

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Policing the Containment Order: The FBI and the Cold War Christian Right

Markku Ruotsila^{1,2}

¹Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland and ²Center for Faith and Human Flourishing, LCC International University, Klaipėda, Lithuania
Email: markku.ruotsila@helsinki.fi

Abstract

According to an influential narrative, the Cold War era Federal Bureau of Investigation led in the construction of a countersubversive machinery that was designed to punish progressive dissent and to uphold a conservative Christian capitalist public order. This narrative has been constructed with very little research done into the FBI's actual views of and relations with the Cold War era political and religious Right, the ideology of which it was supposedly enforcing. Recent availability of FBI files makes such a study now possible – and yields results that destabilize the long-dominant narrative. These files show that the Bureau was in fact just as engaged in surveilling and repressing right-of-center organizations, and those of that era's Christian Right in particular. Materials in the files suggests that far from being an empowering agent for the emerging Christian Right, the Cold War era FBI was in fact policing and enforcing a notably liberal containment consensus and that its views on “genuinely” American religiosity were very far from being far-right.

Keywords: Christian Right; Cold War; FBI; Containment; Political repression; Surveillance

1. Introduction

Developments in US politics since 2016 have precipitated a veritable renaissance in the genre of books both scholarly and polemical that warn of the immense dangers posed to democracy and civil rights in the United States by an entity called “white Christian nationalism” or “Christian fascism.”¹ Alongside much of the mainstream media, such books have issued urgent calls for government action by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to check and repress the menace posed by this adumbrated entity. Some

¹Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020); Sarah Posner, *Unholy: Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump* (New York: Random House, 2020).

historians too have taken to inserting detailed recommendations into their scholarly works on how the FBI should atone for its alleged complicity with, and empowering of, such “white Christian nationalists” in repressing progressive political movements and ideas, as well as ethnic and gender minorities, that has supposedly been on-going for many decades.²

The problems inherent in the polemical nebulousness of the “Christian nationalism” concept aside, what flaws such narratives is that they have failed to perceive this simple reality: the FBI did in fact engage in exactly this kind of repression of the organized Christian Right in the past, at least for all of the Cold War period and perhaps longer. The Cold War era Christian Right too was subject to accusations of white supremacism, and yet, as is shown by recently declassified FBI files, it was also deeply distrusted by “the Bureau,” extensively surveilled and at times repressed.³ While not nearly as pervasive as that directed at the political Left and the black freedom movement, the reality of this parallel repression of conservative Christians should be recalled and narratives about the FBI’s past engagement with politically engaged religiosity revised accordingly.

II. Rethinking the FBI and Political Repression

According to the long influential narrative, the Cold War era FBI was pivotal in the erection of a repressive countersubversive machinery designed specifically to punish progressive dissent and to uphold a capitalist and conservative white Christian public order in the United States. In this view, it was more proper to speak of “Hooverism” as the overall designation of political repression than it was to keep referring to “McCarthyism,” for this latter moniker referred only to one controversial man active in countersubversive work for a relatively brief period while “Hooverism” named the main, supremely influential agency active from the First World War period onward. Supposedly, it was the long-serving FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover who personally saw to it that the Bureau was infused with a “deeply reactionary,” moralistic and also white racist worldview and who fashioned its repertoire of methods employed against those on the left who refused to share such a view.⁴

Even before it was generally known that the FBI had engaged in systematic surveillance and repression of gays and lesbians as well as real and alleged socialists, communists, and progressives (and of the civil rights movement), many scholars maintained that the policing of sexuality also lay at the very core of the Hoover vision. According to one investigator of “Hoover’s war on gays,” the impetus came from his own “puritanical moralism” and was sustained by rank-and-file FBI agents’ investment in their era’s “dominant patriarchal and heterosexual culture.” Another has written about a “moral

²Lerone A. Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI Aided and Abetted the Rise of Christian Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 266–271.

³Ralph Lord Roy, *Apostles of Discord: A Study of Organized Bigotry on the Fringes of Protestantism* (Boston: Beacon, 1953); Erling Jorstad, *The Politics of Doomsday: Fundamentalists of the Far Right* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970); Gary C. Clabaugh, *Thunder on the Right: The Protestant Fundamentalists* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Company, 1974).

⁴Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998); Athan Theoharis, *The FBI and American Democracy: A Brief History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004); Kenneth O’Reilly, *Hoover and the Un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC and the Red Menace* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

panic” that the conflation of Cold War communism and sexual subversion generated in many conservative-thinking sections of the populace, upon which the FBI seized to justify “a vast expansion of the national security state.”⁵

More recent renditions of this conventional wisdom have narrated the argument in terms that owe a marked debt to intersectionality theory. This is particularly the case with many of the entries in the pioneering work on *The FBI and Religion*, the first extended inquiry of its kind published in 2017. Several of its chapters argue an intersectionality case about an overarching white supremacist agenda or master plan behind the myriad of political, sexual, and racial repression in which the FBI has demonstrably engaged. Some of the contributions indeed maintain that the FBI’s investigative and policing work constitutes a form of “racial statecraft” that enforces “state-sponsored racism” and “apartheid” through the surveilling, demonizing, and repressing of “legitimate ideas of dissent and liberatory struggle” by progressive religious, political, ethnic, and gender minorities. Nowhere is it suggested that repression might have also been targeted at groups of Americans whose dissent was not of a progressive variety and who might even have been racist themselves.⁶

The most recent of such studies, Lerone A. Martin’s *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover* (2023), stands out in the genre in that it does note how the FBI dismissed “white fundamentalist ministers” and “virulent anti-communist conservative white Protestants” as the “extremists on the right” and consequently refused to work with them. Yet, Martin too claims, regardless, that the FBI was still engaged in a Cold War project designed “to aid and abet the rise of white Christian nationalism” – that is, the very alleged ideology of these very extremists – and that it sought “to make whiteness and conservative Christianity the foundation and guidepost for American governance and culture” through “virulent anti-communism, capitalism, hypermasculinity” and all-pervasive “white racism.” J. Edgar Hoover himself, maintains Martin, made such a “white Christian nationalism the bedrock of the modern national security state.”⁷

Whether rooted in intersectionalism and critical race theory or in more traditional class-based analysis, the claims are expansive – and made in the near-complete absence of scholarly studies into J. Edgar Hoover’s and his top lieutenants’ *actual* thinking about, relations with, and actions regarding the Cold War era’s Christian Right. Some recent outstanding explorations have indeed delved into conservative Catholics’ and Protestants’ engagement with and borrowals from the FBI, and some of these have also canvassed FBI efforts at utilizing conservative Christian individuals, institutions, and media for its purposes.⁸ But what about those “virulent anti-communist conservative

⁵David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9–10; Douglas M. Charles, *Hoover’s War on Gays: Exposing the FBI’s “Sex Deviates” Program* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 358–359.

