

'Black Like Me'? The Strange Saga of J. Edgar Hoover

by Edward Spannaus

J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation from 1924 to 1972, was notorious for his targeting of black leaders, whether in civil rights, elected officials, or other areas such as black newspaper publishers, or the singer Paul Robeson. Newly discovered evidence now sheds more light on Hoover's legendary fear and hatred of African-Americans, suggesting that this may have been a form of *self-hatred* on Hoover's part.

As we will show, rumors that J. Edgar was partially black were commonplace in Washington, D.C. during Hoover's reign, and were well known to associates of Hoover—and even to Hoover himself. But a new book shows that stories that Hoover was “passing for white” were also being passed down from generation to generation a thousand miles away, through a former slave family, once owned by another Hoover family, in the area of McComb, Mississippi.

We present here some preliminary findings, of an ongoing historical investigation.

Operation Fruehmenschen

In 1988, Rep. Mervyn Dymally (D-Calif.) placed before the House of Representatives a sworn affidavit from a Special Agent of the FBI, Hirsch Friedman, exposing an FBI program called “Operation Fruehmenschen” (German for “primitive man”). Friedman's affidavit declared:

“The purpose of this policy was the routine investigation without probable cause of prominent elected and appointed black officials in major U.S. metropolitan areas. It was explained to me that the basis for this Fruehmenschen policy

was the assumption by the FBI that black officials were intellectually and socially incapable of governing major governmental organizations and institutions.”

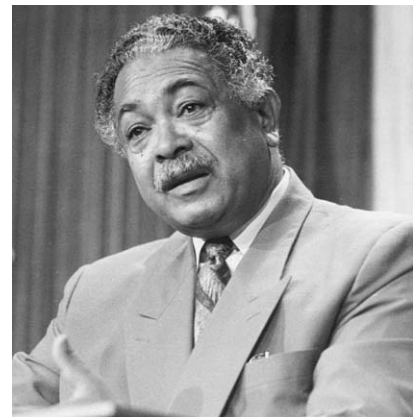
In Ad Hoc Democratic Platform Hearings, held in Washington, D.C. on June 22, former Tennessee judge and legislator Ira Murphy testified about Operation Fruehmenschen, which he has studied extensively. Judge Murphy said that the operation began under Richard Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover, and it has continued since that time. Judge Murphy said that more than 300 black and minority officials have been investigated by the FBI and the Justice Department.

Hoover's obsession about blacks was well known. In 1956, in the wake of the Supreme Court's school desegregation decisions, Hoover fought with Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. over Brownell's proposals for new civil rights laws and enforcement provisions. Hoover declared that “the specter of racial intermarriage” was behind the tensions over “mixed schooling,” and he attacked the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other civil rights organizations, while praising the White Citizens Councils in the South. It was also in 1956 that Hoover launched the FBI's Cointelpro (Counter-Intelligence Program) which targeted civil rights groups and leaders among others. (See Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* [New York: Norton, 1991].)

And as early as 1957, Hoover ordered his agents to monitor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, when the SCLC began a campaign to register eligible black voters in the South. By the beginning



Left: Dr. Martin Luther King was a subject of Hoover's obsessive hatred, with efforts to “neutralize” King including an effort to drive King to suicide, and involvement in joint FBI-Military Intelligence programs which played an important role in the events leading to the assassination of King on April 4, 1968. Right: former U.S. Rep. Mervyn Dymally exposed the FBI's Operation Fruehmenschen, which targeted black elected officials for investigation and prosecution. He demanded that Congress open hearings into the FBI and Justice Department program, which it has never done.





This photograph is identified in almost every biography of Hoover as young John Edgar with his parents, but the presumably-authoritative caption in the J. Edgar Hoover Room of the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple in Washington, D.C. identifies the young child as Hoover's older brother Dickerson. This is one of many mysteries concerning J. Edgar's birth and early childhood.

of the 1960s, the FBI was routinely carrying out illegal break-ins of SCLC offices, and wiretapping King.

Hoover's obsession with destroying King—or, in Bureau-speak, “neutralizing” him—became notorious. Thus it was no surprise that jubilant cries of “They got the SOB!” reverberated through the Atlanta FBI office when the news first came over the radio that Dr. King had been shot in Memphis on April 4, 1968 (Gentry, p. 606). One former FBI agent recalled another agent shouting “We finally got the son of a bitch!” (See Anthony Summers, *Official and Confidential: the Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover* [New York: Putnam, 1993], p. 364.)

It is of note that on March 4, 1968, FBI Headquarters issued a memorandum expanding its Cointelpro activities against “Black Nationalist—Hate Groups” and warning that Dr. King, among others, could emerge as a “‘messiah’ who could unify and electrify the black nationalist movement.” The memorandum called for the use of “imaginative” techniques, and required a report on accomplishments within 30 days. On April 4, Dr. King was assassinated. Hoover's cooperation with military intelligence units conducting surveil-



J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI from 1924 to 1972. There was always widespread belief among black Americans—especially in Washington, D.C.—that Hoover was partly black, and such rumors were also prevalent within the FBI itself.

lance and more deadly operations against King has been established. (See William Pepper, *Orders to Kill: The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.* [New York: Warner, 1998].)

What Did Washington and Mississippi Know?

Rumors of J. Edgar Hoover's black ancestry were widespread during his reign, both inside and outside of the Bureau. Hoover in fact deployed his agents to track down rumors of his racial origins, just as he did regarding rumors of his homosexuality.

Author Anthony Summers, in his 1993 book *Official and Confidential*, cites two examples. A *New York Post* reporter, researching J. Edgar Hoover, found that blacks referred to Hoover as “some kind of spook” and even “soul brother,” and came to realize that in black communities in the East, it was generally believed that Edgar had black roots (Summers, pp. 349-350).

