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Research

FBI Political Harassment and FBI Historiography: Analyzing Informants and Measuring the Effects

DAVID J. GARROW

THANKS TO THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT, and the increased use that scholars have made of it over the past half-dozen years, hardly a month goes by without some new report of how recently released files from the Federal Bureau of Investigation detail the information-gathering and political surveillance that J. Edgar Hoover's thorough bureaucrats engaged in against a diverse assortment of twentieth-century notables: scientist Albert Einstein, photographer Margaret Bourke-White, comedian Charlie Chaplin, rock musician John Lennon, and publisher Alfred A. Knopf, to name only a few.¹ Nowadays no prospective biographer of any twentieth-century figure can safely fail to write the requisite letter to find out what the FBI may have collected and then squirreled away on their particular subject.

Although scholars of American social protest movements and twentieth-century political history generally realized the relevance of the FBI's activities and files to their topics well before their colleagues in cultural

1. See Richard A. Schwartz, "The FBI and Dr. Einstein," *Nation* 237 (September 3–10, 1983), 168–73; Robert E. Snyder, "Margaret Bourke-White and the Communist Witch-Hunt," *Journal of American Studies* 19 (April 1985), 5–25; Irwin Molotsky, "The Chaplin Files: Can It Happen Again?" *New York Times*, January 22, 1986, p. A20; Jon Wiener, "John Lennon Versus the FBI," *New Republic*, May 2, 1983, pp. 19–23; and "FBI Had File on Knopf," *New York Times*, February 5, 1988, p. C30. Also see Herbert Mitgang, *Dangerous Dossiers* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1988); Natalie Robins, "The Defiling of Writers," *Nation* 245 (October 10, 1987), 367–72; and David J. Garrow, "American Authors in the FBI's Library," *Boston Globe*, April 3, 1988, pp. A16, A18.

history, the history of letters, or the history of science, for some years our political and historical studies of the FBI's surveillance and "dirty tricks" efforts from the 1910s through the mid-1970s have emphasized certain valuable themes while slighting or at times ignoring others of equal if not greater importance. This essay will focus upon two separate but related issues that generally have been given short shrift in most scholarly analyses of the "internal security" efforts of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI: the Bureau's widespread and at times wholesale use of human informants in political groups, and the actual effects that Bureau surveillance and penetration may have had on the organizations and movements against which they were targeted.

In much of the recent literature, and even more so in popular recountings of it, emphasis has been placed upon two particular facets of the Bureau's political or "intelligence" work: first, the use of electronic surveillance to monitor not only thousands of telephone conversations, but also, thanks to microphone "bugs," the most intimate and presumably private moments of prominent Americans such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and, second, the dangerous, although sometimes sophomoric harassment and "neutralization" techniques that reached their numerical peak in the 1960s under the "COINTELPRO"—for "counterintelligence program"—designation.

The history of these activities has not and should not be minimized. The Bureau's wide-ranging electronic surveillance of Dr. King and his closest friends not only cost American taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars, conservatively speaking, but also sometimes caused King very serious emotional anguish.² Similarly, the FBI's various COINTELPRO schemes, while sometimes humorously amusing in retrospect, such as a plan for injecting activists' oranges with powerful laxatives, or creating ill-will between the Communist Party and the Mafia by means of inept, anonymous letters, nonetheless also provoked a fatal shooting war between competing California Black Nationalist groups, contributed to the suicide of actress Jean Seberg, and ruined the lives of a host of other victims, few more so than one-time New York Communist Party leader William Albertson, who was publicly expelled from the party in disgrace after party officials fell hook, line, and sinker for a falsely-planted, FBI-written "informant's report" painting Albertson as a paid traitor.³

The Bureau's successful "snitch-jacketing" of Albertson, to use the professionals' term, serves to highlight a fact of the FBI's work that was better appreciated, by both the Bureau and the Communist Party, twenty years ago, than it is in some of the historical literature of more recent years—

2. See David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), 133–35, and *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1986), 362–66, 373–78.

3. See Frank Donner, "Let Him Wear a Wolf's Head: What the FBI Did to William Albertson," *Civil Liberties Review* 3 (April–May 1976), 12–22.



