power.” *The Journal of Politics* 35, no. 2 (1973): 386–409. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2129075>. 396.

organizations led by Black individuals. It tended to refute non-violence and saw it as a tactic rather than an ideology itself. Black Power was a fluid ideology that changed meanings based on the organizations and leaders advocating for it. Black Nationalism is on the other hand incorporated and expanded on ideas associated with Black Power.

Black Nationalism, building upon the ideas of Black Power, revolved around economic self-sufficiency, race-pride for African Americans, and Black separatism.”¹⁰ The ideas of Black Nationalism were influenced by early twentieth century activist Marcus Garvey. Garvey advocated for African American emigration to Africa, the political and economic empowerment of Black communities, and founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association. He would

be one of the first targets of the Bureau of Investigation for his belief in Black Nationalism and opposition to U.S policies. Black Nationalism focused on separatism and the establishment of a Black governed nation and/or the overthrow of the American government and replacing it with something new. The Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammad, another COINTELPRO target, strictly adhered to Black Nationalism. The NOI is one of the most famous organizations that took on the mantle of Black Nationalism, believing Islam to be the best way to save and unite the Black community from the oppression of Christianity and racism. The NOI advocated for separation rather than integration to empower African Americans. One of the most famous Black Nationalists apart of the NOI was Malcolm X who believed in the necessity of the separation of white and Blacks but would

¹⁰ N.a. “Black Nationalism.” The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute. Stanford University, May 21, 2018.

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/black-nationalism>.

later change his opinions after seeing racial cooperation within the international Islamic community.

Black Nationalism focused on the creation of a homogenous Black nation or a new heterogenous nation dedicated to the destruction of all institutional racial barriers. RAM for example, wanted to completely overthrow the American government and establish a “Black dictatorship” or a separated “Black South” but understood that whites and Blacks would have to co-exist in some way.¹¹ Thus, Black Nationalism and Black Power were two distinct ideologies that manifested themselves differently through various organizations and leaders. These ideologies saw American institutions as deeply flawed and needing dramatic change. This terrified the FBI. Many of these organizations directly recruited people

from prisons and low-income areas often affiliated with crime. Therefore, the FBI perceived these organizations to be hosting ‘immoral’ individuals who were corrupting the organizations they were a part of. This is exactly why the Black Coalition, and RAM would be targeted for the same reasons despite being drastically different organizations.

The Black Coalition was a diverse group of Black, liberal, moderate, conservative, and nationalist members that created and funded community projects across the city. The Revolutionary Action Movement was a militant, Marxist, Black Nationalist organization that advocated for the arming of the Black working-class with the goal of turning the Civil Rights movement into a Black Nationalist revolution.¹² By analyzing the FBI’s

¹¹ Max Stanford. “Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement in Western Capitalist Society.” MA diss., University of Atlanta, 1986. 113.

¹² Ahmad Muhammad. History of RAM - Revolutionary Action Movement. United States: Freedom Archives, 1978. 10. Accessed http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/finder/DOC513_scans/RAM/513.RAM.History.of.RAM.pdf

justification for harassment of both organizations, I find that they were motivated not only by their desire for state security, but their own definition of moral behavior, paranoia, and racism.

The FBI and White Society

When the Federal Bureau of Investigation began their crackdown on Black Power organizations in Philadelphia in 1967, it was a large and bureaucratic institution that employed thousands across the country. But the Federal Bureau of Investigation first began in 1908 as a small arm of the Justice Department when Attorney General Charles Bonaparte and President Theodore Roosevelt created a regiment of thirty-four former agents as a parallel to the Secret Service. The growth of federal oversight embodied the values of the early progressive movement which posited

the proliferation of federal capabilities as necessary to protect a rapidly industrializing America. Officially titled the “Bureau of Investigation” this force was made permanent in 1909.¹³ The Bureau’s first large expansion of duties was to enforce the Mann Act, or ‘White Slave Traffic Act’, designed to stop the trafficking of women for sexual and “immoral purpose.”¹⁴ Despite the just intentions, the Bureau used it as a tool to criminalize consensual sexual behaviors, police gender roles, and interracial relationships under the guise of protecting only white Americans.¹⁵

One of the first large scale operations by the FBI, the Mann Act catalyzed its path towards becoming an agency built on surveillance and policing of threats to white America. This goal would become evident when the passage of the Sabotage, Espionage, Sedition, and Selective Service

¹³ N.a. “Origins.” FBI. Department of Justice, May 3, 2016. <https://www.fbi.gov/history>.

¹⁴ The Mann Act (18 U.S.C.A. § 2421 et seq.)

¹⁵ Caitlin Reynolds. “Book Review: Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI.” *Feminist Review* 119, no. 1 (July 2018): 170–71. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-018-0114-y>.

acts during the First World War that increased the Bureau's powers of surveillance and policing of morality. Agents were instructed to arrest draft dodgers as well as those who used "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States."¹⁶ While the Sedition Act was repealed in 1920, its legacy set a precedent for the Bureau's activities in the latter half of the twentieth century. These acts legitimized and justified the arrests of those who opposed the status quo and targeted Black Nationalists, communists, draft dodgers, as well as anti-war and labor advocates.