⁶Junaid Rana, “Policing Kashmiri Brooklyn”, 256–268, and Sylvester A. Johnson, “Dreams and Shadows: Martin Luther King Jr, the FBI, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference”, 189–190, in *The FBI and Religion: Faith and National Security Before and After 9/11*, ed. Sylvester Johnson and Steven Weitzman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

⁷Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar*, xii, 4–5, 7, 124.

⁸Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar*, esp. chapters 2, 4 and 5; Aaron Griffith, *God’s Law and Order: The Politics of Punishment in Evangelical America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); and Michael J. McVicar, “Apostles of Deceit: Ecumenism, Fundamentalism, Surveillance, and the Contested Loyalties of Protestant Clergy during the Cold War”, 85–107, Regin Schmidt, “The FBI and the Catholic Church”, 198–120, and Diane Kirby, “J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI, and the Religious Cold War”, 67–84, each in *The FBI and Religion*, ed. Johnson and Weitzman.

white Protestants,” as per Martin, that even the FBI could not abide? In what way could the FBI not abide them? If the FBI was “Christian nationalist” and “white supremacist,” why could not it abide these “white supremacists” and “Christian nationalists”? What would the answers to such questions tell us about political repression in the modern United States?

Such questions simply have not been asked. They were not prompted even by the disclosure decades ago about the FBI’s COINTELPRO programs of 1964–1971 having in fact surveilled and disrupted not just Black Power and civil rights groups but also a total of twenty-six alleged white Far Right organizations.⁹ Even William W. Keller’s otherwise pivotal *The Liberals and J. Edgar Hoover*, the most important challenger to the “Hooverism” thesis, did not undertake this kind of investigation. Keller situated the Cold War “domestic intelligence state” not on the right but firmly in the center, the product of an elite consensus about Communism as a subversive threat to the liberal state and about federal bureaucrats as the best, because the most professional and “neutral,” voiders of the threat. In this interpretation, the liberal political class eagerly endorsed the White Hate COINTELPRO as well, given that this sought to defuse a white supremacist challenge to civil rights legislation that liberals regarded as no less dangerous than the Communist menace.¹⁰ But how did the Christian Right fit into the picture?

With the recent availability of the relevant FBI files, it is also possible to tell this missing part of the story and so to complicate and complete existing narratives.¹¹ When supplemented by archival materials left behind by the activists of the Cold War Christian Right, we find little in these files to sustain claims about the FBI having created, empowered, or even supported that era’s “white Christian nationalist” movements or their visions for America and the world. Instead, these files tell a story about the FBI’s relationship with the Cold War Christian Right that is structured throughout by notably conventional, middle-of-the-road assumptions about the US encounter with Soviet Communism and about religion’s proper place in US public life, including in its racialized aspects. These assumptions show up in Hoover’s and his field agents’ narrations of the spiritual dimensions of the Cold War, in their characterizations of Christian Right groups, in the nature of the limited collaboration that was forged – and in the overt repression that was eventually unleashed on some of the groups. Far from being an ally or accomplice of a “white supremacist” Christian Right, the Cold War era FBI appears instead as a policing agent of a liberal containment culture that excluded most of the religious Right just as surely as it excluded the Left and the sexually marginalized.

To correctly appreciate why this was indeed so requires clarity at the outset about the nature and composition of the Cold War period’s Christian Right. It requires that we understand that the Cold War Christian Right was a Fundamentalist Christian Right.¹²

⁹David Cunningham, *There’s Something Happening Here: The New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); John Drabble, “To Ensure Domestic Tranquillity: the FBI, COINTELPRO-WHITE HATE, and Political Discourse, 1964–1971”, *Journal of American Studies* 38 (Aug. 2004), 297–328.

¹⁰William W. Keller, *The Liberals and J. Edgar Hoover: The Rise and Fall of a Domestic Intelligence State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 11, 28–33, 85–92.

¹¹Most of the FBI files cited in this article are available at the “Ernie Lazar FOIA Collection: Extreme Right Groups” (https://archive.org/details/ernie1241_xr). The Carl McIntire file (94-HQ-37990) was acquired by the author through a FOIA request and is in the author’s possession.

¹²Markku Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalism: Carl McIntire and the Politicization of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 257–264, 289–292; Daniel Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16–31, 34–46.

That is to say that in the 1940s through the late 1970s, almost all of those US Christians engaged in systematic, organized political lobbying for a clearly set-out right-wing policy agenda were self-identified fundamentalists. The public voice of many of their so-called new evangelical rivals, including that of Billy Graham and *Christianity Today*, was also distinctly conservative on many an issue (and certainly *was* made use of and amplified by the FBI, as has been documented by Lerone Martin, Michael J. McVicar, and Aaron Griffith), but they were not yet engaged in organized political advocacy. Nor, unlike the era's fundamentalists, were they accused of being "Christian nationalists" determined to foist upon America all those things that the FBI was later said to have foisted upon it in terms of laissez-faire capitalism, anticommunism, and a racialized politics of morality. Insofar as the evangelicals aligned politically, they preferred the Republican Party's center against which the political and religious Right rebelled and which they overthrew from power in the late 1970s.¹³ Unlike many of the era's fundamentalists, the new evangelicals also made their peace with the black civil rights movement relatively early on.¹⁴

The Cold War Christian Right *was* the Fundamentalist Christian Right, distinct from the new evangelical movement. But the Fundamentalist Christian Right was not the era's Far Right. A separate overtly white supremacist movement existed alongside it, composed of the groups targeted by the White Hate COINTELPRO, one with notably different methodologies, public theologies and ultimate end-goals. There were also various in-between options in the right-wing grassroots, some of which did exert much influence on the thinking of many a fundamentalist, most prominently the conspiratorial John Birch Society.¹⁵ But in contradistinction to the centrist new evangelicals, none of these was ever approved of, nor empowered by, the FBI. Instead each was surveilled, harassed, and repressed, the mainstream Christian Right as well as the Far Right – and the Left.

III. Faith and the Containment Order

The FBI's statutory responsibilities, directives from the Department of Justice and the White House, as well as the FBI's institutional and bureaucratic interests as a key part of the administrative state, figure alike in the assortment of promptings that explain its past and present investigations. But when it comes to religion, race, and US public life, the personal beliefs of individual agents matter too, and in 1935–1972 when J. Edgar Hoover was in charge, the values of the Director mattered supremely. It is not that FBI officials were purposely taking partisan political stances or sides, but rather that their presuppositions and cultural prejudices exerted an orienting influence that tended to preclude some options, opened up others, and led in certain directions. Assessed on this level, the Cold War FBI does not fill a Fundamentalist Christian Right nor a Far Right template.

