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Malcolm X Under the BOSS' Prying Eyes

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By **David J. Garrow**

THE NEWLY RELEASED New York Police Department surveillance file on Malcolm X - obtained through New York State's Freedom of Information Law - provides a remarkable inside look at the political intelligence gathering that for many years was carried out against a wide variety of activists by the police department's elite Bureau of Special Services (BOSS).

The bureau's political monitoring efforts, which began more than a half-century ago, were finally and formally constrained eight years ago by a long-sought federal court stipulation. But not until the release of the Malcolm X file has there been a historically notable public disclosure of BOSS documents.

These 512 pages of police reports and memos concerning Malcolm and the Nation of Islam are a rich and fascinating trove, but they are also visibly incomplete. Internal references make clear that the bureau's file on Malcolm and the Nation began at least as early as 1955, but the first documents released here date from 1957.

Moreover, gaps in the annual, sequential numberings given to documents from 1957 through 1962 indicate that a majority of the items originally compiled have either not survived or were not included in this initial release. Even more striking is the extreme paucity of documents covering the final 12 months of Malcolm's life - from his public break with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam (NOI) in March, 1964, until his Feb. 21, 1965, assassination at Manhattan's Audubon Ballroom.

Historians and other interested citizens will eagerly await the police department's explanation of where the 1964 documents, as well as the earlier missing items, may - or may not - now be found.

The memo-by-memo record of BOSS' interest in Malcolm and the Nation of Islam, however, is only one small portion of what promises to be a large and dramatically revealing trove of police intelligence files reaching back to at least the 1920s. These records should cover an extremely wide range of political organizations and activists - from the early Communist Party to student protesters of the late '60s - and help document both a rich slice of 20th-Century New York history as well as the ways in which the city's police department tried, sometimes with considerable success, to keep tabs on it. These intriguing Malcolm documents should spur both interested citizens and public officials to press for full release of the entire bureau archive.

A first review of this BOSS file on Malcolm X reveals that:

The bureau's interest in Malcolm intensified in the spring of 1957, when a police beating of one NOI member led to a dramatic vigil at Sydenham Hospital - a scene memorably recaptured in Spike Lee's 1992 film.

Four weeks later, a BOSS detective, William K. DeFossett monitored a Sunday evening service at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church where Malcolm, at the invitation of the Rev. (and congressman) Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., spoke to an audience that included more than 300 of Malcolm's own followers.

In November, 1957, bureau Det. Walter A. Upshur spent over four hours surveilling both an evening meeting at the Nation of Islam's Temple No. 7 on 116th Street and members' subsequent late-night snacks at the Nation's restaurant on Lenox Avenue. "Malcolm X was observed behind the counter and was operating the cash register," Upshur told his superiors.

The following day, Upshur also interviewed Sydenham Hospital administrator William Traynham about the details of Malcolm's recent three-day stay there for a medical problem characterized as "coronary."

Shortly thereafter, one BOSS official explained that while the Nation of Islam had not yet been formally categorized as "subversive" by the U.S. Department of Justice, it nonetheless was "an organization whose activities can be construed as inimical to the best interests of the United States." Thanks to the bureau, "much information concerning the techniques of this organization and its members have [sic] been obtained through confidential sources." Unless that claim was an exaggeration, the many as-yet-unreleased documents could well be even more revealing.

In early 1958, DeFossett reported on a Nation of Islam cultural event where "several vocal selections were rendered by a person called Louis X from Boston" - the man now known as Louis Farrakhan. That rally, like most others, also afforded BOSS agents an opportunity to record the license plates of many of the people who were present, and by tracing automobile registrations, the bureau over the years built up an extensive card file of people who had attended NOI events, including Manhattan Borough President Hulan Jack, City Council member Earl Brown and a host of other notables.

In May, 1959, Det. Anton Weidinger filed a report describing how he and a colleague, Det. Ernest B. Latty, had been allowed by Anti-Defamation League official Milton Ellerin to examine the ADL's file on the "Temples of Islam."

Two months later, Latty recruited a Nation of Islam travel agency consultant, Abdel B. Naeem, as a friendly source, and Naeem passed on to Latty Malcolm's own descriptions of his first visit to Egypt, including his meetings with future Egyptian President Anwar el Sadat.

As many as eight BOSS detectives would stake out each NOI meeting, and by early 1961 the bureau was energetically swapping information on Malcolm and the Nation of Islam with other big-city police departments as well as with the FBI. The Los Angeles Police Department gave BOSS a five-page surveillance report of Elijah Muhammad's April, 1961, visit to that city and a 30-page transcript of a Los Angeles rally at which Malcolm had substituted for his ailing leader.

BOSS detectives also carefully monitored television programs that featured Malcolm and other black activists, such as novelist James Baldwin. In August, 1961, BOSS commander Sanford D. Garelik - who later became New York City Council president - told his superiors that the bureau was maintaining "constant surveillance" of the NOI "in close cooperation with Federal and State agencies, with whom there is a constant exchange of intelligence data."

The BOSS file for late 1961 and early 1962 is glaringly incomplete, but in early 1963 its careful monitoring of Nation of Islam events showed that both Baldwin and well-known photographer Gordon Parks were among Malcolm's growing circle of friends. BOSS responded posthaste when the Washington, D.C., Police Department's "Special Service Unit" asked for information about a rumor that Malcolm would be relocating to the nation's capital, and DeFossett was dispatched to get Malcolm's own face-to-face denial of the report. Outdoor NOI rallies on Lenox Avenue in the summer of 1963 were "electronically recorded" and kept "on file" at BOSS' 56 Worth St. headquarters.

In mid-summer, an intensive investigation was launched after unhappy neighbors reported that both Malcolm and Baldwin - whom one resident termed a "suspected communist leader" - were paying repeated visits to a Sierra Leone diplomat who had just taken Apartment 9-W at 392 Central Park West.

After August, 1963, memos detailing Malcolm's sarcastic attitude toward the March on Washington, as well as his new friendship with heavyweight boxing contender Cassius Clay, the contents of the released BOSS file drop off dramatically.

A June, 1964 memo ("B.S.S. 11-M, Supplementary number 5") and an October, 1964 one ("B.S.S. 11-M, Supplementary number 8") clearly suggest that at least numbers 6 and 7 are yet to be found, and the dramatic events that followed Malcolm's break in March, 1964, with Elijah Muhammad - including BOSS' introduction of an undercover officer, Gene Roberts, into Malcolm's circle - suggest even more strongly that many additional records were generated at that time and, one hopes, still exist.

Photos- 1) Collector's items: Posters for rallies from the file the NYPD kept on Malcolm X. 2) From left, Jame Baldwin, 3) Gordon Parks, 4) Sanford Garelik and 5) Anwar Sadat. 6) Cassius Clay (then). 7) David Garrow