The Bureau's role as a federal police force, vanguard of morality, and bastion against 'non-American' values would accelerate after J. Edgar Hoover became director. His tenure lasted forty-eight years

under eight consecutive presidencies, resulting in a consolidation of power for the Bureau. First promoted to acting director by President Coolidge in 1924, Hoover was a staunch anti-communist who spent several years working for the "Radical Division" within the Bureau on surveillance initiatives against anarchists and communists.¹⁷

Committed to the 'professionalization' of the Bureau, he centralized authority and enforced merit-based promotions. In 1935, as a part of the 'professionalization' initiative, the Bureau was renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation to reinforce its legitimacy as a government institution. To increase public trust Hoover initiated propaganda campaigns showing Special Agents in comics and movies as upstanding American citizens and "detective-heroes" tracking down and violently subduing Communists and Mafia members.¹⁸ The

¹⁶ United States, Statutes at Large, Washington, D.C., 1918, Vol. XL, p. 553

¹⁷ N.a. "The Hoover Legacy, 40 Years after, Part 4." Federal Bureau of Investigation. August 17, 2012.

<https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/the-hoover-legacy-40-years-after-part-4>.

¹⁸ Patricia Brennan. "Hoover and the G-Men Myth." The Washington Post. WP Company, November 17,

physical appearance of FBI agents was important to Hoover, as he wanted FBI agents to appear as respected figures of authority. Field agents were hired on the conditions that they were fit, white, educated men. Special agents were required to wear sleek black and white suits. Conditions were especially stringent for field agents as compared to special agents working in the Seat of Government (SOG, FBI Headquarters, as referred to by FBI agents); Agents in the field, for example, were not allowed to be bald.¹⁹ Appearances and ‘professionalization’ were tied to generating public support and reinforcing the cultural consensus that the FBI represented what it means to be American - a white, Christian, federal police force, which defended law, order, individual liberties, and freedom. In opposition was what the FBI defined as a

threat: Black Power and Black Nationalist organizations who criticized the existing order.

Under Hoover, the FBI hired few Black special agents, and only increased their numbers under pressure from the Justice Department during Kennedy’s administration. The few Black agents who did serve under Hoover performed secretarial tasks. He eventually promoted them to special agents to protect them from the draft during the Vietnam war. Hoover’s personal doorman and designated flyswatter was labeled as such for logistical purposes. In the words of former FBI Agent William C. Sullivan, “Hoover saw no reason to hire Blacks to work for the FBI, just as he saw no reason to involve the FBI in the struggle for civil rights in the south.”²⁰ Hoover’s ‘professionalization’ was not only about

1991.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/tv/1991/11/17/hoover-and-the-g-men-myth/cd1c64d9-b9cb-4f1f-b628-0883bac191c1/>.

¹⁹ William C. Sullivan, and Bill Brown. *The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover's FBI*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979. 81.

²⁰ William C. Sullivan, and Bill Brown. *The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover's FBI*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979. 125.

making the FBI a more bureaucratic federal police force, but one that embodied the white American ideal.

During this period of ‘professionalization’ between 1924-1935, the Bureau enforced prohibition, surveilled communists, and targeted the mob while it expanded as an agency. By 1945 the agency had 42 field offices with over 13,000 employees, including approximately 4,000 Agents. Between 1945 and the beginning of COINTELPRO in 1957, the number of Agents doubled from 4,000 agents to 8,000. The FBI’s increased size came with the advent of the Cold War as the Federal Government saw the FBI as an essential tool to combat communist threats. In the eyes of the Federal Government, the threat of communism necessitated an increased budget for the FBI to surveil American

citizens. In this context, large-scale official programs were crafted, officially called COINTELPROs. The first COINTELPRO in 1957 was implemented to coordinate an assault on the Communist Party USA.²¹

COINTELPRO - CPUSA utilized wiretaps, bribery, surveillance, and defamation to reduce public support of the organization. By the end of 1957 as CPUSA was reduced to 10,000 members, 1,500 of which were FBI informants.²² The main objective of COINTELPRO - CPUSA was to target the organization, known members, and *possible* affiliates. It was under this directive that the FBI began to harass Black Power and civil rights advocates including Martin Luther King between 1957-1968. The FBI even sent him a letter encouraging him to kill himself in 1964.²³ The FBI saw King as a

²¹ Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall. *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars against Domestic Dissent*, 1–20. Boston, MA: South End Press, 2002.

²² Kurt Gentry. *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets*. W.W. Norton & Company 1991. 442.

²³ Jules Boykoff. “Surveillance, Spatial Compression, and Scale: The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr.” *Antipode* 39, no. 4 (2007): 729–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2007.00549.x>.

