

# Federal Bureau of Intimidation

by Howard Zinn

I thought it would be good to talk about the FBI because they talk about us. They don't like to be talked about. They don't even like the fact that you're listening to them being talked about. They are very sensitive people. If you look into the history of the FBI and Martin Luther King-which now has become notorious in that totally notorious history of the FBI- the FBI attempted to neutralize, perhaps kill him, perhaps get him to commit suicide, certainly to destroy him as a leader of black people in the United States. And if you follow the progression of that treatment of King, it starts, not even with the Montgomery Bus Boycott; it starts when King begins to criticize the FBI. You see, then suddenly Hoover's ears, all four of them, perk up. And he says, okay, we have to start working on King.

I was interested in this especially because I was reading the Church Committee report. In 1975, the Senate Select Committee investigated the CIA and the FBI and issued voluminous reports and pointed out at what point the FBI became interested in King. In 1961-62 after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, after the sit-ins, after the Freedom Rides of '61, there was an outbreak of mass demonstrations in a very little, very Southern, almost slave town of southern Georgia called Albany. There had been nothing like this in that town. A quiet, apparently passive town, everybody happy, of course. And then suddenly the black people rose up and a good part of the black population of Albany ended up in jail. There were not enough jails for all who demonstrated.

A report was made for the Southern Regional Council of Atlanta on the events in Albany. The report, which was very critical of the FBI, came out in the New York Times. And King was asked what he thought of the role of the FBI. He said he agreed with the report that the FBI was not doing its job, that the FBI was racist, etcetera, etcetera.

At that point, the FBI also inquired who the author of that report was, and asked that an investigation begin on the author. Since I had written it, I was interested in the FBI's interest in the author. In fact, I sent away for whatever information the FBI had on me, through the Freedom of Information Act. I became curious, I guess. I wanted to test myself because if I found that the FBI did not have any dossier on me, it would have been tremendously embarrassing and I wouldn't have been able to face my friends. But, fortunately, there were several hundred pages of absolutely inconsequential material. Very consequential for the FBI, I suppose, but inconsequential for any intelligent person.

I'm talking about the FBI and U.S. democracy because here we have this peculiar situation that we live in a democratic country-everybody knows that, everybody says it, it's repeated, it's dinned into our ears a thousand times, you grow up, you pledge allegiance, you salute the flag, you hail democracy, you look at the totalitarian states, you read the history of tyrannies, and here is the beacon light of democracy. And, of course, there's some truth to that. There are things you can do in the United States that you can't do many other places without being put in jail.

But the United States is a very complex system. It's very hard to describe because, yes, there are elements of democracy; there are things that you're grateful for, that you're not in front of the death squads in El Salvador. On the other hand, it's not quite a democracy. And one of the things that makes it not quite a democracy is the existence of outfits like the FBI and the CIA. Democracy is based on openness, and the existence of a secret policy, secret lists of dissident citizens, violates the spirit of democracy. There are a lot of other things that make the U.S. less than a democracy. For instance, what happens in police stations, and in the encounters between police and citizens on the street. Or what happens in the military, which is a kind of fascist enclave inside this democracy. Or what happens in courtrooms which are supposedly little repositories of democracy, yet the courtroom is presided over by an emperor who decides everything that happens in a courtroom -what evidence is given, what evidence is withheld, what instructions are given to the jury, what sentences are ultimately meted out to the guilty and so on.

So it's a peculiar kind of democracy. Yes, you vote. You have a choice. Clinton, Bush and Perot! It's fantastic. Time and Newsweek. CBS and NBC. It's called a pluralist society. But in so many of the little places of

everyday life in which life is lived out, somehow democracy doesn't exist. And one of the creeping hands of totalitarianism running through the democracy is the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

I think it was seeing the film *Mississippi Burning* that led me to want to talk about the FBI. I had sort of reached a point where I said, "Who wants to hear anymore about the FBI?" But then I saw *Mississippi Burning*. It relates a very, very important incident in the history of the civil rights movement in the U.S. In the summer of 1964, these three young men in the movement, two white, one black, had traveled to investigate the burning of a church in a place called Philadelphia, Mississippi-city of brotherly love. They were arrested, held in jail, released in the night, followed by cars, stalked, taken off and beaten very, very badly with chains and clubs and shot to death- executed-June 21, 1964. The bodies were found in August. It's a great theme for an important film. *Mississippi Burning*, I suppose, does something useful in capturing the terror of Mississippi, the violence, the ugliness.

