

Dissent, Activism, and Civil Liberties in the 1970s and Today: An Exploration

By Sue Ann Martinson

PART I The 70s: The Burglary, Hoover's Secret FBI and the Antiwar Movement, COINTELPRO

"Never once did I hear anybody, including myself, raise the question: Is this the course of action which we have agreed upon lawful, is it legal, is it ethical or moral?"
—William Sullivan, head of the FBI's Domestic Intelligence Division under FBI director J. Edgar Hoover(1)

Betty Medsger's *The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI* is the story of the Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI, the courageous activists who broke into an FBI office on March 8, 1971 in the small town of Media, Pennsylvania, 12 miles from Philadelphia. Medsger tells the story of the break-in and of those involved, at the same time examining the results of the break-in, Hoover's secret FBI, and the controversies raised that foreshadow the issues we now face.

Hoover's Secret FBI and the Antiwar Movement

In her book, Medsger explains that Hoover's primary focuses in his secret FBI were anticommunism and anti-dissent, including students, especially black students, on college campuses where much antiwar activity had taken place during the Vietnam War.

After Hoover became FBI director in 1924, year after year he asked Congress for and was granted money to fight communism. However, in 1970, he changed his tactics.

William Davidon, who put together the Citizens' Commission, had asked himself, "Is the FBI suppressing dissent?" Davidon was influenced by Catholic activists and had participated in some of their actions; he was dedicated to nonviolent activism. But Hoover was determined to discredit them.

In 1970, in his annual budget request to Congress, Hoover manufactured blatant lies about the Catholic resistance:

This is a militant group self-described as being composed of Catholic priests and nuns, teachers, students and former students who have manifested opposition to the war in Vietnam by acts of violence....The principal leaders of this group are Philip and Daniel Berrigan... This group plans to blow up underground electrical conduits and steam pipes serving the Washington, D.C., area... The plotters are also concocting a scheme to kidnap a highly placed Government official.(2)

COINTELPRO

One of the most important finds of the Media, PA, break-in was the discovery of COINTELPRO, an acronym on one of the documents taken from the FBI offices. Carl

Stern, a reporter for NBC, in a broadcast on December 6, 1973, released information he had discovered about COINTELPRO that revealed a long-running FBI surveillance program in which agents tried to infiltrate and disrupt dissident political groups, including civil rights and antiwar organizations.(3)

The results of the Media, PA, break-in, especially the discovery of COINTELPRO, were influential in investigations by the Church Committee, formed in Congress in 1975 to examine intelligence activities.(4)

PART II The Red Scare, The Black “Threat,” Criminalizing Dissent Post 9/11, What to do?

We celebrate violence in the name of security and violate every precept of human justice through an appeal to fear. This speaks clearly to a form of political repression and a toxic value system.

—Henry A. Giroux, “The Racist Killing Fields in the US: The Death of Sandra Bland” truthout.org (July 19, 2015)(5)



Red Scare vintage film poster, fair.org

The Red Scare

Hoover was a part of the anticommunist propaganda culture America was steeped in during the 40s, 50s and into the 60s. The planting of anticommunism in the minds of the American people was deliberate. Psychological warfare was part of the World War II effort and continued to be a major weapon during the years of the Cold War practiced by the U.S. not only around the world but domestically as well.(6)

In the late 40s and early 50s Joseph McCarthy and the McCarthy hearings(7) and the House Un-American Activities Committee(8) were part of the anticommunist paranoia as they conducted the infamous interviews of Hollywood figures and blacklisted not only Hollywood stars and writers, but also singer/songwriter Pete Seeger and Minnesota writer Meridel LeSueur.

In his book *Wages of Rebellion*, Chris Hedges writes: "Our radical movements, repressed and ruthlessly dismantled in the name of anticommunism, were the real engines of equality and social justice." He refers to "abolitionists, African Americans, suffragists, workers and antiwar and civil rights activists," many of whom paid with their blood.(9)

The Black "Threat" Then and Now

In her role as a reporter at the *Washington Post*, Betty Medsger received a copy of a memorandum from the Citizens Commission with dual subject headings, "Black Student Groups on College Campuses" and "Racial Matters," dated November 4, 1970 and signed by J. Edgar Hoover that stated: "Initiate inquiries immediately. . . . Increased campus disorders involving black students pose a definite threat to the Nation's stability and security. . . ." Medsger adds: "It was clear from these documents that black students were regarded as potentially violent and therefore appropriate subjects to be watched and to have their actions recorded in FBI files."(10)

Since then the deaths of so many African Americans at the hands of the police have come to light, resulting in rebellions in Ferguson, Missouri; New York City; Baltimore, and nationwide (most have been peaceful on the part of the demonstrators). The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has been targeting people of color.(11) Black Lives Matter Minneapolis was infiltrated(12) and its perceived leaders charged after a demonstration at the Mall of America.(13)

Black Lives Matter, along with Idle No More with its focus on Indigenous rights, were both begun by women of color, and are primary radical movements today that are, to borrow Hedges' words, "real engines of equality and social justice."

Criminalizing Dissent Post 9/11

In 2010, antiwar activists(14), members of the Antiwar Committee and Freedom Road Socialists, were raided and subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury by the FBI. Records were removed from the Antiwar Committee's office, and personal papers and items, computers, and cell phones were taken from activists' homes, in spite of the fact that the activities of these groups have always been nonviolent. The sweep also included activists from the Chicago area and Michigan. All of these activists, unwilling to name others, have refused to testify before a grand jury. To date no action has been taken against them.