The FBI's multi-year pursuit of Martin Luther King, Jr., featured not only human informants and electronic surveillance devices, including both telephone wiretaps and microphonic "bugs" targeted against King and his closest political advisors, but also regular physical surveillance by FBI agents seeking to document photographically King's close relationships with supposed "subversives" or Soviet agents. Here, in a February 7, 1964 surreptitiously snapped FBI photo, King (at center) is pictured with New York attorney Stanley D. Levison, the major focus of the FBI's "communist influence" worries. Pictured less distinctly at right is King's personal lawyer, Clarence B. Jones, who often served as an intermediary between King and Levison during the peak years of FBI surveillance, 1963–1965.

namely the extent to which human FBI informants were seemingly, and *actually*, just about everywhere on the political scene, not only during the 1960s but throughout earlier decades as well. Theodore Kornweibel's work, as well as Robert Hill's superbly edited Marcus Garvey Papers, give new—and perhaps to many, surprising—insights into how the Bureau, as early as 1919, hired informants—and *black* informants, at that—to aid in the Justice Department's pursuit of that era's leading black radicals.⁴ For later decades, and particularly for the 1960s and early 1970s, however,

4. See Theodore Kornweibel, "The FBI and Black America, 1917–1922," unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Los Angeles, Cal., March 13, 1984, "The FBI and White American Hegemony: The Campaign Against Marcus Garvey During the Red Scare," unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association, San Diego, Cal., November 2, 1985, and "Black vs. Black: The FBI's First Negro Agents and Informants and the Investigation of Black Radicalism During the Red Scare," unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Chicago, Ill., December 30, 1986; and Robert Hill, *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vols. 1 through 5 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983–1986).

several statistical totals can bring home more powerfully than any list of individual examples the extent to which the FBI's domestic political surveillance work was built upon a foundation—and a truly huge foundation—of secret, cooperative human informants.

Now, twenty-five years later, it may not seem striking that the FBI in 1962 had almost 1,500 member informants in the Communist Party USA, nor may it seem surprising that that figure did not generate any major news stories when a former Bureau agent publicly revealed it that year. Perhaps even then readers and television viewers of Herbert Philbrick's *I Led 3 Lives* were beginning to conclude that the party was more a creature of the FBI than it was of Moscow. Nonetheless, that 1,500 figure deserves more thoughtful consideration than it was given then or since that time, as it meant that some 17 percent of the Communist Party's paid membership was actually on the payroll of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI—"a ratio of one informant for every 5.7 members," as the former agent put it.⁵

Was the Communist Party unique in the degree of attention that it received from the FBI, one might ask? The answer quite simply is no, as a recent and extremely informative federal district court decision in *Socialist Workers Party v. Attorney General* makes strikingly clear. Although the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) was considerably smaller, and an even less plausible threat to "national security" than the Communist Party (CP), the FBI, between 1960 and 1976, operated some three hundred member informants inside the SWP, with the numerical peak coming in 1961, when 54 individuals out of an SWP membership totalling 480, or 11 percent, were reporting to the FBI—"a not insignificant percentage of the membership," U. S. District Judge Thomas P. Griesa concluded with some understatement.⁶

An important distinction has been drawn in some of the earlier, sociologically oriented analyses of political informants, between those who operate within relatively "closed" groups—groups that maintain formal control over the make-up of their membership, like the CP and SWP—and those who function within relatively "open" organizations, where any willing volunteer can quickly become a participant and member.⁷ Although the informant statistics for the CP and SWP reveal that the FBI had little difficulty in recruiting or placing scores of informants within even such "closed," surveillance-conscious organizations, other Bureau statistics, plus the memoirs of former FBI agents and executives, make starkly clear the fact that the Bureau had even less trouble in obtaining far

5. See Jack Levine, "Hoover and the Red Scare," *Nation* 195 (October 20, 1962), 232–35. Also see Philbrick, *I Led 3 Lives* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1952), and Sanford J. Ungar, *FBI* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1975), 372.

6. *Socialist Workers Party v. Attorney General*, 642 F. Supp. 1357 (S.D.N.Y., 1986), slip opinion of August 25, 1986, pp. 49, 55.

