

The Open Assassination of Fred Hampton

by [Joseph E. Green](#)

Excerpted from *Dissenting Views* (2010)

The idea in writing this piece was to show two things: firstly, that the murder of Fred Hampton was essentially the conspiracy that wasn't. In other words, the state powers who oversaw his execution were so certain that no one would pursue the Hampton case that they didn't construct an elaborate conspiracy as against the Kennedys, Dr. King, and so on. They executed him in the open, as it were. Secondly, I wanted to show that this case could be made using the most mainstream sources imaginable, so primarily this article relies on quotes from the New York Times.

Contents

- [The Target](#)
- [The Assassination](#)
- [COINTELRO](#)
- [Notes](#)

Fred Hampton, the dynamic Chairman of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party, was by all accounts a tireless worker for his chosen cause. Under his leadership, which began at the age of 18, the Chicago chapter started five breakfast programs, sponsored blood drives, and initiated a medical co-op that tested members of the community for sickle-cell while providing general care.^[1] Three years later, he was recognized as a community leader and a brilliant speaker. Unfortunately, he would not live to see his 22nd birthday, having been murdered in his bed by the F.B.I.

Targeted assassination both foreign and domestic, as a methodology, is nothing new for the United States. However, the Fred Hampton case is unique for the incredibly egregious and blatant nature of the murder, the facts of which are not in dispute. It is thus an excellent case study of the F.B.I.'s behavior and motives, the methods used to achieve their goals, and finally their attempts at cover-up. It can also serve as a case study in the way today's journalists are forced to concoct a controversy in order to maintain an ideologically dualistic paradigm.

The Target

Fred Hampton had proven himself to be an extremely dangerous man. The danger, however, did not lie in any capacity for physical violence – far from it. Instead, what was truly frightening about Hampton, from the point of view of the authorities, was his intelligence, insight, charisma, and emphasis on community action. The image of the gun-toting Panther was one that Hoover's F.B.I. actively promulgated, as they

felt this image would tend to undermine popular (i.e., White) support. Internal documents have shown that Hoover, for example, had authorized agents to design letter campaigns for the express purpose of destroying Jewish support for the Panthers.[2] (Leonard Bernstein, among others, had sympathized with the Panther cause.) Hoover also wrote that the Breakfast Program “-fill[ed] adolescent children with insidious poison.”[3]

In Fred Hampton’s own words, in a speech later titled “You Can Murder a Liberator, but You Can’t Murder Liberation,” he provided evidence of this alleged “poison”:

Our Breakfast for Children program is feeding a lot of children and the people understand [it]. We sayin’ something like this – we saying that theory’s cool, but theory with no practice ain’t shit. You got to have both of them – the two go together. We have a theory about feeding kids free. What’d we do? We put it into practice. That’s how people learn.[4]

This is terrifying behavior, from the standpoint of Hoover and his minions. A group that is actively feeding and educating children, outside the state-sponsored system, is a movement that can sponsor a revolution. Hampton continues:

The Black Panther Party is about the complete revolution. We not gonna go out there and do half a thing...All they got to do is come to 2350 West Madison any day of the week and anybody up there’ll let them know, let the motherfuckers know: Yes, we subversive with the bullshit we are confronted with today. Just as subversive as anybody can be subversive. And we think them motherfuckers is the criminals. They are the ones always hiding. We the ones in front.[5]

Like the title of his speech, this comment would prove to be prophetic. Some of the ones in hiding were F.B.I. infiltrators in the Panther organization, and one of these double agents would aid his murder.

The Assassination

On the evening of December 4, 1969, Hampton had gone to bed in his flat in Chicago. Mark Clark, the Panther Chairman in Peoria, was also at the house, along with several women. According to the officers, they had obtained a warrant to search the premises for illegal weapons due to an informant’s tip. Sergeant Daniel Groth of the Chicago Police Department told reporters that he had knocked on the door and announced that the police were requesting entry. He stated that this occurred numerous times with no action, but then shots were fired from the home and police had no choice but to return fire. “There must have been six or seven of them firing,” Sergeant Groth said. “The firing must have gone on for 10 or 12 minutes. If 200 shots were exchanged, that was nothing.”[6]

(Note: Daniel Groth is quite a notorious figure even beyond the Hampton case. He also happens to be the man who arrested Thomas Arthur Vallee in Chicago. Vallee was a Lee Harvey Oswald lookalike who played a key role in the Chicago Plot, one of the other plots against John Kennedy before he was murdered in Dallas. Groth coincidentally has been rumored to have been a CIA plant. See Edwin Black’s brilliant “[The Chicago Plot](#).” End of aside.)[7]

The basic story, then, is the following:

- An informant gave police information that Hampton was storing illegal weapons.
- The officers announced themselves, and only returned fire after being fired upon.
- The officers attempted to stop the shoot-out, but could not because the people inside insisted on continuing the crossfire.