¹³Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, esp. 257–264, 289–292.

¹⁴Stephen P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Jane Dailey, "The Theology of Massive Resistance: Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred After Brown", 151–180, in *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction*, ed. Clive Webb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, 141–166.

¹⁵Matthew Dallek, *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right* (New York: Basic, 2023); Edward Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); Ann Burlein, *Lift High the Cross: Where White Supremacy and the Christian Right Converge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

Everything we know, first of all, about J. Edgar Hoover's personal religious beliefs sets him apart from the self-identified fundamentalists who composed the Cold War Christian Right. Instead, they align him with the theologically and politically liberal Protestant mainline. Hoover grew up in the mainline Presbyterian church, briefly belonged to one of the mainline Lutheran denominations, attended mainline missions and Christian Endeavor conferences in his youth, and taught Sunday school at the mainline Old First Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC.¹⁶ When Hoover joined in 1910, this denomination was already in the grips of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that ripped it apart in the mid-1930s, and at that time he purposely stayed with the modernists who took control. These people profiled his denomination as a representative of the Social Gospel movement for purposive social amelioration and renovation, an ecclesiastical critic of unregulated capitalism and, increasingly as the time went on, a public voice for racial and gender equality.¹⁷

Relatively little was made publicly of this mainline Presbyterian affiliation in Cold War public discourse, but it was in fact of crucial importance. Even less attention seems to have been paid to the fact that Hoover, the supposed "puritanical moralist," often went to horse races and bet large sums of money and that he drank alcohol, all of it in contravention to the pieties that obtained in conservative Protestant circles.¹⁸ In some of the Fundamentalist Christian Right leaders' private correspondence, however, the suspicion was voiced that all this made the Director foundationally unsympathetic to their purposes, and possibly even a closeted enemy. The chairman of the Christian League of America, Baptist Bible Fellowship member Edgar C. Bundy, was the most forthright on this point: "We might as well face it," he suggested in 1961 to his ally Carl McIntire, a Bible Presbyterian and one of those who had led the fight inside Hoover's church in the 1930s and then separated. "Hoover is not a Fundamentalist and he is a member of a modernist denomination. He cannot see the theological implications of this fight."¹⁹

Unlike his denominational leaders, Hoover may have been (as his third-in-line, FBI assistant director Cartha "Deke" DeLoach once claimed) an "old-fashioned political conservative who truly believed in limited government."²⁰ He may also have shared with many fundamentalists the racial and gendered prejudices that were emblematic of his time and place.²¹ But this is as far as the like-mindedness ever went. When it came to religiosity's proper place in American public life and to the religious dimensions of the Cold War, Hoover's views were clearly grounded in those mainline tenets against which the fundamentalists defined themselves and because of which they separated from denominations such as Hoover's. As Sylvester A. Johnson and Steven Weitzman have noted, in his public discourse, Hoover was indeed engaged in naming (and in the FBI's

¹⁶Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 13–20.

¹⁷D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 186–190, 201–220.

¹⁸Powers, *Secrecy and Power*, 209–210, 314; William C. Sullivan and Bill Brown, *The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover's FBI* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 87.

¹⁹SAC Chicago to FBI Director, 5 Aug. 1961, 100-HQ-36062-30, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation Records, Washington DC [hereafter "HQ"]; Edgar C. Bundy to Carl McIntire, 13 Mar. 1961, Carl McIntire Manuscript Collection [hereafter CMMC], box 171, Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ.

²⁰Cartha DeLoach, *Hoover's FBI: The Inside Story by Hoover's Trusted Lieutenant* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1995), 10–11.

²¹Johnson, "Dreams and Shadows", 188.

surveillance work also in policing) the “borders between true and false religion.”²² But far from aligning with the Fundamentalist Christian Right in this endeavor, in his public theology, Hoover fairly typified the regnant mainline civil religious consensus of the time.

As Hoover framed the issues in his *Masters of Deceit* (1958), a book partly ghostwritten by his Catholic assistant director William C. Sullivan, Communism constituted a false religion and had for that reason to be resisted – while true religion was about “faith in democracy and our fellow man... rooted in a belief in a Supreme Being” and in fixed natural law that presupposed individual dignity, responsibility and fraternalism.²³ In *A Study of Communism* (1962), Hoover similarly noted that Communism was a threat because of its denial of the existence of God and the soul and because of its materialist philosophy that overlooked the spiritual element in human nature. Throughout, he was careful to refer to religion in general, not to Christianity nor to any specific interpretation of the Bible. He simply maintained that a generic religion-as-such was a force for societal good since it taught “kindness, love of neighbor, charity, justice and the Golden Rule.”²⁴

These kinds of platitudinous sentiments were in the mainstream of the liberal containment consensus of the Cold War period, one that included most of the new evangelicals (members, after all, of the liberal mainline denominations). Put another way, practically all Americans trafficked then in this type of a lowest-common-denominator religiosity, nonconfessional and biblically nonliteralist, that reduced Christianity to a succession of commonsensical ethical precepts and patriotic platitudes. Its utility for Cold War purposes having been recognized from the White House down, this kind of civil religion lay at the core of the Cold War containment order. In the official view, religion in general was a utilitarian tool for social cohesion in a spiritual Cold War that buffered against an external totalitarian threat.²⁵ It was only the period’s fundamentalists (and a handful of the more conservative new evangelicals) who placed additional layers on top of this generic civil religion, ones that radically transformed the whole and yielded something different in kind.

In the 1940s through most of the 1970s, only the self-identified separatist fundamentalists busied themselves with calls to their fellow-believers to become politically engaged in an organized manner, and when so doing, they drew their agendas directly from the literalist interpretation of the Bible that had lost out in the mainline churches. This yielded an unswerving affirmation of the divine institution of free enterprise and a limited state; unceasing effort for the exposure and defeat of all the “enemies of Christ” (including Communism and non-Communist progressivism); and a racialized politics of morality – exactly that set of affirmations that scholars would eventually start calling “Christian nationalism” and claimed that the FBI had embraced and imposed on the nation. The Cold War era’s fundamentalists themselves called it “Christian Americanism.” For them, these affirmations were matters of biblical faith, nonnegotiable, and the United States its

²²Sylvester A. Johnson and Steven Weitzman, “Introduction: ‘True Faith and Allegiance’”, 3, in *The FBI and Religion*, ed. Johnson and Weitzman.

²³J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America* (London: Holt, Rineheart and Winston, 1958), 320–321, 330, 334; Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar*, 129–131.