7. See Comment, "Police Infiltration of Dissident Groups," *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science* 61 (June 1970), 181; and Gary T. Marx, "Thoughts on a Neglected Category of Social Movement Participant: The Agent Provocateur and Informant," *American Journal of Sociology* 80 (September 1971), 424.

larger numbers of human informants within the major social protest movements of the 1955–1975 period, particularly the black freedom struggle and the anti-Vietnam War crusade.⁸

One can approach this issue of the FBI's presence within "open" social protest movements from two different quantitative frames of reference. First, in a context somewhat similar to the CP and SWP, one can determine that nine out of thirty-two participants in a 1969 Washington Peace Mobilization meeting were FBI informants, and that fourteen members of Washington's Black Liberation Front, which in 1970 had a total membership of only some three dozen, likewise were Bureau sources.⁹ Second, in a far more sweeping purview, one can ponder more comprehensive statistics, such as how the FBI's Chicago office, between the years 1966 and 1976, operated at least 5,145 security, radical, or "extremist" informants, and paid those sources a total of at least \$2.5 million dollars over the course of that decade.¹⁰ When extrapolated nationally, those numbers for simply one fairly large FBI office point toward an informant corps of perhaps some 100,000 individuals over the course of those ten years, and budgetary expenses for them that reached easily into the tens of millions of dollars.

Why so many informants, one might ask? The answer must come in at least two major, separate parts. For the FBI, covert human sources were the preferred means of gathering information on politically active individuals and groups. Overt surveillance, in the form of easily recognizable agents attending meetings or formally seeking to interview participants, would have made the Bureau's intensive and far-reaching information-gathering unavoidably obvious to everyone. Not only would the agents thereby learn no more, and perhaps less, than they could read in daily newspapers, but the FBI's efforts would have been a ready subject for public debate, just the sort of "embarrassment to the Bureau" that Hoover and his top aides warned against daily. Equally important, relying heavily on human informants was "far more efficient and productive" for the Bureau than electronic surveillance, which consumed vast quantities of agent and clerical staff time while gathering, vacuum-cleaner style, far more chaff and trivia than even the FBI wanted.¹¹ In retrospect, perhaps nothing about the FBI's political investigations in the 1955–1975 period is more striking than the very modest degree to which the Bureau actually employed "taps" and "bugs" against targeted individuals and organizations.

8. See Robert Wall, "Special Agent for the FBI," *New York Review of Books* 17 (January 27, 1972), 13; and William C. Sullivan, *The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover's FBI* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), 151.

9. See Frank Donner, "Political Informers," in Pat Watters and Stephen Gillers, eds., *Investigating the FBI* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973), 353.

10. See Frank Donner, *The Age of Surveillance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 137.

11. See Ungar, *FBI*, 450; Donner, "Political Informers," 346; and Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King*, 173. Also see Michal R. Belknap, "Above the Law and Beyond Its Reach: O'Reilly and Theoharis on FBI Intelligence Operations," *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* (Winter 1985), 201–15.

Hence, from the FBI's perspective, scholars ought not to find it particularly surprising that the Bureau recruited as large an informant corps as it did, either within far left political parties, within antiwar organizations, or within the black freedom struggle, given the wide-ranging strategy of comprehensive political surveillance that the FBI was pursuing. But that is only half the answer, of course, for an informant corps the size of the Bureau's required thousands of willing recruits as well as an eager recruiter. And it is on this side of the informant equation, I believe, that more attention is needed in order to understand our history fully.

One 1968 FBI headquarters memorandum, reporting on only one of several informant programs that the Bureau had organized to keep a thorough eye on black America, proudly boasted of the recruitment of "3,248 ghetto-type racial informants" over the preceding few months.¹² Granted that at least some of these individuals would have been white shopkeepers or the like, and granted too, based on former agents' admissions, that at least some of these informants existed only on paper, and not in reality,¹³ that still confronts us with the task of explaining, or guessing at, the motivations of many thousands of black Americans who spied on the civil rights movement and black political groups for the FBI.