Summers also interviewed writer Gore Vidal, who grew up in Washington, D.C. in the 1930s. “Hoover was becoming famous,” Vidal told Summers, “and it was always said of him—in my family and around the city—that he was mulatto. People said he came from a family that had ‘passed.’ . . . That's what was always said about Hoover.”

In the late 1950s, a young black girl in Mississippi came home from school and asked her grandfather about J. Edgar Hoover, whom her history class had been studying. The increasingly frightened young girl was told that, yes, J. Edgar was related to her family, and that he was passing for white. “This is a family secret,” the girl was told. Her grandfather went on to tell her that Hoover had a lot of power, that Hoover was the grandfather's second cousin, and the youngster was warned not to ever tell anyone this, because Hoover could

have them all killed. “He doesn’t want the secret out, and he is a powerful man!” the trembling young girl was told.

When the young girl asked if there wouldn’t be records, such as a birth certificate, which would show him to be related to the family of former slaves, her grandfather told her: “J. Edgar Hoover has a lot of power. He can destroy files, and he’s already done it.”

The young girl was Mildred McGhee, whose family lived in Pike County, Mississippi, on the site of the former plantation of a Hoover family. According to her account, a mixture of the family’s oral history and reconstructed memories, the Washington Hoovers, a mixture of black and white, were related to the Mississippi Hoovers. The part of the family’s oral history which was very specific, and oft repeated, was that she and her family are descended from the union of a slave woman and the slave woman’s master, which resulted in the birth of a daughter in 1814 in Virginia, who was named Elizabeth Allan.

Elizabeth, according to the oral history, was taken to Maryland by a Hoover man. Her first born was Emily, very light-skinned, who was taken away from her to Mississippi, where she became the mistress of a plantation owner William Hoover, and bore many children by him. Meanwhile, according to the oral tradition, Elizabeth, still in the Maryland/D.C. area, married a William Hoover, and passed for white, and had seven children.

Millie had heard rumors that J. Edgar himself was not the son of Dickerson N. Hoover of Washington, as is officially reported, but that he was born in the South, probably New Orleans, and then taken to Washington, D.C. at a very young age, and raised there by the Hoover family.

In November 1998, Millie McGhee, by now an educator in California, retained a genealogist, George Ott of Heritage Consulting in Salt Lake City, Utah, to assist her in attempting to document her family history, and to see if there were any links to J. Edgar Hoover. Through his research, Ott found that many aspects of Millie’s story bore a remarkable correspondence to the documentary record.

This spring, McGhee published her recollections and her preliminary findings in a book entitled *Secrets Uncovered: J. Edgar Hoover—Passing for White?* (Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.: Allen-Morris, 2000). The book contains a fictionalized version of the family history along with the results of the first phases of genealogical research. A second, revised edition will be published in August.

Ott, the genealogist, found that some records coincided quite well with Millie’s oral history. For example, the 1860 census for Washington, D.C. shows a William Hoover, born 1804 in Maryland, married to Elizabeth A., born 1814 in Virginia. They have seven children, including a son John T. Hoover who who has a child named Dickerson N. Hoover (the father of J. Edgar Hoover).

In subsequent research, conducted since the publication of the first edition of McGhee’s book, Ott has found some

census records for Mississippi that also correspond to the family oral tradition regarding “Emily,” and he has recently found records which appear to link the Maryland and the Mississippi Hoover families. Ott also found strange—and highly unusual—alterations and erasures in some of the census records pertaining to other Hoovers in Washington.

Who Was J. Edgar?

This writer has confirmed that there are substantial discrepancies and oddities concerning J. Edgar Hoover’s early biography. McGhee and Ott located the birth records index for Washington, D.C. for 1895, in which J. Edgar Hoover’s name was obviously added later than the other entries. Not only is it in different handwriting, but the format is different: The other entries give only the parents’ names; Edgar’s entry adds not only the child’s name, but that he was male, white, and the date of birth.

This writer obtained a copy of Edgar’s actual birth certificate, which was not filed until 1938. Edgar’s own family history, written when he was 17, says that he was born Jan. 1, 1895, at home, with a doctor in attendance. It was legally required to report a birth, but if the doctor was present, he failed to do so. The verification of birth is provided by an affidavit by Edgar’s older brother Dickerson, himself a U.S. government official; it does not mention a doctor being present.

Hoover was baptized when he was 13, under the tutelage of his brother Dickerson, who took him from one church to another, looking for the most prestigious congregation. His birth certificate, obtained by *EIR*, shows the date of birth to be June 1, 1895, not January.

There is also the issue of photographs. The most famous photograph of J. Edgar as a young child is the oval “family photograph,” published in most biographies of Hoover. However, around 1989, the curators of the exhibit in the J. Edgar Hoover Room at the Scottish Rite Masonic Temple in Washington changed the identification of the child to Edgar’s brother Dickerson, not Edgar, and it is now so identified in the exhibit in the Hoover Room.

So far, there is no “smoking gun,” so to speak, and there may never be, given Hoover’s known penchant for altering historical records concerning himself, even those in the National Archives (Gentry, pp. 389-390).

But taken together with the prevalent rumors in Washington, and the oral history of Millie McGhee’s Mississippi family, the discrepancies in Hoover’s own documentary history suggest that Hoover was hiding something.

McGhee herself says her book is not intended as an exposé of J. Edgar Hoover, and indeed, she says she never wanted to be related to him. “I don’t want him to be related to me,” she says, but she adds that, since it now seems that he was, “I want to be the one to erase the hate.”

Eradicating the legacy of J. Edgar Hoover in the FBI and the Justice Department, would be a good place to start.