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Elijah Muhammad vs. Malcom X

By David J. **Garrow**. David J. Garrow is the author of "The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr." and the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography "Bearing the Cross." 1038 words

AN ORIGINAL MAN: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad, by Claude Andrew Clegg III. St. Martin's, 377 pp., \$25.95.

THE MOST EXTENSIVELY surveilled black leader of the 1950s and 1960s was not Martin Luther King Jr. - whose harassment by the Federal Bureau of Investigation is a well-known horror story - but Elijah Muhammad, the strange and reclusive leader of the Nation of Islam, better known in those days as the Black Muslims. The FBI's wiretapping and bugging of King lasted from 1962 until 1968; the bureau's surveillance of Elijah began in 1957 and stretched to mid-1966.

Elijah's NOI is best remembered for creating Malcolm X as a memorable voice and then - after Malcolm's 1964 break with Elijah - generating Malcolm's assassination 11 months later in early 1965. But the Nation's roots reached back two decades prior to Malcolm's 1952 recruitment, to a 1931 Detroit encounter between a mysterious, soon-to-disappear black religious eccentric named W. D. Fard and an aimless 34-year-old black migrant from rural Georgia named Elijah Poole.

Poole became an immediate follower of Fard's unusual, quasi-Islamic faith, and Fard soon bestowed the new surname "Muhammad" upon him. Following Fard's 1934 disappearance, Elijah inherited the leadership of the small, conflict-ridden sect. A combination of law-enforcement harassment and violence-prone splinter groups kept Elijah literally on the run during much of the ensuing eight years; only his 1942 arrest for avoiding the draft brought stability to his life. Following four years' imprisonment, Elijah became a free man again in 1946, when he was 49.

Those 15 years of unpredictable and often dangerous turmoil nevertheless witnessed the slow and halting growth of the Nation of Islam into a long-term organizational survivor. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the NOI grew further - to perhaps a very modest peak of about 20,000 actual members - but Elijah's No. 1 priority was the group's financial well-being, not public prominence.

Author Claude Clegg, a historian at North Carolina A&T State University, perceptively notes how Elijah's harassment and incarceration prompted "a growing aversion to conflict with state and national authorities." A desire for material well-being far outpaced any other substantive agenda, and despite the common belief that the Nation's black separatist ideology made it a "radical" group, Clegg does a superb job of detailing and depicting just how thoroughly conservative Elijah's NOI consistently was.

NOI members were heavily taxed in order to support the group's national headquarters in Chicago, and Clegg accurately calls the group "a kind of military theocracy arranged along dictatorial lines." As the 1950s progressed, "a trend toward materialism, even avarice," became

more and more pronounced among Elijah and his top aides, and their "consuming preoccupation with making money" led to a tightly knit nepotism within the Chicago elite.

As minister of the Nation of Islam's New York temple in Harlem, Malcolm X was both well-removed from the Chicago scene and well-positioned to win far more press attention than all other NOI ministers combined. By the early 1960s the divide between Chicago and New York was more than geographical as Malcolm's "larger-than-life image in the media as the key figure in the Nation" earned him "the envy and jealousy of Chicago officials."

Malcolm's fatal break with Elijah began over what Clegg calls "the worst-kept secret in the Nation" - Elijah's "willingness to test the boundaries of self-indulgence" by fathering upward of a dozen out-of-wedlock children with a succession of young women who worked at NOI headquarters. Various ministers, including Malcolm, privately downplayed word of the scandal, but - as Clegg discerningly notes - not until much later did Malcolm realize that "his efforts to 'inoculate' Muslims against news of Muhammad's transgressions provided his rivals in Chicago with even more weapons in the fight against his ascendancy."

Elijah's 1963 suspension of Malcolm as the NOI's national minister was soon followed by Malcolm's heart-rendingly painful exodus. In the wake of his public departure, Elijah's top loyalists, including Malcolm's former protege Louis X, now known as Louis Farrakhan, turned against Malcolm with an angry and threatening vengeance. Farrakhan wrote in the NOI's newspaper, Muhammad Speaks, that "such a man as Malcolm is worthy of death"; two months later Malcolm was gunned down in a Harlem auditorium by a Nation of Islam assassination squad.

Clegg unfortunately says next to nothing about the under-appreciated specifics of Malcolm's murder, and he presumptuously volunteers that Muhammad's express involvement "can never be confirmed." While Clegg has obtained many crucial FBI documents detailing the bureau's surveillance of the NOI, neither he nor anyone else has yet reviewed the FBI's transcript-like logs that detail everything that was overheard on Elijah's wiretapped phone lines.

But that oversight stands almost alone in an otherwise impressively perceptive and valuable book. Malcolm's death, Clegg explains, meant that the "conservative, fiscally oriented, theological faction of the Nation . . . had triumphed over the challenge of the younger political element," and from the time of Malcolm's killing through Elijah's own death in 1975, the NOI was never again a significant political presence within black America.

"An Original Man" is a major contribution to African-American history that ought to be read by anyone interested in Malcolm X. "Little of what Elijah Muhammad said, and even less of what he actually did, fundamentally challenged the status quo," and Malcolm before his murder had become Elijah's living antithesis. Whereas Elijah "counseled against black participation in electoral politics, railed against the Civil Rights Movement, encouraged racial separation, wrote off much of Africa as uncivilized, and did not question the basic operation of American capitalism," his former disciple embodied a different vision. Malcolm represented the future, but the NOI ensured that it was not to be.

Archive Photo - Elijah Muhammad