Previous analysts of informant behavior have identified a series of distinct possible motives that, one by one or in various admixtures, account for informants' willingness to spy. Money, of course, often comes at the top of the list—cash for information, on a weekly or piecework basis. Second, and often overrated, are ideological motives—a political hostility that most often is a rationalization for an animus that actually stems from personal or psychological sources rather than doctrinal substance. Third, and far more relevant in most instances to criminal informant work than to that of a political sort, is the individual who is informing because of some legal or practical vulnerability out of which his handlers extract quid-pro-quo informant work. Lastly, and more significant than some observers might realize, is simple thrill-seeking—someone whose adrenalin, sense of excitement, and enjoyment of daily life is enhanced by "playing detective" and having a secret purpose or "secret mission."¹⁴

When one looks at informants within the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, these four motivational types aid in analysis and explanation, but they are not sufficient for understanding the entire

12. George C. Moore to William Sullivan, "Racial Informants," September 3, 1968, 170-00-113. Also see Donner, "Political Informers," 356; and "The Use of Informants in FBI Intelligence Investigations," in U. S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Final Report, Book III*, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., 1976, 252-55.

13. See Ungar, *FBI*, 450-51; and *New York Times*, December 6, 1978, p. A13.

14. See Donner, "Political Informers," 343-45; Donner, "The Confession of an FBI Informer," *Harpers* 245 (December 1972), 54-65; Paul Jacobs, "Informers—The Enemy Within," *Ramparts* 12 (August-September 1973), 21-24, 52-55; and Marx, "Thoughts on a Neglected Category," 410-17.

story. Also important are the unwitting informants, those who provided privileged information to the Bureau without fully realizing how they were being used, and how their role was being portrayed in FBI paperwork. As one important board member of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the organization that masterminded that city's crucial 1955–1956 boycott, recalled his first conversation with the FBI, the agent who had turned up at his door had simply stated, "If you don't mind, I'll be checking in with you occasionally." To that board member, there was nothing improper or disloyal about bringing the friendly agent up to date on MIA doings whenever he inquired; to the agent, however, as well as to the FBI's headquarters staff and the Justice Department executives who received their reports, the board member was the FBI's highly-prized sole informant within the MIA, a man whose invaluable inside information was sorely missed when he moved from Montgomery in August 1958.¹⁵

Somewhat similar, but identifiably different, are cases in which a movement participant furnished private information to the authorities out of a desire to "keep the door open" or develop a special relationship that could stand one in good stead if things got difficult or serious troubles developed. Although more a source for local police chief Laurie Pritchett than an informant for the FBI, Albany (Georgia) Movement secretary Marion Page is a classic and important example of this type. "Some of the leaders in the Albany Movement cooperated with me as far as information is concerned," Pritchett later admitted, explaining that they, unlike other sources, were not paid for their help. "I didn't classify them as informers; they were people who I respected, who respected me, and they cooperated with us." Looking back on Page's role and conduct twenty-five years later, Vernon Jordan, who had served as the NAACP's Georgia field secretary at the height of the Albany Movement, explained it succinctly and sympathetically. "It was naiveté; it was the omnipresence of the hand of the law; it was fear; it was a kind of *modus operandi*."¹⁶

Page's story leads directly into what is perhaps the most difficult set of questions concerning the relationship between FBI and the civil rights movement of the 1960s: namely the extent to which a number of important movement leaders and organization executives actively cooperated with the Bureau. Although the caveat always must be kept in mind that not every now-available FBI memoranda description of certain individu-

15. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 67, 104, 649 n. 21; Garrow interview with Robert S. Graetz, February 23, 1984, McArthur, Ohio; Director to Attorney General, April 14, 1958, 62-101087-5-38; and Director to SAC, Mobile, September 5, 1958, 100-135-61-500. Also see Ungar, *FBI*, 451.

16. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 210, 665 n. 36; Blackside, Inc. Interview with Laurie Pritchett, November 7, 1985, Atlanta Ga.; Garrow interview with Vernon Jordan, March 7, 1984, Washington, D.C. Also see John A. Ricks, "'De Lawd' Descends and is Crucified: Martin Luther King, Jr., in Albany, Georgia," *Journal of Southwest Georgia History* 2 (Fall 1984), 13.

als' behavior need be fair, accurate, or complete, the documentary record on this point is extensive enough to deserve the most serious reflection. For almost ten years, the question of NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins's relationship to the Bureau has been a matter of active concern, and Wilkins was not alone among movement leaders in maintaining friendly relations with FBI chieftains. Two memos, both from 1963, outline the dimensions of the problem. "The Bureau has excellent contacts through James Farmer in CORE and Roy Wilkins in the NAACP," one FBI executive reminded another.¹⁷ Similarly, another document reports, CORE Washington leader Julius Hobson "has been a most effective source for this Bureau and has furnished a great deal of information concerning the planned activities of CORE."¹⁸ Both statements raise serious concerns, and a third memo, from Director Hoover to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and dated the day after the Hobson one, offers a fuller picture of the situation:

