

# Death Squad

Thy Name is FBI

William R. Boyer (Bill Boyer)

2021

a review of

*Judas and the Black Messiah*

Director: Shaka King 2hr 6m (2021)

“You can kill a revolutionary, but you can’t kill a revolution.”

—Fred Hampton, 1969

But what if killing a revolutionary does kill a revolution?

—Curious Film Critic

Until recently, few high school social studies classes, let alone the general adult population, ever stumbled upon COINTELPRO, state terrorism, or Fred Hampton, the last of four prominent African American leaders assassinated during the 1960s, after Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. As the mainstream seems even less aware of our essential protest past, perhaps Hollywood has oddly begun to fill a disturbing void.

Thanks to an unlikely commercial feature film rendering of one of the most brutal incidents of the civil rights movement, a remarkable, if flawed, cinematic entry point now covers some grossly neglected US history: the orchestrated FBI and Chicago police assassination of Hampton, the 21-year-old Illinois Black Panther Party Chairman, and fellow BBP activist Mark Clark, in a pre-dawn December 4, 1969 ambush at Hampton’s apartment.

It’s astonishing that four unknown African American scriptwriters and one fairly well-connected director-producer, Ryan Coogler, of well-deserved Fruitvale Station fame (a 2013 indirect inspiration for Black Lives Matter) found \$26 million to pull off such an ambitious, well-acted project. Surely, the BLM resurgence in the summer of 2020 helped its timely distribution.

Despite the questionable concession of making the main character Judas, the slimy FBI informant, William O’Neal, over the powerful Hampton, the film generally avoids sanitizing or sensationalizing the doomed collision between dedicated Black revolutionaries and the most powerful police state apparatus in the world.

This quasi bio-pic rather brazenly exposes the FBI’s infamous Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). While extensive government surveillance of radicals, and harassment operations date back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, by 1969, the FBI director (of state violence), J. Edgar Hoover, intensified his ruthless crusade to “neutralize” those he perceived as Public Enemy #1 after Martin Luther King’s assassination.

His primary target pivoted from mostly pacifist civil rights activists to the militant and armed Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) and to stop any potential new “Black Messiah” from arising, the racist Hoover’s greatest fear.

Originating in Oakland, California in 1966 with co-founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the Marxist and Malcolm X-influenced Black liberation, the BPP had been growing by hundreds of semi-autonomous chapters across the country, most notably with the gifted Hampton in Chicago. A mostly modest Ten-Point Program touted a seemingly achievable revolution free of brutal cops, foreign wars and white hegemony.

By early 1969, most of the Panther leadership had been jailed on serious felony charges including two separate murder trials for the Panther chairmen, and H. Rap Brown for inciting an armed riot across state lines, or fugitives in exile (Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver in Algeria).

As the film dramatically shows, Hampton's unusual organizing and oratory skills drew the feds ire. He dared to begin mobilizing other disparate groups as a prototype Rainbow Coalition, such as the large Blackstone Rangers street gang, the Chicano-based Brown Berets, and for the first time in Panther organizing, many white activists, including Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The Chicago chapter even took great pride in its highly effective free breakfast program for area children.

You can jail a revolutionary, but what if he gets out on appeal?

In 1968, Hampton was convicted on a trumped-up robbery charge for allegedly leading the hijacking of an ice cream truck and distributing the treat to area children. He gained freedom on appeal, so the FBI went to the CIA Vietnam playbook of terminating with extreme prejudice. O'Neal, played effectively by LaKeith Lee Stanfield, as the wounded petty criminal deer-in-the-headlights, became the perfect traitor to the cause, even befriending his white FBI boss in a queasy paternalistic relationship.

As head of Chicago Panther security, O'Neal gave the FBI detailed floor plans of both the Panther headquarters and Hampton's apartment. The feds also provided him with the guns and ammo the FBI would later use as its excuse for the fatal search warrant raid. The film includes O'Neal's final treacherous act of slipping tranquilizers into Hampton's drink several hours before the execution at point blank range, amidst a wail of one-way gunfire and desperate attempts to wake Hampton by his pregnant fiancé Deborah Johnson (Dominque Fishback).

Daniel Kuluuya portrays Hampton's confident leadership quite precisely, down to his convincing voice and speech patterns, although the lead actors are noticeably 10 years older in real life—too big a gamble to risk such difficult roles for any inexperienced young 20s thespian.

Unlike Hollywood's previous attempt, *Panther*, (1995), a cartoonish faux-history centering around real and fictional characters, few punches are pulled in retelling the top-down ruthlessness of Hoover's war on these urban activists. The FBI director of 37 years typically directed Presidents from FDR to Nixon to shut up and let him do his (dirty) business without even token supervision.

*Judas and the Black Messiah* remains about a half hour too short on Hampton's meteoric rise in the months before his murder, as the narration omits his elevated momentum after visiting the Panther national headquarters in Oakland. We see moments of touching romance within perhaps a too romantic movement.

Hampton spoke out eloquently against self-defeating "Custerism," citing the failed Weatherman faction of SDS's Days of Rage in Chicago two months before his death, yet he seemed at least dimly aware of the forces arming steadily against him.

The subsequent fall of the BPP rapidly accelerated after the murder of Hampton and Clark.

Maybe a revolution can be renewed, yet all evidence points to how it can be stopped for generations by killing some key activists, and the recruitment of inept politicians, such as former Chicago Black Panther Bobby Rush, now a born-again city council member. With the state ever in control, will it look away as Hollywood tries to explore other overlooked conquests by American state terrorism?

William R. Boyer continues to teach high school social studies, just north of Detroit, from an undisclosed screen.

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