The Relationship Between Government Documents and Black People Through the Coverage of the Black Panther Party

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The Black Panther Party (BPP) was a political organization rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideologies. This paper uses the BPP as a case study to examine how government documents cover Black people. This paper will only look at government documents from the period when the BPP was active, between 1966 and 1982. A distinction should be made between coverage of Black people through government documents through a government organization such as the US Census Bureau and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The US Census Bureau does cover Black people and represents information on Black people in the United States. This information could include but is not limited to, how many Black people there are in a specific area or how many Black people there are by gender. In comparison, the FBI might have a biased agenda regarding why records were collected on Black people. While government organizations such as the US Census Bureau are valuable resources to examine how government documents cover or represent Black people, this paper will focus on government organizations that have the latter or a biased agenda. Bias typically has a negative connotation. However, in the case of the FBI, their mission is to protect the United States. Some FBI officials may have a bias in how this mission could be accomplished. This bias is not negative on its own, yet it could negatively affect certain people or groups. This paper intentionally argues that the coverage in official government documents of the Black Panther Party reflects how government documents cover Black people. While not all Black organizations represent all Black people, government officials use Black organizations as a method to provide their opinions on Black people through government documents.

Literature Review

The BPP was a political organization founded in Oakland, California, in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. It became a notable organization during the Black Power movement. The organization was originally called the "Black Panther Party for Self Defense," however, the "for Self Defense" was dropped after Newton noticed confusion surrounding the mission and goals of the BPP. The BPP provided many services to Black communities and poor communities across the United States. These services included policing the police, free breakfast programs for children, political education programs, free food programs, free medical assistance, free clothing, and free pest control.[1] The BPP peaked around 1970, with offices in 68 cities and connections with other radical movements globally. These radical movements included but were not limited to, supporting Algeria's struggle for independence, attending the Hemispheric Conference to End the War in Vietnam, and creating solidarity committees in Stockholm, Oslo, and Helsinki. Their last office closed in 1982 following leadership difficulties and heightened interference from the government.[2]

Much of the pre-existing literature discusses the relationship between Black people and Congress.[3] Most of this literature focuses on the media coverage of this relationship and not specifically on government documents. However, this relationship is still important as it can relate to how government

documents cover Black people. It has not been easy for Black people to work with Congress or work for Congress, as exemplified by the rough experience of the first Black Congressman.[4] This difficulty can translate to how government documents cover Black people, as government documents might portray Black people negatively. There has been some research on how government documents cover Black people. In his 1987 article, "Government Policies and Black Progress: The Role of Social Research in Public Policy Debates," Willard Richan illustrates the tendency to utilize results from research and government reports without context to promote agendas. He uses two documents, a report from the Rand Corporation and a report from the US Commission on Civil Rights, and provides context to show the arguments made by these two reports are not entirely true. Richan warns of the dangers of accepting potentially biased data in relation to decision-making as it could have negative impacts. Richan's article is an example of how government documents can be used to promote biased information as fact and how one could accept those agendas as true and support their own possibly incorrect beliefs.[5] In their 2000 book, "Racialized Coverage of Congress: The News in Black and White," Jeremy Zilber and David Niven utilize media coverage to show how Black members of Congress have been negatively impacted. Both the Richan and the Zilber and Niven publications are examples of how government officials can use the government as a medium to portray beliefs about groups of people, specifically negative opinions about Black people.[6] This paper will seek to add to the limited pre-existing literature surrounding Black people and how they are covered by government documents.

While the research focus in this paper is not explicitly on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), documents will be discussed that have been obtained through FOIA. Literature on FOIA compliments the sparse pre-existing literature surrounding Black people and how they are covered by government documents. In her 2008 article, "U.S. Government Surveillance and the Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-1973: A Case Study," Roberta Salper describes the process of obtaining her own FBI file through FOIA and the contents of the file. In his 2010 article, "The Freedom of Information Act and the Press: Obstruction or Transparency?" David T. Barstow illustrates his frustrations with FOIA pertaining to the rules that enhance the difficulty of utilizing FOIA. Salper uses FOIA as a method to show the redundancy of her file as she was essentially categorized as a threat to society for attempting to disrupt the status quo, while Barstow recounts his difficulties with FOIA and discusses legislation to provide context. Their critiques are aimed at different aspects, but both acknowledge FOIA's capabilities.[7] This paper will utilize the pre-existing literature to guide analysis of the FOIA documents, such as noting exemptions and the limitations of FOIA.