“Black Messiah” who would unify Black Americans and threaten white society.²⁴

The FBI’s harassment and assault against Black Power advocates was not separated from COINTELPRO - CPUSA until August 25th, 1967, when Hoover issued a memo to field offices across the country. The memo called for a new “counter-intelligence endeavor...to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of Black Nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings...and to counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder.”²⁵ Hoover saw Black Power, civil rights, and Black Nationalist organizations as fundamental threats to society. Many organizations did not want to end their mission at desegregation and economic equality. Some

wanted more and called for revolution, self-sovereignty, and the abolition of capitalism. This would be defining differences between RAM and the Black Coalition.

Philadelphia’s Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Nationalist Movements

Contributed by the dramatic growth in Philadelphia’s Black population, Philadelphia during the 1960s harbored a variety of organizations associated with the Black Power, Black Nationalist, and civil rights movements. The Great Migration resulted in a rapid increase in Philadelphia’s Black population by 529,000 between 1950 and 1960 (26.4 percent of the general population).²⁶ This demographic shift fed a fear of change among white Philadelphians that increased with the civil rights protests in 1963-1964. Hoping to appease civil rights

²⁴ Internal Memo, Director to SAC, Albany, and all other field offices, 03/04/1968

²⁵ Internal Memo, Director to SAC, Albany, and all other field offices, 08/25/1967

²⁶ Thaddeus P. Mathis, “A Cultural Assessment of Black Power and Social Change in Postindustrial Philadelphia,” in *The State of Black*

Philadelphia, vol. 3, ed. Charyn Tutton and Eric S. King (Philadelphia: Urban League of Philadelphia), 28 (table 3); John L. Puckett and Mark Frazier Lloyd, *Becoming Penn: The Pragmatic American University, 1950–2000* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2015), 91; citing socialexplorer.com, Philadelphia County, PA.

leaders while juggling white backlash, Mayor James Tate (1962-1972) pleased no one. In the eyes of many whites Mayor Tate was too soft on civil disobedience and crime while in the eyes of Black Philadelphians he was not doing enough to change racist hiring practices and housing accessibility. Tate's perceived failures in the 1960s ushered in the 'tough on crime' candidate Frank Rizzo in 1972. Tate's term was defined by its progressive attempts to desegregate the city without much success in alleviating poverty or housing issues but did contribute to the desegregation of unions and political offices.

Philadelphia maintained significant inequality regarding job opportunities and housing. Redlining, the practice of preventing minority homeowners from obtaining loans was rampant, not only in Philadelphia, but metropolitan areas across

the country.²⁷ People of color were restricted from moving into suburban areas and were concentrated into North Philadelphia, Northern Liberties, and Kensington.²⁸ The housing crisis was also accompanied by significant employment discrimination. Philadelphia's unemployment rate was 6.5% in 1960, while the unemployment of Black Philadelphians was between 13-20%.²⁹ Industries, especially construction, would actively refuse to hire Black workers even if they were more qualified than their white counterparts. This inequality inspired the Strawberry Mansion construction protests led by Philadelphia NAACP president Cecil B. Moore in 1963. A series of strikes around the construction site of a new school in Strawberry Mansion that did not have any Black workers was successful after three weeks and resulted in Mayor Tate enforcing

²⁷The most defining examples of this is Levittown, which is categorized throughout contemporary historiography as one the most infamous examples of housing discrimination in suburban communities.

²⁸ N.a "Mapping the Legacy of Structural Racism in Philadelphia." Office of the Controller. City of Philadelphia, January 23, 2020.

<https://controller.phila.gov/philadelphia-audits/mapping-the-legacy-of-structural-racism-in-philadelphia/>.

²⁹ Lenora E. Berson, "Case Study of a Riot: The Philadelphia Story." New York, NY: Institute of Human Relations Press, The American Jewish Committee, 1966. 27.

the hiring of more Black workers.³⁰ The protests were significant not only for their success, but also because they marked a shift away from strict non-violence and non-confrontation associated with the civil rights movement, as the Philadelphia NAACP and CORE adopted more confrontational strategies and language under Cecil B Moore's leadership.³¹

Strategies of nonviolence and non-militancy had been important to civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King and John Lewis who sought to generate white liberal support and prevent the media from misrepresenting the movement. The success of these efforts was proved with the passing of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964 as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The civil rights movement was built on non-violence and interracial support, but this resulted in disagreement within Black

community by the mid-1960s. Leaders such as John Churchville, Malcolm X, Max Stanford, and Cecil B. Moore had become disillusioned with non-violence by 1965, especially when faced with direct violence. To them, civil rights leaders were too easily manipulated by the perceptions and wants of white liberals and was not able to address urban poverty and police violence. It was confined by intuitional barriers and relied on appeasing whites in power. Therefore, these individuals and organizations became more associated with Black power and Black Nationalism. This would directly contribute to the rise of the Revolutionary Action Movement in 1962.