But after it does that, it does something which I think is very harmful: In the apprehension of the murderers, it portrays two FBI operatives and a whole flotilla-if FBI men float-of FBI people as the heroes of this episode. Anybody who knows anything about the history of the civil rights movement, or certainly people who were in the movement at that time in the South, would have to be horrified by that portrayal. I was just one of many people who was involved in the movement. I was teaching in Atlanta, Georgia, in a black college for about seven years from 1956 to 1963, and I became involved in the movement, in Albany, Georgia, and Selma, Alabama, and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and Greenwood and Greenville and Jackson, Mississippi in the summer of '64. I was involved with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Anybody who was involved in the Southern movement at that time knew with absolute certainty: The FBI could not be counted on and it was not the friend of the civil rights movement. The FBI stood by with their suits and ties-I'm sorry I'm dressed this way today, but I was just trying to throw them off the track-and took notes while people were being beaten in front of them. This happened again, and again, and again. The Justice Department, to which the FBI is presumably accountable, was called again and again, in times of stress by people of the civil rights movement saying, hey, somebody's in danger here. Somebody's about to be beaten, somebody's about to be arrested, somebody's about to be killed. We need help from the federal government. We do have a Constitution, don't we? We do have rights. We do have the constitutional right to just live, or to walk, or to speak, or to pray, or to demonstrate. We have a Bill of Rights. It's America. It's a democracy. You're the Justice Department, your job is to enforce the Constitution of the United States. That's what you took an oath to do, so where are you? The Justice Department wasn't responding. They wouldn't return phone calls, they wouldn't show up, or when they did show up, they did nothing.

The civil rights movement was very, very clear about the role of the FBI. And it wasn't just the FBI; it goes back to the Justice Department; back to Washington; back to politics; back to Kennedy appointing racist judges in Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia to do favors for his Southern Democratic political cronies, only becoming concerned about black people when things appeared on television that embarrassed the administration and the nation before the world.

Only then did things happen. Oh, we'll send troops to Little Rock, we'll send troops to Oxford, Mississippi, and so on. Do something big and dramatic and so on. But in all the days and all the hours in between, before and after, if there's no international attention, forget it. Leave these black folk at the mercy of the law enforcement officers down there. Just as after the Civil War, blacks were left at the mercy of Southern power and Southern plantation owners by Northern politicians who made their deal with the white South in 1877.

If you want to read the hour-by-hour description of this, you could read a wonderful book by Mary King, *Freedom Song*. She was a SNCC staffperson in the Atlanta office whose job was to get on the phone and call the newspapers, the government, the Justice Department and say: Hey, three young men have not come back from Philadelphia, Mississippi. She called and called and called and it took several days before she got a response. Deaf ears. They were dead. Probably none of those calls would have saved them.

It was too late, but there was something that could have saved them. And it's something I haven't seen reported in the press. If there had been federal agents accompanying the three on their trip, if there had been federal agents in the police station in Philadelphia, Mississippi, that might not have happened. If there had been somebody determined to enforce law, enforce constitutional rights, to protect the rights of people who were just

going around, driving, talking, working, then those three murders might have been averted.

In fact, 12 days before the three disappeared, there was a gathering in Washington, D.C., on June 9, 1964. A busload of black Mississippians came all the way up-it was a long bus ride to Washington-to the National Theater.

There was a jury of fairly well known Americans- college presidents, writers, other people-assembled to hear the testimony. The black people's testimony before the press and an audience was recorded and transcribed. They testified that what was going to happen in Mississippi that summer with all these volunteers coming down was very, very dangerous. They testified about their experiences, about their history of being beaten, about the bodies of black people found floating in the rivers of Mississippi and they said, people are going to get killed; we need the protection of the federal government.

Also appearing at this hearing were specialists in constitutional law who made the proper legal points that the federal government had absolute power to protect people going down into Mississippi. Section 333, Title 10 of the U.S. Code (some numbers burn themselves into you because you have to use them again and again) gives the federal government the power to do anything to enforce constitutional rights when local authorities either refused or failed to protect those rights.

So they take all this testimony at the National Theater and put it into a transcript and deliver it to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, hand deliver it to the White House, and ask the federal government to send marshals down to Mississippi. Not an army, a few hundred marshals, that's all. Plainclothes people for protection. This is 1964; by now you've sent 40,000 soldiers to Vietnam, so you can send 200 plainclothes people to Mississippi. No response from the Attorney General, none from the President. Twelve days later those three men disappear.

Well, why didn't they put that in the film? Why didn't anybody say anything about that? So the FBI are the heroes of this film.

Well, that's only part, as you know, of the history of the FBI. Going back, the FBI was formed first as the Bureau of Investigation under Theodore Roosevelt-don't worry, I'm not going to take you year by year through this history. It's a very depressing history.

But, it just interested me. In 1908, under Theodore Roosevelt, his Attorney General, a man named Bonaparte, a grand nephew of Napoleon-set up the Bureau of Investigation which later became the FBI. One of its first acts was to enforce a new federal law- the Mann Act. This law made it illegal to transport women across state lines for immoral purposes. Yes, one of their first acts was to prosecute the black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, because he was living with a white woman and they actually crossed a state line. One of the first heroic acts of the FBI. They go way back. Racism goes way back in the FBI and comes way forward, comes right up to now. By the way-in the film they show a black FBI man. But there was no black person in the FBI in 1964. A chauffeur, maybe. A maid, maybe. No black FBI agents in 1964. But there was this black FBI agent in the film.