Our liaison program with the responsible leadership of some of the principal groups favoring integration . . . has enabled this Bureau to obtain and pass on to the Department and local law enforcement authorities . . . a constant flow of intelligence type information pertaining to pending and proposed action which these various groups have planned. . . . This information has also enabled us to alert local law enforcement agencies in advance in order that these agencies may take appropriate action to maintain peace and order and to prevent unwarranted situations from developing. The furnishing of such information has enabled us to maintain effective liaison during the critical period with the local authorities.¹⁹

If ever a documentary statement reflecting the close and friendly cooperation the Bureau afforded segregationist southern law enforcement officers was needed, this one would fill the bill. More importantly, although Farmer's relationship to the Bureau shows perhaps only one sign of having reached beyond that of the FBI's earlier Montgomery source,²⁰ Wilkins's stance is far more troubling. Wilkins's extremely deep-seated hostility toward Martin Luther King, Jr., whom he viewed as an undeserving usurper of the NAACP's rightful role as black America's foremost voice, apparently led him to sympathize actively with the Bureau's intense desire to oust King from any leadership role in the movement. Informed by top Hoover aide Cartha "Deke" DeLoach of King's privately professed dislike for the FBI Director, Wilkins responded by stating, so DeLoach wrote at the time, that "this upset him greatly and made him all the more determined to initiate action to remove King as soon as possi-

17. Fred J. Baumgardner to William C. Sullivan, October 16, 1963, 100-3-104-3883.

18. Alex Rosen to Alan H. Belmont, "Civil Rights Matters," May 22, 1963, 44-00-Not Recorded. Also see Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King*, 13, 232; and *Washington Post*, May 22, 1981, pp. A1, A18-19.

19. Hoover to Kennedy, May 23, 1963, 157-00-54.

20. See Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 270-71; and Garrow, "Freedom's Rider," *Nation* 240 (May 4, 1985), 535-37.

ble.” Neither Wilkins’s supposed determination to be rid of King nor the Bureau’s came to any immediate fruition.²¹

One context within which multiple movement leaders, although not King, actively cooperated with the Bureau concerned the purging of suspected “Reds” or Communists from movement groups. Farmer responded to an FBI warning about one alleged CP infiltrator by quickly firing the man from CORE; many other movement activists felt similarly, for, as the Bureau’s Montgomery source put it in describing the attitude of the MIA, “We had almost a paranoia about anybody getting involved who was related to any kind of subversive or questionable organization. We were just on our guard constantly.”²² When important movement groups developed, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which did not regard leftists with such fear, active but unfocused concerns developed among numerous movement supporters about the potential danger SNCC represented to the larger cause. One leader of the March on Washington noted the fear in religious circles that SNCC “is a Communist front of some sort,” but was reassured when an important Jewish official, “who maintains regular contact with the FBI,” apparently stemming from shared concerns about the Ku Klux Klan and other violently anti-Semitic organizations, reported back that there were “no known Communists” in SNCC’s leadership and “nothing concrete to go on.”²³

While cooperation of the Montgomery, Page, and Farmer sort, and perhaps Wilkins as well, can be explained by interests and motivations that in no way constituted any betrayal of the movement, other examples of civil rights informant conduct more closely mirror the four major categories outlined earlier. As I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere, the Bureau’s highly prized informant within Dr. King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Comptroller James A. Harrison, was motivated in large part, first-hand sources report, by the regular and substantial cash stipends he received from his FBI handler. Harrison reflects the second major category as well, for when confronted in 1980 about his informant’s role, Harrison sought to claim that initially my “rationale had mostly to do with whether the Communist Party was manipulating the movement.”

21. DeLoach to John P. Mohr, November 27, 1964, 62-78270-16. Also see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 687–88; Robert G. Murphy to J. Stanley Pottinger, “Martin Luther King, Jr.,” March 31, 1976, Civil Rights Division, U. S. Department of Justice, 38–39; *Washington Post*, May 29, 1978, p. A1, May 31, 1978, p. A6, and June 2, 1978, p. A2. For a discussion of a somewhat similar relationship involving a top American Civil Liberties Union official, see Harrison E. Salisbury, “The Strange Correspondence of Morris Ernst and John Edgar Hoover, 1939–1964,” *Nation* 239 (December 1, 1984), 575–89.

22. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 270–71; Garrow Interview with Robert S. Graetz, February 23, 1984, McArthur, Ohio.

23. Mathew Ahmann to Gerard Sherry, September 25, 1963, Henry Cabirac to Mathew Ahmann, March 8, 1963, and Sherry to Cabirac, October 24, 1963, National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice Papers, Marquette University Library Archives, Milwaukee, Wis., Boxes 20-44, 31-4 and 20-13.

Even Harrison, however, like virtually everyone who worked with him during his years as the FBI's spy inside SCLC, had to acknowledge that that motivation did not account for his six-year-long stint as a paid informant. "I made a mistake [by not getting out of it]," he later admitted.²⁴

Although Harrison's conduct, according to many who knew him then, also involved elements of the fourth major type, the thrill-seeker who enjoys the private excitement of "playing detective," the movement was not without at least a few examples of the third type as well, the coerced informant. Perhaps the clearest example of it, although a most awkward one, involved a young male staff worker for one of the major southern civil rights organizations who was confronted by city law enforcement authorities in Selma, Alabama, during the early stages of the 1965 campaign there, with evidence that he had engaged in illegal sexual conduct with underage youngsters. From that point forward, Selma Public Safety Director Wilson Baker had a valuable though unwilling informant who was privy to the movement's private strategy sessions.²⁵

This analysis and description of the FBI's informant-based political surveillance system and the types of informant situations that black civil rights organizations encountered during the 1955–1975 period at the hands of the FBI and other law enforcement organizations leads, I would suggest, to three points, two of which may be handled briefly, and one which cannot. First, scholars of the Bureau, as well as scholars of radical political organizations and twentieth-century social protest movements, need to realize that there are potentially thousands of informant identities, and the complicated explanations and stories that go with them, waiting for possible historical detection in the years to come. Given the legal unlikelihood that we will ever discover more than a very modest fraction of these identities, what difference does and will this large, missing part of our recent political history make in our understanding and portrayals of these decades? I can offer no simple or succinct answer, but I will argue that we need to pay far more attention to this matter than we have over the past ten to fifteen years.

Second, serious appreciation of just how informant-oriented the FBI's political intelligence work was over the years will, I believe, necessarily lead scholars of the Bureau toward a more extensive practice of oral history than has yet been the case in FBI historiography. To date the vast majority of scholarly studies concerning the Bureau have relied exclusively or almost exclusively on the available documentary record that insightful use of the FOIA has been able to generate. If we are to study seriously the Bureau's recruitment, usage, and supervision of its infor-

24. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King*, 175–76, 178–79, 183, 193, 198, 201, 206–7, 286–87, 299; *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, November 16, 1980, pp. A1, A16. Also see Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 427, 468, 584, 597, 611, 715–16.

25. See Charles E. Fager, *Selma 1965* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 31, 226; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 379.

mant corps, however, we will have to move beyond the documentary record to numerous interviews with former “security squad” field agents. Interviewing those agents, many of whom may have little use for scholarly critics of the FBI, about what they regard as the most sensitive aspects of their former jobs will be no easy task. Although some scholars have begun interviewing some of those retired FBI headquarters executives who are willing to talk, virtually all scholars of the Bureau are familiar with the great tensions and differences of perspective that separated the majority of field agents from the majority of headquarters supervisors. No scholar nowadays would argue that we can pursue serious, credible studies of the civil rights or antiwar movements without thorough oral history interviewing of the participants, and we need to set that same standard for scholarly studies of the FBI. Difficulties in obtaining desired interviews occur to varying extents in all fields of recent history, but failure to pursue and conduct them is not an acceptable excuse. Until we start making far greater use of oral history with both headquarters executives and former FBI field agents, FBI historiography in general and our understanding of the informant industry in particular will continue to be seriously deficient.