Documents

The first appearance of the BPP in the *Congressional Record* was in 1966. In the *Congressional Record* Volume 112, Part 14, there are multiple mentions of the BPP. The BPP is described as a "200-member gang." This is in relation to riots in Cleveland that occurred in 1966. While a 17-year-old Black child reported that the BPP planned much of the riots, a grand jury found there was no evidence that any Black radical organization had been responsible.[8] Additionally, a notable civil rights organization called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began to utilize the Black Panther emblem and chant "Black Power" slogans as Stokely Carmichael replaced John Lewis as the SNCC national chairman. John Lewis stated that the emblem and slogans were being used to strike fear in white people. Stokely Carmichael is credited as the founder of the BPP chapter in Lowndes County, Alabama, prior to becoming the national chairman of SNCC.[9] The BPP would continue appearing in congressional records for years. By 1970 there was a significant increase in the mention of the BPP in congressional records. In the *Congressional Record* Volume 116, Part 20, there is significant mention of the BPP. A US House of Representatives from Ohio member, John M. Ashbrook, spoke about the BPP. He described the organization as "violent-prone" and "revolutionary." He criticized media outlets for not describing the violent nature of the BPP enough. He distinctly separated the BPP from "good hardworking black Americans," stating, "Surely, the majority of good honest black Americans do not sympathize with the Panthers." He gave an overview of the BPP's history, including facts about the members' arrests and income information.[10] He clearly believed the Black Panthers were a great threat to the United States.

In 1969, the FBI Field Office in Charlotte, North Carolina, opened an investigative file on the BPP. Many documents of the information the FBI collected were made public through FOIA. The FBI describes the BPP as "a black extremist organization founded in Oakland, California, in 1966. It advocated using violence and guerilla tactics to overthrow the US government."[11] Their reasoning for collecting records on the BPP is "In 1969, the FBI's Charlotte Field Office opened an investigative file on the BPP to track its militant activities, income, and expenses. This release contains Charlotte's file on BPP activities from 1969 to 1976."[12] This investigation began only three years after the creation of the BPP. In a 133-page file, the FBI documented information about the BPP. This is only one of

the 34 documents available, and it only covers the activity of the BPP between 1968 and 1969. The 133-page file includes plans the BPP made to have events, information about their newspaper, and any arrests made of BPP members. Some of the information is redacted, while some of it is unavailable due to FOIA exemption (7)(D) which protects the name of a confidential source. The reason for this protection is to ensure law enforcement agencies have less difficulty recruiting informants, as it decreases the chance of retaliation the source could face for providing information to law enforcement.[13] It is clear from the way that the documents are typed that the FBI had informants attending BPP meetings to report back to the FBI on their activities. This included activities where no violence occurred.[14]