Yes, the racism comes right up to yesterday when a black FBI man-in Detroit, I think-is harassed by his fellow white FBI agents who do all sorts of funny things to him to make life miserable for him. You think, where is the solidarity among FBI people? FBI people, black and white together, we shall overcome. Well, apparently the FBI doesn't believe in that.

There's too much to say about the FBI and racism. It's not just J. Edgar Hoover. Everybody says, oh, J. Edgar Hoover, he really hated black people. He hated the civil rights movement, but it's not just him, of course. It's too easy to pin all this on J. Edgar Hoover, to pin it just on the FBI as if they're wildcards. The president says, oh sorry, we didn't know what they were doing. Well, it's just like Oliver North. A wildcard North was doing these crazy things and his defense was absolutely right: I did it for them. He did. He did it for them and now they have turned on him. He doesn't have to worry, they'll take good care of him. They take care of their own.

When people in the CIA and FBI commit crimes, how do they get handled? They don't. They're forgotten about. Do you know how many crimes have been committed by the FBI and the CIA? How many black bag jobs? Breaking and entering? Try breaking and entering. Really. Try breaking and entering in the daytime, or

nighttime, and see what happens to you. Different punishments depending on what hour of the day. The FBI broke and entered again and again and again and again, hundreds and hundreds of times.

There were hundreds of FBI men involved in these breaks. Two men were actually prosecuted. This happens every once in a while. When huge public attention finally gets focused, they pick out two from the pack and prosecute them and they find them guilty and they sentence them. To what? To nothing. Fine, \$5,000 for one person. That's FBI petty cash. \$3,500 for the other. And then they say that justice has been done and the system works.

Remember when Richard Helms of the CIA was found guilty of perjury in 1976? Hiss went to jail for four years for perjury, Helms didn't go to jail for two hours. And Helms's perjury, if you examine it, was far, far more serious than Alger Hiss's, if Hiss was indeed guilty. But if you're CIA, if you're FBI, you get off.

But North is right; he did it for them. He did what they expected him, wanted him, to do. They use this phrase, plausible denial, a very neat device. You have to be able to do things that the President wants you to do but that he can deny he wanted you to do, or deny he ordered you to do if push comes to shove.

It's not just the FBI. It's the government. It's part of the system, not just a few people here and there. The FBI has names of millions of people. The FBI has a security index of tens of thousands of people- they won't tell us the exact numbers. Security index. That's people who in the event of national emergency will be picked up without trial and held. Just like that. The FBI's been preparing for a long time, waiting for an emergency. You get horrified at South Africa, or Israel, or Haiti where they detain people without trial, just pick them up and hold them incommunicado. You never hear from them, don't know where they are. The FBI's been preparing to do this for a long time. Just waiting for an emergency. These are all countries in emergency; South Africa's in an emergency, Chile was in an emergency, all emergencies.

James Madison made the point way back. One of the founding fathers. They were not dumb. They may have been rich and white and reactionary and slave holders but they weren't dumb. Madison said the best way to infringe on liberty is to create an external menace.

What can a citizen do in a situation like this? Well, one thing is simply to expose the FBI. They hate to be exposed, they're a secret outfit. Everything they do is secret. Their threat rests on secrecy. Don't know where they are. Not everybody in a trench coat is an FBI agent. We don't know where they are, who they are, or what they're doing. Are they tapping? Right. And what are you going to do about it?

The one thing you shouldn't think will do anything is to pass a law against the FBI. There are always people who come up with that. That's the biggest laugh in the world. These are people who pay absolutely no attention to the law, again and again. They've violated the law thousands of times. Pass another law; that's funny.

No, the only thing you can do with the FBI is expose them to public understanding-education, ridicule. They deserve it. They have "garbologists" ransacking garbage pails. A lot of interesting stuff in garbage pails. They have to be exposed, brought down from that hallowed point where they once were. And, by the way, they have been brought down. That's one of the comforting things about what has happened in the United States in the last 30 years. The FBI at one point was absolutely untouchable. Everybody had great respect for the FBI. In 1965 when they took a poll of Americans; do you have a strong admiration for the FBI? Eight-five percent of people said, "Yes." When they asked again in '75, 35 percent said, "Yes." That's a big comedown. That's education -education by events, education by exposure. They know they've come down in the public mind and so now they're trying to look kinder and gentler. But they're not likely to merge with the American Civil Liberties Union. They're more likely, whatever their soothing words, to keep doing what they're in the habit of doing, assaulting the rights of citizens.

The most important thing you can do is simply to continue exposing them. Because why does the FBI do all this? To scare the hell out of people. Were they doing this because of a Soviet invasion threat or because they thought the Socialist Workers Party was about to take over the country? Are they going after whoever their current target is because the country is in imminent danger, internal or external? No. They are doing it because they don't like these organizations. They don't like the civil rights organizations, they don't like the women's organizations, they don't like the anti-war organizations, they don't like the Central American organizations.

They don't like social movements. They work for the establishment and the corporations and the politicians to keep things as they are. And they want to frighten and chill the people who are trying to change things. So the best defense against them and resistance against them is simply to keep on fighting back, to keep on exposing them. That's all I have to say.