²⁴J. Edgar Hoover, *A Study of Communism* (London: Holt, Rineheart and Winston, 1962), 31–33. See also Hoover’s articles “Communist Propaganda and the Christian Pulpit”, *Christianity Today*, 24 Oct. 1960, 5, and “Spiritual Priorities: Guidelines for a Civilization in Peril”, *Christianity Today*, 22 June 1962, 3.

²⁵William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

true, divinely intended self only as long as it remained grounded in them, not in some amorphous religion in general.²⁶

Schematically put, the fundamentalists of the Cold War era Christian Right were seeking *liberation from sin*, including from Communism and all its approximations and believed enablers the world over, while those who were invested in the officially endorsed mainline civil religion only sought the *containment of sin*, including external Soviet aggression and domestic subversion. The difference, in a large part traceable to different Bible interpretations and presuppositions, was most clearly on display in competing foreign policy propositions, but in truth it encompassed all areas of public life. Hoover's FBI, by virtue of its official role in the administrative state and because of the faith and public theologies of its top officials, was among the policing and enforcement agents of the latter option, and as such it had to contravene the era's Christian Right, the containment order's principal challenger in the churches.

In foreign policy, fundamentalists were the only ecclesiastical actors during the Cold War who endorsed the proposals originally devised by secular conservatives such as the ex-Trotskyist *National Review* editor James Burnham for the actual roll-back of Soviet power from the areas that Soviet Communists had conquered and for the liberation of the Russian (and eventually Chinese) heartland itself.²⁷ Their church groups, the American Council of Christian Churches (ACCC) and the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC), both creations of Carl McIntire, called from 1946 onwards for concerted attempts at proactively encouraging uprisings through religious incitement; for the deployment of US and proxy military force to attack, not merely to contain; and even for the first use of nuclear weapons. At home, the Christian Right's fundamentalists demanded a thoroughgoing countersubversive effort to ferret out and neutralize all left-of-center actors that were endangering their vision for a capitalist and limited-state "Christian America."²⁸ In racial terms, these organizations included segregationists, some of whom participated in "Massive Resistance" campaigns, yet their own public events were actually desegregated even before *Brown v. Board of Education*.²⁹

At least the foreign policy agenda here sketched lay definitely beyond the pale of Cold War civil religion and the containment order predicated thereupon. It received no official governmental support (until Ronald Reagan's election in 1980), and from the Protestant and Catholic mainline, only deep disapproval greeted it.³⁰ In foreign policy, mainline leaders opted instead for endorsing containment, and at home they stood for limited inquiries into subversion that would exclude (as Hoover's Presbyterian church insisted

²⁶Williams, *God's Own Party*, 34–46; Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, 59–112; Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 147–163.

²⁷Daniel Kelly, *James Burnham and the Struggle for the World* (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2002), 140–150; David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a Free Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109–139.

²⁸See, by Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, 85–140, 223–236, 252–256; "Russia's Most Effective Fifth Column": Cold War Perceptions of Un-Americanism in U.S. Churches', *Journal of American Studies* 47 (Nov. 2013), 1019–1041; and "Transnational Fundamentalist Anti-Communism: The International Council of Christian Churches", 235–250, in *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War: Agents, Activities, and Networks*, ed. Luc van Dongen, Stéphanie Roulin, and Giles Scott-Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

²⁹Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, 143–147.

³⁰In the early Cold War aspects of the roll-back program were in fact implemented, but this was classified information. Foglesong, *The American Mission*, 130–139.

in 1953) “citizens of integrity and social passion” whose dissent from unregulated capitalism was being equated with treason.³¹ A radicalized section opted for “Christian globalism” that objected to containment too, to US world leadership and to all forms of nationalism, imperialism, and racism, and sought instead after an amorphous “reconciliation” between economic systems and peoples.³² But just as unacceptable as a policy proposition as it was anathema to both of these two sections’ sense of decorum was the exhortation offered by McIntire: “We must fight; we must fight hard... in the most vigorous battle that America has ever waged, fighting it on every front, rolling back the Communist advances, and winning a Cold War.”³³

Surveilling such foreign policy advocacy did not officially fall under the FBI remit, but in their reports, agents did comment on the Christian Rightists’ roll-back talk too, disapprovingly.³⁴ More importantly, on the overarching cultural and civil religious level, everything that we know about the FBI’s assessments of the Cold War era faith-based advocacy here sketched does indeed show a partiality – only not for the Christian Right. It was conformity to the state-sanctioned center that was being policed by the FBI, and the civil religious containment order for which most of the mainline stood was being endorsed, not the Christian Right’s challenge thereto. The Cold War era public space was not a combat zone structured by a singular juxtaposition of “reactionary” and “puritanical” anticommunism on the one hand and “progressive” dissent on the other hand, but it also contained a center thus constituted and enforced.

IV. Countersubversive Cooperative Networks

A degree of collaboration in information exchange did ensue between the FBI and the Cold War era’s various Christian Right countersubversive organizations. Yet far from intimating that Bureau agents (or J. Edgar Hoover himself) agreed with these Christian Rightists’ purposes or animating worldviews, a close reading of available FBI memoranda suggests that the collaboration took place despite deep-seated disagreements on foundational principles and purposes. Documents show quite clearly that throughout the Cold War the FBI was very cautious in its dealings with these Christian Right countersubversives and that it deprecated their activities. However, officials recognized that certain kinds of data were readily available only through these sources. Thus, co-operation in data gathering was regarded as a necessity, but it was entered into reluctantly and circumspectly.

At the start of the Cold War, there were several Christian countersubversive investigative bodies in existence. Some, such as Harry Jung’s American Vigilante Intelligence Federation, had their origins in the 1920s but had since declined.³⁵ Others, such as Edgar

³¹Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy*, 30–55; Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), chapters 23 and 24; Rick Nutt, “For Truth and Liberty: Presbyterians and McCarthyism”, *Journal of Presbyterian History* 78 (Spring 2000), 51–66.

³²James D. Strasburg, *God’s Marshall Plan: American Protestants and the Struggle for the Soul of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 11–21, 205–219, 230.

³³Carl McIntire, “Communism: Threat to Freedom”, *Christian Beacon*, 29 Mar. 1962, 2.

³⁴SAC San Diego to FBI Director, 8 Aug. 1961, 100-HQ-424-820-16; A. H. Belmont to W. C. Sullivan, 21 Mar. 1962, 100-HQ-424-820-24.

³⁵Allan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York: Grove, 2008), 18–19, 96–97.