There are hundreds of documents archived through the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), however, only less than a hundred documents are digitized. Some of these documents include two items written by Bobby Seale when he was on trial, a 586-page file and an 82-page file from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) under Classification 157 or "Civil Unrest."[15] The 586-page file is from Charlotte, North Carolina, and it is titled "Counterintelligence Matters—Black Nationalist Hate Groups—Black Panther Party." The 82-page file is from Alexandria, Virginia, and it is titled "Counter-Intelligence Measures—Black Panther Party—Counter-Intelligence Program—Black Nationalist-Hate Groups—COINTELPRO—Black Extremists." Both items that were written by Bobby Seale, a statement and a note, are a part of the Records of District Courts of the United States record group and the Criminal Case Files series. Bobby Seale was one of the defendants in the trial *United States v. Dellinger*, which is more commonly known as the trial of the Chicago Seven. In the statement, he wrote to Judge Julius Hoffman asking for the trial to be postponed as he did not want the current lawyer representing him to represent him. In the note, he detailed the harm he had experienced by the US Marshalls. Specifically, he noted that his blood circulation was interrupted, and the Marshals attempted to push rags into his mouth after he mentioned his tonsils were in pain. The 586-page file contains documents from 1967 to 1977. It clearly states that the purpose of the FBI's counterintelligence program is to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters, and to counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder."[16] This shows the intentionality of the FBI to effectively destroy the BPP and other similar groups. Many documents in the file elaborate on successful or unsuccessful attempts to obtain informants. One document describes how the FBI attempted to capitalize on the leadership changes and divergence within the BPP in North Carolina in 1970 by utilizing the media to publicize the divide. The 82-page file also contains documents from 1967 to 1977. This file has similar information to the 586-page file, as it also covers the FBI's counterintelligence program. It describes how the FBI sent mail encouraging unions and police organizations to boycott handing out BPP newspapers after hearing of a union refusing to pass out BPP newspapers. Both files have information restricted due to the aforementioned FOIA exemption.

Discussion

The language used to describe the BPP in the first year of their existence through congressional records is racially charged, for example, the description of the BPP as a "200-member gang" relates to the historical criminalization of Black people in the United States.[17] This language was continuously used throughout the duration of the BPP's existence by Congress and the FBI. This builds on the arguments made by the pre-existing literature that government officials can use the government as a medium to put forth negative opinions of Black people. Moreover, this paper expands on Zilber and Niven's argument that it is not only the media that can be used to cause these harms. Additionally, this paper adds to Richan's argument that government documents can be used to promote agendas. The negative language used in government documents caused tremendous harm to Black people by associating any Black people who worked with the BPP to be a threat. The immediate stigmatization of the BPP by the government was due to their politics and the methods of how they executed their politics. The FBI's publication of the divide of the BPP in North Carolina shows how the FBI wanted the public to feel about the BPP. Additionally, Bobby Seale's treatment in prison reflected the harm caused by the statements made in government documents.

As this paper only utilized some documents that were already retrieved by FOIA and were not specifically about FOIA, it cannot add any meaningful critiques about FOIA. This paper builds on Salper's argument surrounding the redundancy of information collection. Some of the information collected on the activities of the BPP was not a threat to the United States at all. There was not any violence at some of the meetings, as noted by the documents. There were also documents that stated that someone refused to be an informant, and their case was closed. There did not seem to be any worth in this information collection besides the FBI's own bias in attempting to infiltrate the BPP and other Black organizations.

One group does not represent Black people, as Black people are not a monolith. However, the BPP had a significantly large membership, and many Black people were supportive of the

BPP and believed in the BPP's mission. While it can be argued that the BPP does not represent all Black people, that would be partially incorrect. The BPP is recognized as one of the most dominant organizations during the Black Power movement for a reason. Their mission and actions resonated with people. This attempt to separate "good" Black people from "bad" Black people, only further dehumanizes Black people. It relies on the premise that "good" Black people are those who do not object to the status quo, and "bad" Black people are the ones who do. This premise was built on white supremacist notions through slavery. The members of the BPP were not perfect, however, they pushed to provide meaningful change to the lives of Black people and poor communities nationally and globally.

Conclusion

Clear biases were shown in the portrayal of the BPP through government documents. These biases are not unique to the BPP, they reflect the US's beliefs about defying the status quo and about Black people. This is also evidenced by the FBI's decision to target not only the BPP but many different Black organizations. A limitation of my research was the difficulty in understanding the FBI's documents. There was great difficulty in understanding the context behind the FBI's documents that were made available through FOIA. The lack of feasibility in questioning FBI officials or former BPP members about the documents limits the interpretation of some of the documents. Additionally, these documents include interviews with people and listed names of people. As there were many people connected to the BPP who were not famous, searching names online to find information on people mentioned in these documents was not a viable solution to provide further context to the documents. Future research could discover who these people are or explore the relationship between FOIA policies and implementation.

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