

# CHALLENGES TO THE MOVEMENT

## INTERVIEW THREAD TWO: FBI INVESTIGATION

### CLIFFORD ALEXANDER

“My father, for some reason, who was not in politics, had this extraordinarily negative opinion of [FBI Director J. Edgar] Hoover. And I think it was just generally known in black communities that this was the enemy, and he was indeed, indeed the enemy. His stuff, you know, the personal stuff was awful and. . . But he used that, not as much, but he used that on white politicians the way he did on King. But the extent to which at least that I've read that he did on King was horrifyingly offensive. Which he is just a horrible human being with an extraordinary amount of power, which he chose to exercise in that fashion. And I remember one incident when I ran the White House Conference to Fulfill these Rights, everybody who was coming had to have a, not a full feel, but an 'okay' by the FBI. And since I was in charge, I remember Marvin Watson coming to me and telling me that Bayard Rustin who was gay and known to be gay and had been arrested for it and convicted, really shouldn't be on the list. And I remember saying to Marvin, 'If you don't have him you won't have a conference because you've got Martin Luther King and A. Philip Randolph here.' So, they had him.

“But, you know, that kind of stuff, if it isn't run by somebody like me who knew the underlying facts were, God knows how many people didn't make it through his sieve of whatever it might be. And there is a long tradition of no black agents [in the FBI], certainly.”

### JOSEPH CALIFANO

“When Doctor King came out against the war in Vietnam and at one point -- and when he was after [the anti-war speech at] Riverside Church, he went to Harvard and he said he might run for president, then the very next day he didn't. And Johnson was worried. He wasn't worried about Doctor King and the war because he had much more trouble with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the war than he would with Doctor King. What he was worried about were two things. One, the FBI was constantly investigating King and constantly citing one or two of his associates who they said were Communists. And he was afraid that that would build up -- he was afraid that, that concern, the FBI would leak it and it would build up an enormous white backlash, because King coming out against the war, the Soviets were on the other side of the war. That was his big concern. And so, he never really criticized King for what he did on the war. He wasn't happy about it, he's a human being.”

### CLEVELAND SELLERS

We all felt that and we all could see FBI agents around and about. And they were very deliberate in, you know, watching you and watching you travel and all of that kind of stuff. In places like Mississippi, they had the Sovereignty Commission and they would instruct police in Mississippi, state police and local police to surveil. So, they got all of this documentation on people and what they, what they perceived that they were doing, not what they were doing, but what they perceived that they were in fact doing. So, the surveillance was, was tremendous and just as [boxer] Muhammad Ali's case was resolved over wiretap, mine was too at the same time, around the same time. So, you know, I was, I was --the charges were dropped against me, but I had already done three months in federal penitentiary as a result of Orangeburg, which the judge said that I could not -- I could not post the bond because of my moral turpitude and he was talking about the Orangeburg massacre.<sup>1</sup> And you know, it -- it's just -- the FBI and local police have not been a friend of mine and I don't think they are even today.

“But J. Edgar Hoover -- it was known that if we were under surveillance that Doctor King was under surveillance. We, we, we knew that there were people in the organi -- in- infiltrators in the organization and we tried to minimize that in SNCC. So, the criteria for coming into SNCC at first was that you had to have a badge of honor. You had to have some arrests and you had to be on that bus in order for you to become a member in SNCC or you have to be active and in an organization that was a progressive organization that you're coming from. So, we managed to for a long period of time,

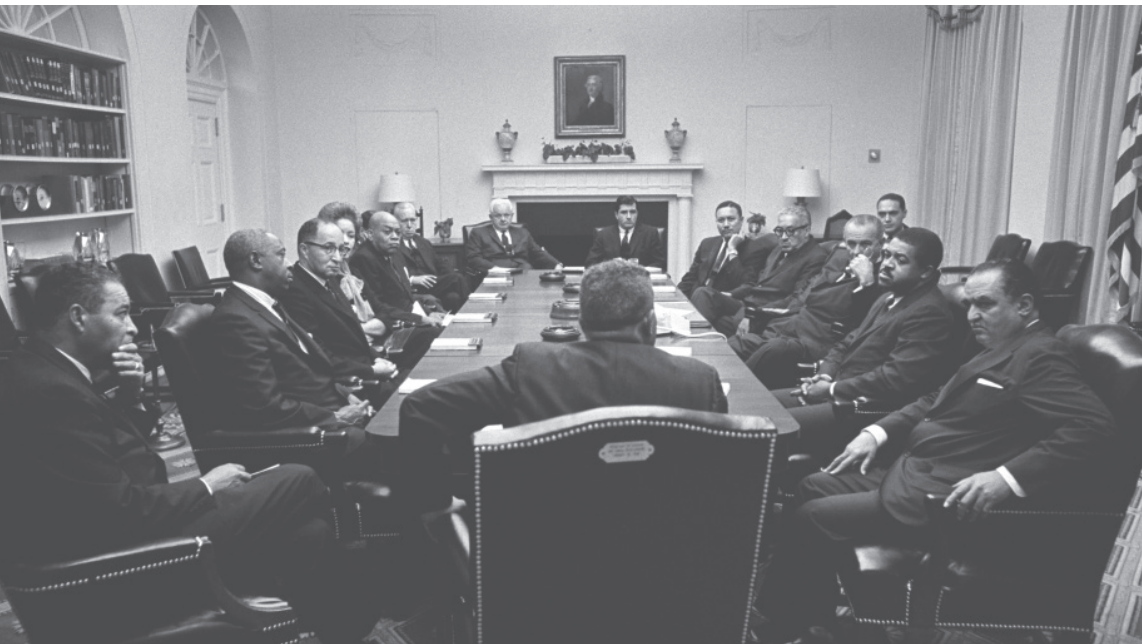
you know, not have informants in the organization. Plus, we were young, and we talked in a different language and all that kind of stuff, so it made it difficult for somebody who was coming outside inside and you not being able to see that they were like a duck out of water.”

**TREY ELLIS:**

“What did the FBI look like?”

**CLEVELAND SELLERS:**

“All white. Now, the informants were black, but all the FBI were white, no blacks, all white. And so that would be the first telltale sign ‘cause we lived in communities in which we were trying to change. And so, you know, there wouldn’t be many unmarked cars that were brand new -- that would be anybody other than the FBI. And they would -- I was saying they were new because we, we would recognize the local police. They wouldn’t have new cars to ride around in, they would have the old stock. So that’s, that’s what, that’s what we, we looked at when we went out or when we’re walking or if we went around the block or that kind of thing. Plus, our phones -- we found out that we could actually not pay our telephone bills and the phones would stay on. The only reason that was because if, if they did, if they let the phone go off they couldn’t tap us any longer and so they would tap us like that.”



<sup>1</sup> The Orangeburg massacre refers to the shooting of protesters by South Carolina Highway Patrol officers on the South Carolina State University campus in Orangeburg, South Carolina, on February 8, 1968.