Bundy's Church League of America (CLA), had been created in the New Deal years as private detective bureaus that offered name-checking services for businesses and engaged in public debate through their publications. Eventually, they endorsed roll-back as well (indeed, the CLA came to employ as a consultant none other than James Burnham).³⁶ Still others, including the Methodist layman Myers G. Lowman's Circuit Riders, Inc., and the Congregationalist Verne P. Kaub's American Council of Christian Laymen (ACCL), set up in 1951 and 1947 respectively, were engaged with tracking left-of-center advocacy in the churches and with publishing that touched on broader Cold War and conservative agendas.³⁷

The CLA maintained an extensive collection of card files of suspected subversives ("second only to those of the FBI," as its publicity materials stressed) that by the 1960s allegedly weighed five tons and included information on some seven million individuals.³⁸ The Circuit Riders boasted a more limited but still substantive set of files on between 8000 and 9000 Protestant clergymen with alleged Communist affiliations.³⁹ While no similar data sets were stored at the ACCL's offices in Madison, Wisconsin, this group acted as a clearinghouse and a distribution center for all Christian Right investigators and publicists.⁴⁰ At the nucleus of this countersubversive network lay the ACCC and the ICCCL, the two interdenominational associations and chief lobbying agents of the separatist fundamentalist churches that under Carl McIntire engaged in incessant political advocacy and in behind-the-scenes pressurizing of government officials for roll-back, countersubversion and laissez-faire capitalism.⁴¹

Jealously guarding the FBI monopoly on investigations into subversion, J. Edgar Hoover himself consistently insisted that all such private investigating complicated and hindered effective countersubversive work.⁴² Of all those in the private investigative infrastructure on the Right, however, it was the Christian Right's operatives who were singled out for particular opprobrium. Supposedly, they in particular exploited anticommunism for private and denominational profit and were burdened with a proclivity to guilt-by-association tactics. Edgar C. Bundy, for example, was described as "typical of the irresponsible, irrational, 'professional' anticommunists who make a living out of touring the country and charging fees for their services," and he, like the others, was charged with misleading audiences into assuming that he had close relations with the Bureau. The more that FBI officials heard of Christian Right countersubversives fostering such impressions, the more they turned against these individuals.⁴³

³⁶McVicar, "Apostles of Deceit", 100–105; *What Is the Church League of America?* (Wheaton, IL: Church League of America, nd [1957]); James Burnham to Edgar C. Bundy, 22 Jan. and 3 Feb. 1961, James Burnham Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, box 5.2.

³⁷Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation*, 150; Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, 81–82.

³⁸"The Facts About the Church League of America Files", 2 Apr. 1987, CMMC, box 182; Edgar C. Bundy to W. C. Sullivan, 11 Mar. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-26X5.

³⁹Myers G. Lowman to Paul A. Hopkins, 11 Mar. 1955, Myers G. Lowman Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, box 14; "Red-Tainted Churchmen", *Human Events* 17 (Mar. 1960), 3.

⁴⁰W. O. H. Garman to Verne P. Kaub, 14 Jan. 1950, Kaub to Allen Zoll, 6 June 1950, and Kaub to Edgar Bundy, 28 Feb. and 1 Mar. 1950, American Council of Christian Laymen Records [hereafter ACCL Records], reel 1, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, WI.

⁴¹Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, 80–84, 108–109, 130; Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 42–44, 198, 259.

⁴²Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 204–208; DeLoach, *Hoover's FBI*, 269–270.

⁴³R. W. Smith to W. C. Sullivan, 11 Aug. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-50; SAC Denver to FBI Director, 7 July 1952, 62-HQ-104576; FBI Director to SAC Denver, 22 July 1952, 62-HQ-104576.

With one exception, co-operation was *ad hoc* and initiated by the Christian groups, with the FBI remaining a notably passive recipient of data that often chose not even to acknowledge receipt. Significant amounts of information were passed to the FBI's field offices and headquarters, and often the heads of the Christian Right groups would visit or telephone their local FBI offices. On rarer occasions, special agents would arrive at these agencies' offices for briefings. In return for the data received, the FBI placed some Christian countersubversives on the Special Correspondents' List, meaning they were entitled to compendia of the FBI's public source information.⁴⁴ Others not on the list, such as the ACCC and the prominent Arkansian radio evangelist Billy James Hargis' Christian Crusade, were sometimes forwarded FBI materials, too.⁴⁵

Only the Circuit Riders, Inc., however, could be described as a significant FBI partner. Since contact had been initiated in 1953, this organization had supplied the FBI with a voluminous amount of data. Yet, even this partner agency was regarded as "controversial," since its director, the Cincinnati, Ohio, advertising executive Myers G. Lowman, had a well-established reputation as a right-wing conservative and collaborator with segregationists, and as one of the key facilitators of ex-Communist witnesses' appearances before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and state-level investigative bodies. His organization would pay such witnesses' expenses (for which it was sometimes reimbursed by the FBI), and often it even wrote witness testimonies for them.⁴⁶

Like other contacts on the Christian Right, Lowman was invited to reassure the FBI about his opposition to racism and white supremacy as an implied precondition of collaboration, and to avow that he did not practice racial segregation himself.⁴⁷ Such assurances given, top FBI officials felt that he was "one of those individuals whom we should keep on our side," since he had "in every instance been cooperative with the FBI" and since "his files are readily available to us."⁴⁸ The FBI headquarters even helped him with the placement of public defenses of the Bureau in some thousands of newspapers, on radio and on television, whenever it was attacked, whether on the Left or on the Right.⁴⁹

Useful as a supplier of data and as a defender of the FBI, the Circuit Riders was nurtured by officials also because it was willing to inform on other Christian conservatives.⁵⁰ This circumstance recovers a key dimension in the FBI's engagement with the Christian Right that thus far has mostly escaped scholars' attention. It has tangentially been noted that, upon request, the FBI at times supplied data on Christian Right groups to

⁴⁴SAC Chicago to FBI Director, 10 Jan. 1957, 62-HQ-104576-X10; M. A. Jones to G. A. Nease, 8 Dec. 1958, 62-HQ-99405-107; Billy James Hargis to J. Edgar Hoover, 22 Sept. 1961, 100-HQ-424-820-17; SAC Chicago to FBI Director, 11 Nov. 1962, 62-HQ-104576; M. A. Jones to Mr. Bishop, 17 Apr. 1972, 100-HQ-424820.

⁴⁵W. O. H. Garman to Carl McIntire, 7 Apr. 1954, W. O. H. Garman Papers, Bob Jones University Archives, Greenville, SC; G. E. Malmfeldt to Mr. Bishop, 6 Aug. 1968, 100-HQ-424820-65.

⁴⁶Myers G. Lowman to Alfred Kohlberg, 28 Aug. 1953, Alfred Kohlberg Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, box 113; SAC Little Rock to FBI Director, 10 Dec. 1958, 62-HQ-99405-111; G. A. Nease to Clyde Tolson, 11 Dec. 1958, 62-HQ-99405-112; SAC Cincinnati to FBI Director, 9 June 1959, HQ 62-99405-133.