Lastly, the informants issue leads us to a final and far more analytically complicated set of questions: what effects did it all have, what differences did it really make? At bottom, this is perhaps the most fundamental issue of all that has to be addressed in researching the FBI’s six decades of political surveillance, and it is one we have not as yet made a good start toward answering. What valuable analytical work has taken place on this issue has been largely limited to the most explicitly and tangibly harmful of the COINTELPRO actions, where intentional Bureau provocations led the victims of the tactics to do things—including things that endangered or otherwise harmed their own lives or those of others—that otherwise never would have taken place. That toll is a supremely unpleasant and distasteful list,²⁶ but it is also a relatively short list, relatively short when read in the light of the tens of thousands of people and hundreds of thousands of events that made up and went into the major social protest movements of the last thirty years. Once one sets aside the list of intentionally disruptive harassment actions, the question of “just how much difference did the FBI’s surveillance and penetration presence make” still looms large.

Two of this era’s most insightful sociologists have been among the very small number of people who have attempted to tackle this question head-on, and their conclusions deserve consideration. MIT’s Gary Marx has

26. See in particular “COINTELPRO: The FBI’s Covert Action Programs Against American Citizens,” and “The FBI’s Covert Action Program to Destroy the Black Panther Party,” in U. S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee, *Final Report, Book III*, n. 12, above, 1–77, 185–223. Also see Morton Halperin, *et al.*, *The Lawless State: The Crimes of the U.S. Intelligence Agencies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976); and Athan Theoharis, *Spying on Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 133–55.

emphasized that law enforcement penetration efforts appear to have had a far more significant effect upon “closed” groups than upon “open” social protest movements. While “open” groups could be penetrated at will, their relatively decentralized structures, unprivatized decisionmaking processes, fluid membership, and preference for spontaneous rather than carefully planned actions all served to weaken the effects of official informants’ presence, Marx has suggested. Although conceding that “the nature of the group cannot help but be changed by the presence of specious activists,” Marx nonetheless concludes that twentieth-century American political repression has been “relatively benign, particularly at the federal level.” That has been especially the case with regard to mass-based social protest movements, rather than secret, hierarchical, and tightly-knit “closed” groups such as the CP and SWP. “Authorities appear to have been least successful against the antiwar, student, and moderate civil rights movement,” Marx concludes.²⁷

Marx correctly realizes that the most important issue of all is whether the FBI’s conduct toward these movements actually in any way changed the course of their growth, development, and eventual decline. His answer is a qualified no. “Many of the outcomes sought by authorities seeking to damage social movements were likely to happen anyway, though perhaps not as rapidly or to the same degree.”²⁸ A second leading sociologist, Anthony Oberschall, who has examined the historical record in similar detail, has voiced his parallel conclusions more strongly. Official penetration, surveillance, and dirty tricks “probably had some weakening effect,” Oberschall notes, “but hardly as much as” internal developments and tensions that plagued those social protest organizations. “Repression of the 1960s movements,” Oberschall concluded, “was only marginally effective in precipitating movement decline.”²⁹

Although Marx’s and Oberschall’s analyses are generally correct, they likely are overstated to at least a modest degree. Only with considerably more detailed and painstaking work, I fear, will we be able to come to well-informed and fully dependable conclusions concerning the FBI’s harmful effects upon its political targets. In order to do so, I believe we will have to keep three distinct categories of possible effects clearly in

27. Marx, “Thoughts on a Neglected Category,” 424, 430, and “External Efforts to Damage or Facilitate Social Movements: Some Patterns, Explanations, Outcomes, and Complications,” in Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy, eds., *The Dynamics of Social Movements* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1979), 119, 120. Also see Richard L. Criley, “The Cult of the Informer Revisited: ‘Antiterrorism’ Policy in the United States,” *Crime and Social Justice* 21–22 (1984), 186–87.

28. Marx, “External Efforts to Damage,” 122.

29. Anthony Oberschall, “The Decline of the 1960s Social Movements,” in Louis Kriesberg, ed., *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, vol. 1 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1978), 277, 280. Also see Doug McAdam, “The Decline of the Civil Rights Movement,” in Jo Freeman, ed., *Social Movements of the Sixties and Seventies* (New York: Longman, 1983), 298–319.