Other examples of criminalizing dissent are the RNC8 (a group of antiwar protesters),(15) charged with terrorism during the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, MN, in 2008. (Charges against them were found not to have substance and were eventually dropped.) And more recently, in 2015, as mentioned previously, charges were leveled against Black Lives Matter organizers for a demonstration at the Mall of America.

Attacks from Within and the “isms”

A small percentage of people around the country appear to still be living in the “red scare” past, decrying communism and socialism and taunting those who may identify as socialists or communists, once again touting the “red menace” mentality by attacking individuals and organizations for their philosophy and politics in an attempt to create a toxic atmosphere among peace/antiwar activists. At times there has even been the need for activists to focus time and energy defending against attacks against individuals and groups in what appear to be attempts to split justice and peace groups internally and prevent them from acting in coalition with each other. Attacks have focused on the antiwar activists targeted by the FBI and those affiliated with them in the struggle for justice and peace.

Capitalism Now

Along with communism and socialism, the other prominent “ism” is capitalism. Both communism, which is basically a political system, and socialism, an economic system, are near opposites of capitalism.(16) Chris Hedges has much to say about capitalism, which like socialism is an economic rather than political system, but has become political through corporations exercising control over the government. Hedges states that capitalism is a dying system, as Marx had predicted.(17) Marx’s analysis of the capitalistic system has long been ignored in this country because of the unrelenting paranoiac drive of anticommunism. In *Wages of Rebellion* Hedges documents capitalism on steroids and how the current surveillance system is the cornerstone of capitalistic corporate control.(18)

Beyond the ‘isms’: What Then Are We to Do?

The answer may be simpler than it might first appear. We are surrounded by the Machiavellian machinations of the FBI, Homeland Security; and the NSA, all of whose perspectives are supported by the corporate mainstream media.

Yet even with all the oppression and in spite of it, all around the country people are taking up peaceful arms, including legal challenges, lobbying politicians, internet organizing, and demonstrations against racism, perpetual war, illegal surveillance, police brutality, economic inequality, climate change, fracking and toxic oil pipelines, and contamination of our food by GMOs, to name a few areas of resistance.

These actions for justice and peace, carried out with passion and love, are living demonstrations of moral indignation against a morally bankrupt system and of taking a stand in action in accordance with what should be our Constitutional civil rights and civil liberties.

Activists in the pro-peace/antiwar movement know that stands against perpetual war and climate change are inextricably linked, not only because the mighty machine of the U.S. military/industrial complex pollutes, but because the wars being fought, although covered in propagandistic rhetoric, are geopolitical wars about resources, especially oil, but increasingly water as well. NATO is the armed police

force of the multinational corporations. No more transparent illustration of the geopolitical battles for resources (but certainly not the only example) is the flagrant presence of Chevron in the Ukraine.(19)

The police act as the armed forces of corporations in this country and other countries, as well, when they attempt to suppress nonviolent dissent and activism. Sometimes activist engage in small actions and other times there are large demonstrations. Sometimes activism takes the form of civil disobedience. As Hedges says, "Rebellion against this global oligarchic elite percolates across the planet."

Keystone XL activist Tom Weis, as quoted by Chris Hedges in *Wages of Rebellion*, succinctly states, "There comes a time when we must stand for the future of our children, and for all life on earth. That time is here. That time is now."(20)

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Endnotes

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2. Medsger, *The Burglary*, 32
3. Michael Isikoff, "NBC Reporter Recalls Exposing FBI Spying." Web. NBCNews, January 8, 2014
4. "United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (The Church Committee)". The Senate Historical Office. Web. USSenate.gov
5. Henry A. Giroux, "The Racist Killing Fields in the US: The Death of Sandra Bland." Web. truthout.org, July 19, 2015
6. In regard to psychological warfare, see the important work of Christopher Simpson, *Science of Coercion: Communication Research & Psychological Warfare, 1945-1960*, [digital edition](#) with updated Preface by Christopher Simpson and Introduction by Robert McChesney. Web. (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2014). Earlier editions available in print: Oxford University Press; Reprint edition (March 14, 1996).
7. "McCarthyism," Web. UShistory.org, U.S. History Online Textbook. Accessed August 15, 2015. Copyright 2015.
8. "House Un-American Activities Committee," Web. George Washington University
9. Chris Hedges, *Wages of Rebellion* (New York: Nation Books 2014), 66.
10. Medsger, *The Burglary*, 169-70. At the time Medsger received these documents she did not know the identity of the Media PA burglars.
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12. Shaun King, "Undercover officers infiltrate #BlackLivesMatter protest movement in Minnesota; charge leaders." *Daily Kos*. Web. January 15, 2015.
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14. "Who are the targets of the FBI and Grand Jury Witch Hunt?" Committee to Stop FBI Repression, StopFBI.net. Web. 2010.
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 16. "Communism vs. Socialism." Web. Diften.com.
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 18. Hedges, Wages of Rebellion, 53.
 19. Robert Parry, "A Family Business of Perpetual War," Consortium News. Web. March 20, 2015.
 20. Hedges, Wages of Rebellion, 209-10. In protest of the pipeline, Tom Weis rode his bright yellow "rocket trike" for ten weeks and 2,150 miles along the proposed Keystone XL pipeline route.