The story eventually unraveled, although it would take years for the full details to arrive, complete with F.B.I. internal documents. However, early on it was apparent that the government's position was to stonewall. Despite their efforts, a special grand jury was convened to study the matter in May of 1970. Jerris Leonard, who was the Assistant Attorney General of the State of Illinois at the time, met with the special commission and actually tried to stop them from conducting the investigation.[8] It didn't work, and their investigation came to the conclusion that the "...police there had grossly exaggerated Black Panthers' resistance." [9] This would turn out to be an understatement. Over the course of the next several years, civil suits filed by the mothers of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark would reveal some startling facts about the incident. In addition, another panel, this time led by former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, would conclude in 1972 that "neither the Federal Government nor the state sought to establish the truth" in the Hampton and Clark slaying.

The panel found that: "contrary to its stated objectives," the officers had "conceived and planned [the raid] as a search and destroy mission aimed at the leaders of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther party." The police had fired the first shot and continued to blast away, ignoring the lack resistance and the hiding occupants, who "cried out for the police to stop." The report further stated that Hampton "could not be roused, owing to a possibly lethal concentration" of secobarbital in his system.[10] The police had arranged for Hampton to be drugged by their "inside man" in the operation, William O'Neil. He was the chief of security for the Panthers and Hampton's personal bodyguard, meaning he was in an ideal position to deliver the drug. "Statements by survivors indicate that Mr. Hampton, who was slain in his bed, did not awaken during the raid." [11]

Even by conservative estimates, almost 100 bullets were fired and Hampton never awoke – indeed, he was shot in the head while he slept. In addition to making sure Hampton would be unconscious, police knew the exact layout of the building. FBI agent Roy Mitchell testified that information on the layout had been provided by the same William O'Neil. Before the raid, F.B.I. agents handed out maps to the police officers, which were marked to show exactly where Hampton would be sleeping.[12]

The Panthers had maintained from the beginning that there had been no shootout, but in fact what had taken place was a simple massacre. The special Federal grand jury had concluded that police fired "between 82 and 99 shots." They also concluded that one shot had been fired in return – possibly. The *Times* article in which this information appears goes on to note that "the inquiry raised the possibility that the police had been 'falsifying' their report, but the jury returned no indictments." [13]

Raised the possibility? How could it be otherwise, given the facts?

William O'Neil received a \$300 bonus for his work in assisting the murder of Fred Hampton,[14] part of \$17,000 that he received from 1969 to 1970.[15]

COINTELPRO

Later, many of the COINTELPRO programs that targeted the Panthers, Martin Luther King, and others would be exposed. These operations focused on destroying specific individuals that J. Edgar Hoover feared would emerge as new “black messiahs,” in his words. There were also specific attempts to insert discord in the black movement, aiding for example the split between Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton. “...F.B.I. documents also disclosed an attempt by the agency to create discord between the Panthers and the Black P. Stone Rangers in February 1969 by sending an anonymous letter to Jeff Fort, leader of the Rangers, suggesting the Panthers were planning a ‘hit’ against him. [Then-head of the F.B.I.’s Chicago field office Marlin] Johnson insisted the word ‘hit’ did not mean a murder contract. He testified that he had defined it as something nonviolent in nature.”[16]

This ludicrous statement, like the ‘possible’ misstatements by police years earlier, went unmentioned-on by the *Times*. However, the reporter who wrote this story did go on to quote from further documents that also proved that all of the weapons at Hampton’s flat “had been legally purchased.”[17]

Going back to the key points we isolated for the government’s version:

- The informant did indeed provide information to the F.B.I., but it had nothing to do with illegal weapons. The weapons had been legally purchased. Instead, the information concerned the specific location of the sleeping, drugged Fred Hampton prior to the raid.
- The officers fired some 90 shots (there are other estimates that say more) into the residence and may have been fired upon once.
- There was no ‘continuing crossfire’ and therefore the police lied about wanting to stop the shooting. Hampton himself had been shot numerous times, including twice in the head from point-blank range, which is an execution.

