

Marshall, Hoover and the NAACP.  
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One was fighting Jim Crow, the other hunting Reds. But behind the scenes, Thurgood and J. Edgar found each other useful.

THURGOOD MARSHALL'S CHIEF PREOCCUPATION throughout most of 1952 was with how the U.S. Supreme Court would respond when he, then the NAACP's top lawyer, argued a school-desegregation case called *Brown v. Board of Education* that December. Simultaneously, however, Marshall's best acquaintance in the upper reaches of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Assistant Director Louis B. Nichols, was telling J. Edgar Hoover that "the matter which is worrying [Marshall] more than anything else at the moment is the Communist Party's effort to get into the NAACP." True, Marshall had been pressing for several years to expel those sub rosa communists who had wormed their way into various local NAACP branches. But he clearly wasn't as obsessed with Red-hunting as Nichols described--and therein lies a little-known tale about the civil-rights movement.

Marshall's relationship with Hoover's FBI came to light last week when 1,300 pages of the bureau's files on the first black Supreme Court justice were released. They record a series of contacts between Marshall and high-ranking G-men, touching on everything from the danger of communists in the movement's ranks to a renegade NAACP activist in North Carolina who advocated armed self-defense. The press played the story as if Marshall--the architect of the crucial legal challenges that led to the abolition of Jim Crow--was an FBI collaborator, snitching to the Feds.

He wasn't. In fact, Marshall, like his colleague Roy Wilkins, the NAACP's executive secretary, and Wilkins's predecessor, Walter White, lived in a political climate in which protecting the NAACP's ideological respectability was a constant priority. Southern segregationists regularly claimed that the "N Double A" harbored violent radicals and communist revolutionaries, and it was essential for the civil rights advocates--who had enough problems selling their cause without being saddled with charges of foreign influence--to rebut those accusations. Indeed, in 1947 Walter White successfully solicited a formal endorsement of the NAACP's bona fides from America's most celebrated anti-communist: J. Edgar Hoover.

Hoover enjoyed a far more positive reputation in those years than he's had since the 1960s, and the NAACP's interactions with the FBI were politically savvy. Following the 1954 desegregation victory in *Brown*, Southern politicians launched a regionwide onslaught against the NAACP's very existence. Marshall and fellow lawyers fought back against state attempts to obtain and publish NAACP membership lists--a truly life-or-death issue in some locales--while segregationists professed a need to expose communist infiltration. Marshall knew that the Southern segregationists, not the G-men, were the ones working to destroy the movement.

From the FBI's vantage point, cordial and informative ties with the top figures in an important organization like the NAACP had tremendous bureaucratic value. FBI supervisors recognized Hoover's insatiable appetite for political information and gossip; Hoover himself often

recapitulated those reports in personal letters to the White House that reminded each president of just how valuable and an-knowing the FBI could be. In 1964, at the height of the FBI's war against Martin Luther King Jr., Hoover informed LBJ that Roy Wilkins had told the FBI he agreed that ideally King should retire from the movement. (Years later, Wilkins, confronted with a 1964 memo detailing his private comments, denied anything of the sort.)

When Hoover's FBI invested the time and money to maintain elaborate electronic surveillance on someone like King or Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam, the resulting record was tens of thousands of pages long and often--if intelligently transcribed--of tremendous historical value. More often, however, the FBI's information was coming from human informants, individuals who were formally designated as such and often financially rewarded, whether or not the accuracy of their information could be proven.

Essentially innocuous conversations like Marshall's can acquire ominous connotations because of the police-agency style in which they are recounted. The reality was far more mundane than the old documents make it seem: Marshall was just looking out for the NAACP's own interests. Hoover's FBI talked to important Americans every day of the year; people shouldn't misinterpret the workaday conversations of someone like Marshall as something they never were.

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