⁴⁷G. A. Nease to Clyde Tolson, 9 Dec. 1958, 62-HQ-99405-113; SAC Cincinnati to FBI Director, 20 Feb. 1962, 100-HQ-424-820-21; "Correlation Summary", 6 Sept. 1966, 97-HQ-3475.

⁴⁸G. A. Nease to Clyde Tolson, 12 Aug. 1958, 62-HQ-99405-108; SAC Cincinnati to FBI Director, 25 Feb. 1960, 62-HQ-99405-140; R. W. Smith to W. C. Sullivan, 6 May 1963, 62-HQ-104576-92.

⁴⁹G. A. Nease to Clyde Tolson, 23 Oct. 1958, 62-HQ-99405; FBI Director to SAC Cincinnati, 10 Oct. 1958, 62-HQ-99405-110; SAC Cincinnati to FBI Director, 25 Feb. 1960, 62-HQ-99405-140.

⁵⁰A. H. Belmont to W. C. Sullivan, 10 Mar. 1958, 100-HQ-50869; SAC Cincinnati to FBI Director, 31 Mar. 1961, 100-HQ-36062-28; SAC Cincinnati to FBI Director, 11 May 1962, 100-HQ-50869.

the White House, but the Bureau's own agency here has been elided.⁵¹ Evidence suggests, however, that all their contact notwithstanding, in most cases Cold War era's fundamentalists appeared in the FBI's eyes less as valued collaborators in a shared project than as objects of suspicion that needed to be watched themselves. This, in fact, was the guiding assumption that colored nearly all of the FBI's assessments of the Cold War Christian Right – of its leaders, its purposes and methods and its projects.

V. The Boundaries of Cold War Respectability

In their assessments of the Fundamentalist Christian Right groups, FBI investigators invariably employed those very terms – “extremism,” “irrational,” and “reactionary” – that the Christian Right's critics, then and later, applied also to the Bureau itself. Thus, far from seeing the FBI's purposes as being aligned with these fundamentalists', in their characterizations agents disclosed notably liberal presuppositions and interpretive frameworks. It is clear that for all their contact, Bureau officials never understood (nor even attempted to understand) the fundamentalists' agenda, worldview or separatist culture. Rather, in assessing these suppliers of data, key FBI officials relied almost exclusively on mainline church leaders', new evangelicals', and disillusioned former followers' testimonies, and on these bases, ended up defining the Fundamentalist Christian Right, its projects, its ways of operating and its policy proposals as beyond the pale.

Cold War nonrespectability was conferred on the Fundamentalist Christian Right first of all in the highly prejudiced characterizations of the individuals involved. Apart from being regarded as a profiteer, Edgar C. Bundy, for example, was described as “charlatan who feeds like a parasite off of respectable people,” “an evil force with a complex to destroy.”⁵² The Christian Crusade's Billy James Hargis was “a hillbilly type evangelist... so emotional about the Communist menace that... he would never achieve his ends because of his approach.”⁵³ The Australian-born Fred C. Schwartz, head of the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, seemed to be an “opportunist” whose “sincerity, integrity, motives, and effectiveness in combating communism” were questionable and who was, according to informants, “guaranteed to produce mass hysteria harmful to our Nation.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Carl McIntire was but a “rabble-rouser and a disseminator of hate,” a “radical” with “an almost pathological hatred for the established, legitimate Protestant organizations.”⁵⁵

Characterizations such as these were most often predicated on the testimonies of McIntire's, Hargis', and Bundy's mainline liberal church critics. Bureau officials consulted these leaders and were told that McIntire was “a maverick preacher not recognized by a great number of Protestants” who led “a group of freelance churches of no organized denominations.” Mainline church liberals also told the Bureau, and agents accepted at face value, that in their public activities and speeches McIntire's ilk failed to exhibit the

⁵¹Kirby, “J. Edgar Hoover”, 75.

⁵²M. A. Jones to G. A. Nease, 3 Nov. 1958, 62-HQ-104576-10; Cartha DeLoach to J. P. Mohr, 11 Aug. 1961, HQ 62-104576-50; R. W. Smith to W. C. Sullivan, 6 May 1963, 62-HQ-104576-92.

⁵³FBI headquarters to SAC Portland, 11 July 1960, 100-HQ-424-820-12; SAC San Diego to FBI Director, 8 Aug. 1961, 100-HQ-424-820-16.

⁵⁴R. W. Smith to W. C. Sullivan, 13 Oct. 1961, 94-HQ-50868-; FBI Director to SAC Miami, 1 June 1961, 94-HQ-50868-161; D. C. Morrell to Cartha DeLoach, 27 Nov. 1961, 94-HQ-50868-241.

⁵⁵J. P. Mohr to Clyde Tolson, 28 Oct. 1953, 94-HQ-37990-12; FBI office notes on J. Edgar Hoover to [name redacted], 30 Sept. 1958, 62-HQ-99405-100; “Correlation Summary”, 24 June 1964, 94-HQ-37990-87.

“good taste” required of respectable Christians.⁵⁶ This privately conveyed set of assertions was reinforced in the flood of National Council of Churches (NCC) pamphlets issued in the 1950s through the 1970s to discredit the Cold war era Christian Right, ones that portrayed its leaders as heads of wholly insignificant “splinter groups” that could only pretend to be “legitimate” church bodies, stressing their “emotionalism,” intent to “confuse the public” and the damage that their “absurd” and “wholly unreliable” propositions did to anticommunist work.⁵⁷

The Circuit Riders’ Myers Lowman, critical though he was of such church liberals, offered further corroboration in his secret reports on his fellow-Christian Rightists. In these, he would describe Edgar Bundy as “an individual who would stand on the nose of a prostrate relative in order to elevate his own height one-sixteenth of an inch.”⁵⁸ The ACCL’s Verne P. Kaub, on the other hand, Lowman described as a “lively opponent of the NCC... [who] frequently spoils some good work by an unbalanced opinion or a slight detail of research that should have been conducted rather than assumed.”⁵⁹ While Carl McIntire was a “very fine man” who could be trusted, even he was partial to be taken in by a lot of “nonsense.”⁶⁰

The seriousness with which FBI agents took these kinds of comments even when they came from known church liberals, the comments’ constant repetition in internal memoranda, and the very fact that the comments were being actively solicited to begin with from those sources, all suggest that the gulf between the FBI and the Christian Right was, to a significant degree, one of style and culture. Culturally, Hoover and his agents, being either mainline Protestants or Catholics, simply accepted what the mainline church leaders – people of their own kind, class, and deportment, even if more liberal politically – told them about the Christian Rightists as “extremist” and “irrational.” This was the default starting point as long as no one bothered to investigate further.