Revolutionary Action Movement

As a Black Nationalist organization that embraced revolutionary Maoism, RAM was what the FBI considered an 'ideal target.' RAM (initially called the Reform

³⁰ Matthew Countryman. "Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia," University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 215.

³¹ Matthew Countryman. "Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia," University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 123.

Action Movement to not scare students) was founded in 1962 as a revolutionary organization at Central State University by a variety of students, graduates, and individuals expelled from southern schools.³² RAM leaders such as Max Stanford, Wanda Marshall, and Donald Freeman, organized with various other student organization in addition to Black Nationalist organizations across the country to solidify their ideology while figuring out their place within national organizations such as SDS, SNCC, and CORE. The organization then became militant and embraced a revolutionary ideology as they wanted to “build a liberation movement autonomous of the white left.”³³ This attracted the FBI’s attention and resulted in RAM’s dissolution in 1969. RAM was what the FBI feared all Black Nationalist

organizations had the power to become. To the FBI, RAM’s version of Black Nationalism was a corrupting force on other civil rights, Black Power, and Black Nationalist organizations which could lead to a violent spread of revolutionary fervor.

RAM’s ideology and objectives would make it one of the first official targets of “COINTELPRO: Black Hate Groups” in 1967. As an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary organization that wanted to foster a Black revolution in the United States and internationally, RAM sought to “transform the civil rights movements into a Black Nationalist movement.”³⁴ By 1964, RAM made Philadelphia one of their target cities for expansion. Participation in Black Nationalist organizations rapidly grew by this time and the FBI and Philadelphia

³² Max Stanford. 1986. Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement in Western Capitalist Society. MA diss., University of Atlanta. 76.

³³ Umoja Akinyele, “From One Generation to the Next: Armed Self-Defense, Revolutionary Nationalism, and the Southern Black Freedom

Struggle.” *Souls* 15, no. 3 (2013). 224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2013.838857>.

³⁴ Max Stanford. 1986. Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement in Western Capitalist Society. MA diss., University of Atlanta. 108.

Police viewed action against the group as necessary to prevent the spread of Black Nationalism and communism. The concerns of law enforcement proved accurate, as by 1965, many civil rights activists felt that segregation was crumbling too slowly, which contributed towards increased recruitment by Black Nationalist and Black Power organizations, including RAM.³⁵

By 1965, the leaders of RAM, Max Stanford, and Donald Freeman, wanted the Revolutionary Action Movement to be an underground organization. Members were instructed to spread the revolutionary ideology to other organizations without drawing attention to RAM. Recruitment was focused on the urban and street level, diverging itself from academic types in the

early 60s. RAM was unable to maintain their goal of *not* becoming a publicized or televised name but was successful in becoming a “truly national organization” with the intention of facilitating a broad coalition of Black Nationalist organizations.³⁶

RAM was very active in the city of Philadelphia. Its members participated in the Strawberry Mansion Construction Protests, spread educational and revolutionary literature, formed rifle clubs and organized “street gangs, students, women's groups, to politicalize the urban rebellions and develop anti-Vietnam war resistance in the black community.”³⁷ Additionally, they formed a sub-group called “The Black Guards” which trained members on how to engage in “an

³⁵ Max Stanford. 1986. Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement in Western Capitalist Society. MA diss., University of Atlanta. 114.

³⁶ Umoja, Akinyele. “From One Generation to the Next: Armed Self-Defense, Revolutionary Nationalism, and the Southern Black Freedom Struggle.” *Souls* 15, no. 3 (2013). 225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2013.838857>.

³⁶ Max Stanford. 1986. Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement in Western Capitalist Society. MA diss., University of Atlanta. 126

³⁷ Eric C. Schneider, “Street Wars: Shooting Police and Police Shootings.” In *The Ecology of Homicide: Race, Place, and Space in Postwar Philadelphia*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 102. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv170x57c.10>.

urban guerilla war.”³⁸ They were also on a mission to spread a “Black cultural revolution” to unite Black Americans through a homogenous culture and form a united front.³⁹ The cultural mission fed a distinctive fear within the FBI of a “Black Messiah” and a national coalition of Black revolutionary organizations.

The Philadelphia Police had their eyes on RAM between 1964 and 1967, but action against the group would not escalate until 1967. As soon as “COINTELPRO: Black Hate Groups” was initiated, the response of the FBI and police was swift and brutal as “any excuse for arrest was promptly implemented by arrest. Any possibility of neutralizing a RAM activist was exercised.”⁴⁰ The goal was to have any

identified member arrested for petty charges, jailed, and forced to pay bail until the member could no longer afford it. Bails would be set to unusually high rates at the time, up to 20,000, to quickly neutralize RAM members.⁴¹ The Philadelphia Police’s Civil Disobedience Unit in collaboration with the FBI, would surveil and photograph suspected members and their houses.⁴² Individuals at protests would be photographed and documented to compiled dossiers for any future action. License plates were tagged, “occupants were identified. Then became the target of harassment.”⁴³ The FBI was aware that their methods constituted harassment and violated civil rights, but it was an effective way to demoralize the organization and its members. Many of the actions conducted

³⁸ Max Stanford. 1986. Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM): A Case Study of an Urban Revolutionary Movement in Western Capitalist Society. MA diss., University of Atlanta.

