

**Guide to the
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of the
FBI File
on the
Reverend Jesse Jackson**

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**Scholarly Resources Inc.
104 Greenhill Avenue
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Introduction to the FBI FILE ON THE REVEREND JESSE JACKSON

The files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation on the Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson begin as early as January 1967, when the twenty-four-year-old first came to the attention of the Chicago, Springfield, and Columbia, South Carolina, field offices. As a follower of Martin Luther King, Jr., the head of "Operation Breadbasket," and an opponent of the war in Vietnam, Jackson was certain to raise the suspicions of J. Edgar Hoover and others who saw the civil rights movement, calls for economic redistribution, and domestic dissent to U.S. foreign policy as evidence of political and social extremism.

Jackson initially was more concerned with the economic dimensions of the civil rights movement than with the political, despite his interest in politics. Jackson's first position of national prominence was as head of "Operation Breadbasket," the Chicago-based economic arm of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. During the May 1968 demonstrations in Washington at "Resurrection City," Jackson and some 150 marchers ran up a lunch tab at the Department of Agriculture cafeteria of \$292.66; Jackson refused to pay the bill, and, according to newspaper reports, "said the bill would be compared with the amount the country owed the poor to see who really owed whom." Although Dr. Ralph Abernathy, who headed the SCLC after the King assassination, paid the bill in cash after Attorney General Ramsay Clark threatened prosecution, Jackson had made his point and gained national attention. Two years later, in March 1970, he proposed to the Chicago City Council that it budget \$35 million to deal with the problems of hunger among Chicago's poor, but the City Council rejected the proposal.

Jackson's political ambitions were evident early in his career. Regarded by many, including himself, as the heir to Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackson's relations with Ralph Abernathy appear to have been strained at least as early as 1968. He resigned from the SCLC in December 1971 as a result of demands by Abernathy that all SCLC directors operate out of Atlanta; Jackson apparently believed that this diminished his freedom of action and limited his presidential aspirations, which he had indicated as early as that March. He not only took himself out of the organization but took his followers in Chicago as

well and formed a new group, People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), the organization that has remained the core of his power base.

Jackson, however, was not content with making demands on those who held political or economic power but preached economic self-help through education; in a September 1970 report, the FBI noted that Jackson "criticized black students in colleges who demonstrate and cause disturbances so as to obtain concessions allowing them to continue in school without having to measure up to the scholastic standards of the school. Jackson stated that upon graduation these students will be useless because they will not have acquired the knowledge and ability to be lawyers, doctors, and teachers, which are so sorely needed in the black community today." Although couched in the bureaucratic language of the FBI, this report seems to reflect Jackson's famous call, in the aftermath of several summers of riots, of "learn, baby, learn instead of burn, baby, burn." His work in developing greater employment opportunities for minorities, even to the point of demanding quotas for black employees in the 1970s, including his negotiations with the FBI itself, continued this program of economic civil rights.

Material in the FBI files indicates the range of opinions regarding Jackson held by different groups both inside and outside the government. In 1969 the U.S. Jaycees named Jackson one of the ten outstanding young men of the year; at the same time, the FBI forwarded material dealing with Jackson to the legal attaché in Paris, who was the bureau's intelligence officer. Jackson was tied to the Black Panther Party (BPP) in the eyes of FBI headquarters by such actions as voicing support for Angela Davis in January 1971, despite such information as the report of the Special Agent in Charge of the Chicago field office one year previously that "there appears to be no question but what JESSE JACKSON is not a member of the BPP." In November 1971, FBI headquarters warned the Secret Service that Jackson was a possible subversive, and, in May 1972, claimed that he was "closely associated with black extremists and revolutionaries," yet the Chicago office regarded him as nonviolent in February 1973. By the end of 1975, the Chicago SAC was reporting that Jackson was said to be an outstanding leader of the Chicago black community. The view of Jackson as an extremist seems to have emanated from FBI headquarters, despite intelligence estimates to the contrary, and probably is a better indication of the perceptual structure of certain groups in Washington than it is about the activities and beliefs of the subject himself.

The FBI files, in addition to the original investigative file, indicate Jackson's growing national and international reputation in both routine and somewhat bizarre fashions. These files contain information relating to FBI and Secret Service protection of Jackson as a presidential candidate. They also provide evidence of the various threats made against Jackson, including those allegedly made against him and other prominent political figures such as Jim Wright and Edward Kennedy by William Clark White, an unemployed Florida carpenter, as well as the threat in June 1981 to kill Jackson and

Assistant Attorney General William Bradford Reynolds. They include as well the file of the 1981 FBI investigation of Jackson for possible violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act that was based on the CIA allegation that Jackson, like Billy Carter, was a paid agent of the Libyan government; this investigation apparently led nowhere.

More than a record of Jesse Jackson's career from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, these files provide an indication of the strains that racial antagonism has imposed on American political, legal, and social institutions. Most of the early investigative file reflects Jackson's unpopularity with J. Edgar Hoover and his conservative white constituency. Allegations of possible criminal acts are few and unsubstantiated. The legally dubious surveillance of Jackson, PUSH, and other Chicago civil rights organizations was finally halted by class-action suits, in which Jackson joined, against the FBI, CIA, and the city of Chicago. Finally, the threats made against Jackson testify to personal pathology that cannot be separated from the social pathology of racism. These files are a mirror of some of the more sinister features of recent and contemporary American society.

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