These kinds of prejudices were embedded also in the FBI’s assessments of all Christian Right projects throughout the Cold War. FBI agents came to classify most of these as outside the bounds of legitimate, respectable, productive anticommunism. This was the case particularly with the major on-going campaign for most of the 1950s and 1960s pursued by most of the Christian Right – their attempt to instigate FBI and congressional investigation into Communist infiltration in churches.⁶¹ While congressional investigations did ensue, the FBI refused to participate. It agreed with the liberal containment establishment that the whole campaign was deleterious as it undermined respect for the churches and thus weakened the utility of Cold War civil religion.

This may appear surprising at first glance, since J. Edgar Hoover had earlier ordered an investigation of the mainline Protestants in their association’s previous guise as the Federal Council of Churches of Christ (FCC). He had come to suspect that the FCC

⁵⁶SAC Philadelphia to SAC Chicago, 27 Sept. 1949, 100-HQ-36062-1; “Correlation Summary”, 24 June 1964, 94-HQ-37990-87; M. A. Jones to Mr. Bishop, 23 Sept. 1970 and 30 Apr. 1971, 94-HQ-37990-105 and 94-HQ-37990-110.

⁵⁷*Plain Facts About the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.* (New York: NCC, 1953), 2–9, 13–15; “Vigilance – The Price of Truth”, 15 Jan. 1950, G. Bromley Oxnam Papers, box 47, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division, Washington, DC; G. Bromley Oxnam, “The Answer Is More Democracy”, *Western World* (Dec. 1957), 32–4.

⁵⁸SAC Cincinnati to FBI Director, 31 Mar. 1961, 100-HQ-36062-28.

⁵⁹Myers G. Lowman to Alfred Kohlberg, 27 Nov. 1953, Kohlberg papers, box 113.

⁶⁰“Correlation Summary”, 3 Mar. 1964, 94-HQ-37990-87.

⁶¹Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalism*, 113–140.

harbored pro-Communist subversives after it had criticized the so-called Palmer raids of 1919–1920 during which scores of Russian anarchists were deported.⁶² “The FCC is an organization that certainly should not receive any encouragement or support from the government,” Hoover felt then, since “it is always rushing to the rescue of the radicals.”⁶³ With FBI agents’ help, the naval intelligence service had conducted a surreptitious search at the FCC’s offices, and in the 1930s, it classed the FCC as among those groups that, “while not openly advocating the ‘force and violence’ principles of the Communists, give aid and comfort to the Communist movement and party.”⁶⁴

Hoover’s own suspicions never abated. This was apparent when the principal target of the Christian Right’s probe, the influential Methodist bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, asked in 1947 for an audience. Hoover declined, and to his subordinates he insisted that “this fellow and his outfit are certainly far from being unsympathetic to Communism.” Not only Oxnam but the NCC, Hoover still believed, stood for “palliation toward Communism” and included clergy with clearly “pro-Communist sympathies and alleged Communist connections.”⁶⁵ On rare occasions, Hoover even made his sentiments public, as when he told the House Un-American Activities Committee that same year about his “real apprehension so long as Communists are able to secure ministers of the Gospel to promote their evil work and espouse a cause that is alien to the religion of Christ and Judaism.”⁶⁶ Also in 1961, Hoover told Congress Communists had “infiltrated every conceivable sphere of activity,” including “church and school.”⁶⁷

Yet even as Hoover made these aspersions, he also kept insisting that “our opposition to communism must be careful, constructive and positive.” He advised against delving too deeply into subversion in the churches, since “we must not in any way assist the communists in their attempt to create fear and dissension causing our congregations as a whole to doubt or distrust their fellow church members or their leaders.” Hoover deprecated “hysterical charges leveled at American churches in general” and bemoaned that “many people have made irresponsible statements without access to factual data, and such unsupportable charges give rise to a divisive influence that can result in irreparable damage to the country’s fight against communism.”⁶⁸

Clearly, Hoover was referring here to the Christian Right’s activists. Regarding subversion in the churches, the FBI just did not trust the private investigators from the Christian Right. Not only the FBI but all of the intelligence agencies *did* trust most mainline church leaders. As much was shown in the ease with which Oxnam himself managed to arrange meetings, if not with Hoover than with Hoover’s boss, Attorney-General Herbert Brownell (a Methodist like Oxnam), and with the (mainline Presbyterian) head of the Central Intelligence Agency, Allen Dulles, right in the middle of the

⁶² Regin Schmidt, *Red Scare: FBI and the Origins of Anticommunism in the United States, 1919–1943* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2000), ch. 6.

⁶³ Powers, *Secrecy and Power*, 137; J. Edgar Hoover to William J. Burns, 20 Nov. 1923, 100-HQ-50869-X12; F. J. Baumgardner to A. H. Belmont, 4 May 1960, 100-HQ-50869-432.

⁶⁴ Roy Talbot Jr, *Negative Intelligence: The Army and the American Left, 1917–1941* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 223–229; “Shall the Nation’s Defenders Be Gagged for Loyal Service?”, *Detroit Evening Times*, 22 Jan. 1936, Lowman Papers, box 37.

⁶⁵ M. A. Jones to G. A. Nease, 1 Oct. 1958, 62-HQ-99405-101; Sullivan and Brown, *The Bureau*, 267.

⁶⁶ Press release by the American Council of Christian Churches, 3 Oct. 1947, CMMC, box 385.

⁶⁷ Edgar C. Bundy to J. Edgar Hoover, 2 Aug. 1961, 62-HQ-104576.

⁶⁸ J. Edgar Hoover to J. Howard Pew, 31 May 1961, Christianity Today International Records, box 1, Billy Graham Archives Center, Wheaton, IL.

controversy that swirled around him (both men sided with him).⁶⁹ As James D. Strasburg and Matthew Avery Sutton have documented, many a mainline leader was on the intelligence agencies' payroll during both the Second World War and the Cold War, their services having been deemed useful in the spiritual Cold War, so meetings such as this should not come as a surprise.⁷⁰

It might of course be that the FBI and the CIA thought that they could gain more actionable intelligence from liberal church leaders, these being ecumenically affiliated and therefore globally active, than they could from the Christian Right. If so, they were mistaken, for the fundamentalists' ICCC was just as global an operation with its 55 million members worldwide, its regional councils on every continent and its thirty-two periodicals published in eighty-nine countries, its grassroots informants on both sides of the Iron (and Bamboo) Curtain, its membership in the World Anti-Communist League, and its close links with the anticommunist governments of Taiwan and South Korea.⁷¹ So why would not the US intelligence services tap into these ICCC sources of data?