As I noted at the beginning of this essay, the assassination of Fred Hampton is one of the most blatant committed by the federal government in all their sordid and far-ranging history.

The facts are stunning, easily discovered, and yet still ‘controversial.’ For example, when a proposal to name a street in Chicago Fred Hampton Way was announced, the *Times* characterized Hampton as “a frightening, dangerous radical”[18] The same article states the following, without batting an eye:

Much of what happened before dawn on Dec. 4, 1969, when police officers raided the apartment building at 2337 W. Monroe Street, is still fiercely debated here.

The raid, ordered by State’s Attorney Edward V. Hanrahan, who said then that the 14 police officers were searching for illegal weapons, ended with the deaths of Mr. Hampton and Mark Clark, another party leader.

The police said a shootout had led to the deaths, but survivors in the apartment said the police had fired nearly all of the more than 80 shots. The police, meanwhile, listed numerous guns they said they found inside.

The police officers were cleared of criminal wrongdoing in the raid, but survivors and family members ultimately received a \$1.85 million settlement from a civil rights case against the government entities involved.[19]

Note the point of view. This is complete nonsense. The facts are not “fiercely debated” by anyone who can read. The writer says that “survivors...said the police fired nearly all...” the shots, making it seem like there could be disagreement about this. Even the description “nearly all” fails to do justice to the matter. As we’ve seen, it was more than 90 shots, and a grand jury investigation led by Ramsey Clark, one of the most highly respected figures in the country, proved that police fired all but one of them. Then the reporter inserts an irrelevant note that “police listed numerous guns” while failing to report that the guns were *legal*. And that final note that the cops were “cleared of criminal wrongdoing” although the family eventually received almost two million dollars. This is remarked without follow-up, because any follow-up would get into details that would reflect poorly on the Chicago Police Department and the Bureau.

Monica Davey’s [article](#) is a perfect example of what “objectivity” has become in our time. In order to be “objective,” Davey has to cast doubt, and draw opposing sides into controversial claims, regardless of evidence.

There are not equal and opposing sides in the Fred Hampton scenario, and the pretense that there are ignores historical reality. Taken across the spectrum, that notion plays into the hands of the powerful and against the people, for whom Hampton spent his energy trying to help. Like so many before him, however, he placed himself in opposition to wealth and power and earned himself an execution courtesy of Uncle Sam.

Notes

1. Huey P. Newton, *War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America*. Harlem River Press: London, 1996, pg. 72. [[↔](#)]
2. “F.B.I. Files Reveal Moves Against Black Panthers.” C. Gerald Fraser, *The New York Times*: 19 October 1980. [[↔](#)]
3. *Ibid.* [[↔](#)]
4. Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Black Panthers Speak*, Da Capo Press: MA, 2002, pg. 139. [[↔](#)]
5. *Ibid.*, pg. 140. [[↔](#)]

6. "Police in Chicago Slay 2 Panthers." John Kifner, *The New York Times*: 5 December 1969 [↔]
7. Edwin Black, "The Chicago Plot," *The Chicago Independent*, 1975 November. [↔]
8. "U.S. Aide Asked Panel Not to Study Panther Deaths." John Kifner, *The New York Times*, 23 May 1970. [↔]
9. "U.S. Jury Assails Police in Chicago on Panther Raid." Fred P. Graham, *The New York Times*, 16 May 1970. [↔]
10. "Report Assails Inquiry on Slaying of Black Panthers." Thomas A. Johnson, *The New York Times*, 17 March 1972. [↔]
11. "F.B.I., Before Raid, Gave Police Plan of Chicago Panther's Flat." John Kifner, *The New York Times*, 25 May 1974. [↔]
12. Ibid. [↔]
13. "F.B.I. Files Say Informer Got Data for Panther Raid." John Kifner, *The New York Times*, 7 May 1976. [↔]
14. Ibid. [↔]
15. Newton, *War Against the Panthers*, pg. 73. [↔]
16. "Ex-Head of Chicago F.B.I. Office Says Agency Sought to Discredit Panthers." Seth S. King. *The New York Times*, 22 February 1976. [↔]
17. Ibid. [↔]
18. "Chicago Divided Over Proposal to Honor Slain Black Panther." Monica Davey, *The New York Times*, 5 March 2006. [↔]
19. Ibid. [↔]