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⁴⁰ Internal Memo, SAC, Philadelphia to Director. 8/30/1967. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁴¹ Frank Donner. *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992. 210.

⁴² Frank Donner. *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992. 202.

⁴³ Internal Memo, SAC, Philadelphia to Director. 8/30/1967. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

against RAM were recorded through released FBI memos that were sent between the Philadelphia field office and the Seat of Government.

The FBI's controversial methods include the arrest of a RAM member who was handing out RAM literature at a local school. Lacking any actual crime, he was arrested on charges of being a narcotics user simply because of his needle scars, despite not having any narcotics on him.⁴⁴ Police also arrested a young Black man for passing out literature to houses claiming he was allegedly "attempting to incite a riot."⁴⁵ Search warrants were given for all the five houses where literature was planted, despite no proof that any of the houses were associated with RAM. Only the fifth house contained RAM and communist literature resulting in the arrest of three individuals. The police and FBI were essentially playing

scorched earth and using any means possible to identify and neutralize RAM members. Bystanders were also victimized. The FBI and police did not require concrete proof. The mere accusation of being affiliated with Black Nationalism and communism justified for the violation of civil liberties. The FBI and police also utilized the artificial fabrication of plots to place blame on RAM, justify arrests, and negatively impact the publics' opinion of the organization.

Media outlets often collaborated with the FBI and police to this end. In September 1967, the New York Times published, "Mass Poison Plot Laid to Negroes", announcing that the Philadelphia DA's office had issued out warrants for the arrest of four RAM members. They claimed that "evidence given from Negro informants" revealed that RAM was going poison the

⁴⁴ Internal Memo, SAC, Philadelphia to Director. 8/30/1967. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁴⁵ Internal Memo, SAC, Philadelphia to Director. 8/30/1967. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

Philadelphia Police Department.⁴⁶ Yet the only charges were disorderly conducts and breach of peace, despite the claim that a ‘super plot’ was going to occur.⁴⁷ In October, RAM members “were seized and charged with plotting to dynamite public buildings and assassinate public officials, including the then Police Commissioner, Frank Rizzo.”⁴⁸ The charges were dropped for lack of evidence after their arrests. Despite the lack of evidence, the FBI and PPD had no issue fabricating plots to justify their racially biased and paranoid campaign against Black Nationalists.

In 1969, after years of constant harassment by the FBI and PPD, RAM officially dissolved, and members joined other powerful Black Nationalist

organizations. RAM was not a pacifist or peaceful organization but the FBI “was forced to admit that his [Hoover’s] agents had turned up no hard evidence of violence or other criminal activities.”⁴⁹ The FBI and PPD’s efforts were successful and demonstrated the effectiveness of state retaliation. The FBI was genuinely concerned about the risks associated with an active revolutionary Maoist organization in the country, but their treatment demonstrated the lengths the FBI and PPD would go to suppress such organizations. They would be forced to fabricate plots and use petty charges to neutralize members and the organization. Law enforcements’ actions in their campaign, driven by racial prejudice, paranoia of communist plots, and desire to

⁴⁶ "Mass Poison Plot Laid to Negroes: Extremists in Philadelphia Also Face Riot Charge." New York Times, Sep 28, 1967. <http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/historical-newspapers/mass-poison-plot-laid-negroes/docview/117894196/se-2?accountid=14270>.

⁴⁷ Frank Donner. *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992. 210.

⁴⁸ Frank Donner. *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992. 210.

⁴⁹ Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall. *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Domestic Dissent*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990. 112.

depict law enforcement as a moral guardians would later be deemed illegal after numerous lawsuits and federal investigation. But their zealous desire to take down organizations even remotely associated with Black Nationalism would result in the targeting of non-militant, integrationist, non-Nationalist organizations such as the Black Coalition.

The Black Coalition

The Black Coalition was an attempt by moderate and liberal business leaders and community leaders to provide career training, employment, youth services, sports opportunities, and more to assist disenfranchised Black Philadelphians in 1968. Yet, the group also hosted a small minority of Black nationalists which resulted in FBI harassment. The Black Coalition began when a group of business

and community leaders, both white and Black, met on Good Friday 1968, and formed the Good Friday Group. The purpose of the Good Friday Group was to set up a \$1,000,000 fund that would be used to set up projects throughout the city to increase Black employment and reduce gang violence. To assist the latter, issue, leaders and advisors within the Good Friday group suggested they recruit ‘radical’ Black community leaders with the goal of deescalating tensions and bridging the gap between the white and Black communities.⁵⁰ These four individuals, Hakim Rahman (Also known as George Anderson who was also a member of RAM), Malik (Gilbert Satterwhite), Stanley Branche, and Freedom George, were the only members of the Black Coalition described by the Good Friday Group and the FBI as radical. This was only four out of thirty-three total members.⁵¹

⁵⁰ George W. Corner. “The Black Coalition: An Experiment in Racial Cooperation Philadelphia, 1968.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical*

Society 120, no. 3 (1976): 178–186.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/986557>.