mind. First, what were the *direct* effects of the surveillance and penetration on the movement itself? With regard to COINTEL-style harassment and dirty tricks, the record already appears fairly complete, although not clear. With regard to the relatively limited number of instances of electronic surveillance, the effects seem likely to have been minimal at best. With regard to informants' presence, much more tough-minded consideration must be given to whether passive presence has tangible effects,³⁰ to how significant a number of instances of informant activism or agent provocateur behavior actually occurred, and to whether activists' *expectations* of informers' presence may really have been the most significant internal effect of all. Widespread suspicion of informant penetration provided fertile ground for accusations of betrayal whenever movement tensions led to angry, personal recriminations.³¹ The CP's knee-jerk acceptance of William Albertson's snitch-jacketing is the worst but by no means the only example of how ready thousands of activists within a wide-ranging assortment of FBI target groups—the CP, the Black Panthers, SCLC, and the Ku Klux Klan—were to uncover real or imagined informants within their ranks.³²

Second, we will need to survey and examine, more thoroughly than we have so far, the extent to which FBI actions altered the news media's portrayals of targeted activist groups. Such an examination would involve not only the well-known instances in which friendly publications published purposefully negative, Bureau-authored stories, but the far larger potential number of incidents in which FBI tips to the Bureau's large number of media friends³³ led to the publicizing of incidents or themes that otherwise never would have become a part of the information lens through which the American public viewed the political groups and mass movements of those decades. Although it likely will prove impossible to measure the number of potential members or participants who were dissuaded from activism by such officially planted media images, or the number of past or potential financial contributors who scaled back upon or

30. See in particular Andrew Karmen, "Agents Provocateurs in the Contemporary U. S. Leftist Movement," in Charles E. Reardon, ed., *The Criminologist: Crime and the Criminal* (Pacific Palisades, Cal.: Goodyear Publishing Co., 1974), 221, who notes that "the spy or informer is a passive information gatherer peripheral to the growth and development of the target group," but adds, with reference to "closed" rather than "open" groups, that "an agent's degree of influence is inversely proportional to the size of the conspiratorial group, and directly proportional to the agent's standing within the group, the degree of differentiation of his proposals from other plans, and the forcefulness with which he promotes his line."

31. See, e. g., Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 464.

32. For a study that devotes special attention to the FBI's informant penetration of the Ku Klux Klan, and to questions concerning agent provocateur behavior on the part of those informants, see "The Use of Informants in FBI Intelligence Investigations," in U. S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee, *Final Report, Book III*, n. 26, above, 239–44.

33. See Paul Clancy, "The Bureau and the bureaus," *Quill*, February 1976, 12–18, and March 1976, 12–15; and Chip Berlet, "Journalists & G-Men," *Chicago Reader*, June 2, 1978, pp. 1, 18–26.

abstained from monetary support because of such stories, these effects of the FBI's media efforts deserve more extensive consideration than scholars so far have afforded them.

Third, and last, and perhaps equally difficult to measure, is the effect that FBI information and reports had upon those in government, or very close to it, who became privy to the Bureau's descriptions and analyses of politically targeted groups. There is no doubt that the Bureau's information-passing about Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, significantly altered, in highly negative ways, the attitudes that Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy held toward those central players in the civil rights movement.³⁴ Did those significantly different attitudes in turn lead to a distinctly lower level of official support for that movement, and some of its goals, than otherwise would have been the case? While of course such a question can never be answered conclusively, a very strong case can be made for the argument that the FBI, in this instance and in others, significantly affected the overall response that the federal government—in Congress, in the Justice Department, and particularly in the White House—offered to the major social protest movements of the 1955–1975 period.³⁵

Hence, a very good argument can be offered that the FBI's efforts against those movements and organizations did have significantly damaging effects, though more so in external than in internal terms. Although human informants formed the largest element in the FBI's political surveillance substructure, those informants may well have damaged political dissenters less through their presence and actions than through the fears of their presence that were generated by activists' limited but still sufficient awareness of the huge, far-reaching scope of the FBI's human informant operations. Additionally, thorough consideration likely will show that the most significantly harmful effects of the FBI's actions against mass-based social protest movements were external rather than internal, and involved substantial though hard-to-measure diminution of public and governmental support that those movements otherwise would have enjoyed and been strengthened by. On both of these fronts—the informant substructure and the significant panoply of harmful effects and real damage—our future scholarship on the FBI needs to move forward from where we presently stand.

34. See Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King*, 91–96, 166–69; and Garrow, “Commentary: Leadership and Competition in the Civil Rights Movement,” in Charles W. Eagles, ed., *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 63.

35. See Ramsey Clark, *Crime in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 293.