⁵¹ George W. Corner. “The Black Coalition: An Experiment in Racial Cooperation Philadelphia,

Doubts from the Black community regarding excessive influence of white members and savior complexes in fixing Black issues resulted in, the Good Friday Group establishing the Black Coalition. This sub-group would be comprised entirely of Black individuals and ranged from moderate, liberal, and radical members who autonomously handled the creation and organization of projects.

The Black Coalition allocated resources to projects while the Good Friday Group provided funds and advised over affairs. The Black Coalition would draft projects, send them to the Good Friday Group for approval, and if the project was accepted, the Black Coalition would handle all aspects of implementation. One of many criticisms stated by the Good Friday Group of the Black Coalition after it dissolved in April of 1969. An internal memo by the

1968.” Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 120, no. 3 (1976): 178–186. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/986557>. 180.

Good Friday Group critiquing the Black Coalition published after the dissolution stated, “There was a lack of fiscal control over operations. Thus, funds were misappropriated and probably misdirected.”⁵² The word ‘probably’ and ‘apparently’ are used repeatedly throughout the critiques which alleged the misappropriation of funds without certainty. Rumors were continuously spread by FBI informants and the moderate members who were already suspicious of the Black Nationalists. These critiques, which contributed to the eventual dissolution of the organization, were exploited by the FBI.

While the Black Coalition’s goals were to bring jobs, housing, and training to Black residents of Philadelphia, the fact that four self-proclaimed militant Black Nationalists were involved resulted in counterintelligence operations against the

⁵² “The Black Coalition and the Good Friday Group: A Critique”, 1969. SCRC 35, Box 3A, Folder 11, Page 4, The Black Coalition, Temple University Urban Archives.

group. In the FBI's eyes "the Black Coalition is a group of Black Nationalists," which, was an oversimplification of a far more complex and diverse organization.⁵³ But the overall presence of four individuals linked to gang elements as well as Black Nationalism, deeply perturbed the FBI. 'Amoral', 'street elements', who opposed the status quo they were a threat and therefore the whole organization was contaminated.

On August 26th, 1968, the Directorate authorized the spreading of rumors to discredit the Black Coalition. Informants and agents were instructed to "foster the rumor that the leaders of the Black Coalition have sold out to whites and are using money which should go to Negro poor people for their personal benefit."⁵⁴ The FBI appeared to not know if the rumors were true or not but were facilitated to create

disorder within the Black Coalition and delegitimize them publicly. Delegitimizing the group to the public was important as it would prevent the organization from growing and gaining support from the community. The FBI believed that if white donors became dissatisfied with the radicals of the group they would be ousted, and the organization would possibly dissolve. The language used by both the Coalition and the FBI indicated uncertainty about misappropriation but the rumors were believable to some because a couple months after the formation of the Black Coalition, Stanley Branche had acquired a new Cadillac and some clothes.⁵⁵ An FBI memo states, "Furthering this rumor is an excellent way to neutralize the influence of Black Nationalist extremists; and since REDACTED both have new cars and

⁵³ Internal Memo, Director, to SAC, Philadelphia, 8/26/68. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁵⁴ Internal Memo, Director, to SAC, Philadelphia, 8/26/68. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁵⁵ George W. Corner. "The Black Coalition: An Experiment in Racial Cooperation Philadelphia, 1968." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 120, no. 3 (1976): 178-186. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/986557>. 181.

clothes, the rumor...*may* have basic in fact.”⁵⁶ The FBI’s rumor that Stanley Branche had acquired commodities due to crime rather than legitimate market participation perpetuated negative stereotypes. The evidence of misappropriation wasn’t sufficient but sowed the seeds of mistrust and doubt within the Coalition and Good Friday Group.

The Directorate also authorized the Philadelphia office to “furnish information regarding kickbacks for materials and services purchased by the Black Coalition.”⁵⁷ These claims were instructed to be spread by informants within the Black Coalition to potential donors to dissuade them and reduce the flow of money into the organization. Whether or not the allegations

of kickbacks are true is uncertain due to redactions within the available FBI sources and the use of ambiguous language.⁵⁸ The FBI would later claim that their actions, “informants, and sources helped break up the Black Coalition.”⁵⁹ Rumors spread by informants sowed distrust and discontent between the moderate-conservative faction and the minority Black Nationalists. The organization steered away from projects that possibly fostered the spread of Black Nationalism. This was apparent when the Black Coalition shut down the Muntu School, “Hakim's idea of an educational program built around African culture.”⁶⁰

The school taught Swahili and Arabic, and hosted music, dancing, health, and self-defense classes. The school was immensely popular and would often be

⁵⁶ Internal Memo, Director, to SAC, Philadelphia, 8/26/68. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁵⁷ Internal Memo, Director, to SAC, Philadelphia, 8/26/68. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁵⁸ Internal Memo, Director, to SAC, Philadelphia, 8/26/68. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁵⁹ Internal Memo, SAC Philadelphia, To Director, 1/23/69. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁶⁰ George W. Corner. “The Black Coalition: An Experiment in Racial Cooperation Philadelphia, 1968.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 120, no. 3 (1976): 178–186. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/986557>. 182.

overcrowded due its popularity. Known gang members would come attend classes and engage regularly in dance and song. But the self-defense classes concerned moderate and conservative members of the Black Coalition, Good Friday Group, and law enforcement. Unsubstantiated rumors were spread possibly by informants, claiming the school was teaching classes on making Molotov Cocktails for the revolution.⁶¹ According to Barbara Leff, a researcher who interviewed Black Coalition members shortly after the dissolution, an advertisement was posted for the Muntu school titled “14 Ways to Kill a Cop” and had “mysterious and unknown origins.”⁶² While speculative, the FBI vault is missing

an extraordinary amounts of files regarding the Black Coalition, and after I submitted a Freedom of Information act request, they confirmed many have been destroyed or misplaced. The FBI has previously published false advertisements to incriminate organizations, such as the infamous Black Panther Coloring Book.⁶³ Additionally, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote articles on behalf of the FBI to delegitimize Black Power organizations.⁶⁴ The Inquirer described the school as a “Black militant institution.”⁶⁵ These rumors and the existing skepticism held by conservative and moderate members of the Black Coalition fostered concerns about the program. The existence of a popular school

⁶¹ George W. Corner. “The Black Coalition: An Experiment in Racial Cooperation Philadelphia, 1968.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 120, no. 3 (1976): 178–186. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/986557>. 183.

⁶² Sara Borden. “An Examination of How Archives Have Influenced the Telling of the Story of Philadelphia’s Civil Rights Movement.” MA diss., Temple University Libraries. 2011. 35.

⁶³ George Lardner Jr. “15 Years of Dirty Tricks Bared by FBI.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, November 22, 1977.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1977/11/22/15-years-of-dirty-tricks-bared-by-fbi/5e344f2f-d850-4469-a33c-a19a20e443ca/>.

⁶⁴ Internal Memo, SAC, Philadelphia, to Director. 10/02/69. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice.

⁶⁵ “Plane Plot Suspect on Coast Linked to Shooting Militant.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer Public Ledger* (1934-1969), Jan 21, 1969. <://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/january-21-1969-page-33-52/docview/1841724437/se-2?accountid=14270>.

focused on the education of African culture was immediately seen as a threat to law enforcement, especially due to the fact they taught karate for self-defense, in an area where people were frequently victimized by crime. Because a school that was focused on the education of African culture was teaching self-defense and fighting techniques to Black community members, meant that they were going to try commit violence in the eyes of law enforcement. There, an asymmetry is found between the treatment of white vs Black community members by law enforcement. Teaching self-defense to Black community members meant they were going to use those skills to commit immoral criminal and seditious acts. Therefore it was a threat to the white community. Plainclothes officers and informants were posted at the school due to these concerns. One night, Hakim, who was

already facing charges related to his involvement with RAM, had gotten into an argument with a schoolteacher at the Muntu school over payment and subsequently shot him, resulting in his flight. Rather than continue the school's mission, the Black Coalition did not want to risk any negative attention nor an association with crime and extremism. The school was shut down.

The Black Coalition, while having brief moments of failure, succeeded in providing some relief to Philadelphians in need. The Black Coalition had twenty-five official programs and sixteen of them, were described by the Good Friday Group as "effective", having "good potential", or being a "success."⁶⁶ Some examples include *Project Read* – an after-school reading course for troubled highschoolers, *Adventure* – a "frugality" store which provided job and financial literacy training,

⁶⁶ George W. Corner. "The Black Coalition: An Experiment in Racial Cooperation Philadelphia, 1968." Proceedings of the American Philosophical

Society 120, no. 3 (1976): 178–186.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/986557>. 184.

and *Medical Center* – a free health clinic for underprivileged households.⁶⁷ The FBI did not care about the benefits the Black Coalition provided the Philadelphia community. Rather, their goal was to incapacitate the organization due to their judgements against a minority group of participants. The organization was inherently corrupted in the eyes of the FBI due to the participation of Black Nationalists. Therefore, the organization could become a threat to society. To the FBI, it was unacceptable that Black Nationalists were partly running a non-violent multi-racial experiment to alleviate conditions of poverty and crime within the city.

In April of 1969, the Black Coalition agreed to dissolve in a joint agreement with the Good Friday Group. Despite its successes, disorganization, internal conflict,

mismanagement, power struggles, and distrust caused many of the leaders to resign. It's not certain if the FBI's harassment resulted directly in the dissolution of the organization, but the evidence suggests it played a part. The spreading of harmful rumors to discredit Black Coalition members in addition to the possible planting of false advertisements contributed towards divisions within the organization. The FBI acted against the Black Coalition due to their own belief that they were preventing immoral and seditious characters from spreading Black Nationalism. The FBI was upholding their own values of protecting America from moral corruption and society from harmful ideologies. Yet, these attacks victimized an organization that provided progressive and helpful services to the Philadelphia community. The Black Coalition demonstrated that the FBI

⁶⁷ George W. Corner. "The Black Coalition: An Experiment in Racial Cooperation Philadelphia, 1968." Proceedings of the American Philosophical

Society 120, no. 3 (1976): 178–186. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/986557>. 184.

attempted to neutralize any organization associated with Black Nationalism. Even if its goal were entirely different than militant revolutionary organization like RAM.

Conclusion

RAM and the Black Coalition had radically different missions and behaviors. The latter being a diverse group of Black liberal, moderate, conservative, and nationalist members that created and funded community projects across the city. While the former, RAM, was a militant, Marxist, Black Nationalist organization that advocated for the arming of the Black working-class with the goal of turning the civil rights movement into a Black Nationalist revolution.

By 1968 and 1969, RAM and the Black Coalition had ultimately dissolved as they both internally agreed to disband due to harassment from law enforcement as well as from their own internal issues. They both were fundamentally different organizations

but still were categorized as Black Nationalist organizations and marked for neutralization by the FBI. While the Revolutionary Action Movement received far more direct harassment by the FBI and Philadelphia Police, the Black Coalition was still targeted for the same goal of being neutralized, despite the fact it was nonmilitant, not nationalist, and not revolutionary.

The fact that two radically different organizations were targeted with the goal of neutralization under the same mantle of Black Nationalism is indicative of the FBI's prejudice against the Black community and paranoia against the spread of communism, immorality, and subversive activity. The FBI did not care that both the Black Coalition and RAM were ideologically different on almost every level. Their influence and possibility for growth made them a threat. Whether the organizations were providing tangible improvements to

the quality of life for Black Americans was not in consideration when being considered a threat by the FBI. Their focus on ideology and spread of ‘immoral’ ideas such as Black Nationalism and communism were more important.

During the period between 1956 and 1971, the FBI had spent significantly more of its resources targeting leftist and Black organizations as opposed to the actively violent White supremacy and far-right groups across the country. To the FBI it wasn’t a matter of if a group was violent or not, but as seen through this case study of the Black Coalition and RAM, it was about participating in the movement promoting Black causes and opposing the status quo. To the FBI, the status quo may have been imperfect, but the American political system could not be allowed to change due to pressures from social movements led by communists, leftists, and Black Americans. In their eyes it would contaminate American

values and lead to the deterioration of American society and even worse, the expansion of communist thought.

This analysis contributes to the already existing historiography exploring the FBI’s efforts to dismantle leftist and Black Power movements throughout its history, especially during the COINTELPRO period. While this analysis only focused on two organizations in Philadelphia, it highlights the carelessness and illegal actions conducted by the FBI and local law enforcement. The illegality of the FBI’s harassment would be upheld by the Church Committee and various lawsuits from victims such as the Socialist Workers Party. Future research would benefit from exploring lesser-known organizations during the COINTELPRO period as well as comparative case studies that highlight the FBI’s attitudes towards leftist and Black Power organizations as opposed to violent far-right and White supremacist groups.

Additionally, the campaigns of harassment and plethora of activity by Black Nationalists and Black Power organizations would directly lead to a period of white backlash with the election of Frank Rizzo.

The constant harassment by the FBI, Philadelphia Police Department, and media would rally white voters in Philadelphia who had become increasingly antagonistic towards the activities of Black Power and Black Nationalist organizations. After the mayorship of James Tate, Republican Frank Rizzo would take on the mantle of mayor and institute nearly a decade of ‘tough on crime’ and ‘law and order’ policies that embodied the greater political phenomenon of white backlash that was happening nationally. For example, President Nixon’s campaign, which brought him to the presidency in 1969, had embraced the white backlash against the social unrest of the 1960s using his “Southern Strategy”, won the office of the President on a platform of

‘law and order.’ The significance is that while Philadelphia may not have played a major role in the national civil rights movement, Philadelphia acts as a microcosm that reflects the realities of white backlash that was occurring nationally. Additionally, Frank Rizzo was a unique and quintessential ‘tough on crime’ politician that instituted significant social and policy change in the city.

Overall, this research is significant in that it highlights the illegal and corrupt actions of law enforcement as well as the ideological justifications held by state institutions. Programs such as COINTELPRO still exist in American society and continue to be conducted by the FBI, NSA, and CIA. Additionally, the American judicial system continues to harbor racial biases in the treatment of Black Americans well after the documented state repression during the 1950s and 60s. By continuing to investigate state repression

against minority groups and social movements, scholars and activists can continue to advocate for justice and valuable change in American society.

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