It is difficult not to conclude that while the FBI indeed regarded some of the mainline church leaders as pro-Communist, they were also seen as inherently more respectable and thus more trustworthy than the Christian Right clergy. That this most likely was the case would seem to be further confirmed when we note how effortlessly FBI officials managed to ignore all the evidence about mainline clerical hostility towards themselves that came to light during the subversion in the churches probe. In a preemptive attempt at the beginning to discredit the conservatives, powerful mainline and new evangelical leaders claimed that this entire probe owed to a Catholic conspiracy at the highest echelons of the FBI. The charge originated with the progressive Presbyterian John Mackay but was spread most notably by the new evangelical Donald Grey Barnhouse. (Both were members of Hoover's own denomination.) Barnhouse claimed that 77 per cent of FBI agents were Catholics and that the Roman Catholic Church had an advanced plan for taking over the Bureau and for using it against Protestants. Implicated in this plan to form "the core of a gestapo," Barnhouse insisted, were Senator Joseph McCarthy, a Catholic, and Carl McIntire, the leading fundamentalist campaigner for the church investigation.⁷²

But even these reckless charges failed to prompt any real FBI questioning of the mainline portrayals of the Christian Right or a reconsideration of the mainline itself. No rethinking resulted even after McIntire launched a counter-attack, charging his mainline accusers for hate-mongering anti-Catholicism. Seemingly, it was the Christian Right that was mainstream and responsible here, the liberal mainline extremist. Correspondence ensued between Hoover, McIntire, and the ACCC's president W.O.H. Garman, and Hoover even agreed to be dragged publicly into the controversy. He allowed McIntire print his privately conveyed refutation of the charges and his thanks for Christian Right support.⁷³ More importantly, however, no reprisals followed against the liberal church

⁶⁹G. Bromley Oxnam diary, 12–13 and 15 June 1954, Oxnam Papers, box 23.

⁷⁰Strasburg, *God's Marshall Plan*, 114–121, 133–134; Matthew Avery Sutton, *Double Crossed: The Missionaries Who Spied for the United States During the Second World War* (New York: Basic, 2019).

⁷¹Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, 3, 95–96, 103, 159, 215–216; Ruotsila, "Transnational Fundamentalist Anti-Communism", 235–250.

⁷²W. O. H. Garman to J. Edgar Hoover, 10 March, 2 Apr. and 22 May 1954, and Garman to Carl McIntire 27 Apr. 1954, Garman Papers; Carl McIntire to Francis Schaeffer, 8 May 1954, CMMC, box 22; G. Bromley Oxnam Diary, 2 Jan. 1954, Oxnam Papers, box 23.

⁷³Carl McIntire to Francis Schaeffer, 8 May 1954, CMMC, box 22; "J. Edgar Hoover Questions Barnhouse", *Christian Beacon*, 8 Apr. 1953, 4.

critics of the FBI; rather, the mainline representation of the Christian Right continued to structure Bureau approaches to the religious plane of Cold War debates. It was the pro-FBI Christian Right, not the mainline critics of the Bureau, that started to be investigated.

VI. Surveillance and Repression of the Right

Major FBI investigations of Christian Right groups followed the subversion-in-the-churches and Catholics-in-the-FBI controversies of the 1950s. Occasionally before but especially afterward, agents infiltrated meetings and rallies by the ACCC, the Christian Crusade and other conservative Christian groups, and at times they patrolled outside the homes of these groups' leaders, reporting the comings and goings of visitors. Reports by agents and informers were sent to FBI headquarters, phone conversations were intercepted and Christian Right leaders were brought in for questioning.⁷⁴ Then, in the early 1960s, the FBI began to repress the Christian Right directly. Predating the White Hate COINTELPRO and proceeding without any specific authorization, the repressive measures exposed the FBI's broad-spectrum, long-sustained and deeply held suspicion of fundamentalist Protestantism. The ease with which surveillance turned into repression confirms that we are dealing with significant suspicions indeed.

The links between some of the mainstream Christian Right and those on the racist Far Right provided the initial prompting for the investigations and countermeasures. In the summer of 1963, for example, agents reported on a meeting by Hargis' Christian Crusade where mass demonstrations were allegedly planned by "massive resisters" suspected of having engaged in acts of domestic terrorism.⁷⁵ One paid informant of the Miami, Florida, police department who had infiltrated a meeting of the Congress of Freedom, a secular right-wing grouping with a sizable Christian Right wing, claimed that plans had been agreed on a series of assassinations of government and business leaders. The "generalized feeling" was in favor of "the overthrow of the present government of the United States," the FBI was told, by violence if necessary.⁷⁶ About year later, another informant broached the putative plan again, only this time Bundy was implicated and a "guerilla movement" in the works.⁷⁷

Field reports such as these fed into the narrative of extremism that had already been established in Bureau assessments of the Christian Right, and they prompted the investigations of Christian Right leaders Hargis, McIntire and Bundy that followed. In 1958, Hargis was interviewed about his links with neo-Nazis, and two years later he was summoned to the FBI headquarters on the suspicion that he had been involved in the bombing of the historically black Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas. Then, in 1963, agents were told that he had led a secret meeting to plan for the assassination of president John F. Kennedy with far-right figures and people who knew J. Harvey Oswald (who would himself allegedly spoken at a Hargis event).⁷⁸ McIntire too was an early

⁷⁴SAC San Diego to FBI Director, 8 Aug. 1961, 100-HQ-424-820-16; SAC San Francisco to FBI Director, 20 Nov. 1961, 94-HQ-50868-246; SAC Cincinnati to FBI Director, 20 Feb. 1962, 100-HQ-424-820-21; M. A. Jones to Mr. Bishop, 23 Sept. 1970, 94-HQ-37990-105.

⁷⁵SAC Miami to FBI Director and to SACs Washington and Oklahoma City, 29 July 1963, 100-HQ-424-820-42; SAC El Paso to FBI Director, 12 Feb. 1962, 94-HQ-50868-265.

⁷⁶SAC Miami to FBI Director, 12 Apr. 1963, 105-HQ-18057-20; FBI Director to the Attorney General, 19 Apr. 1963, 105-HQ-18057-28; D. C. Morrell to Mr. Wick, 28 April 1963, 105-HQ-18057-27.

⁷⁷Special Agent [name redacted] to SAC Chicago, 3 Sept. 1965, 100-HQ-36062.

⁷⁸"Correlation Summary", 6 Sept. 1966, 97-HQ-3475; SAC Oklahoma City to FBI director, 21 Dec. 1961, 100-HQ-424-820-19.

suspect in the Kennedy assassination inquiry, and he was summoned to appear before special agents after J. Edgar Hoover had personally ordered that data be gathered on him. Accusations about his involvement (possibly instigation) were brought to the FBI's attention by the well-known critics of conservatives and the FBI alike, Pennsylvania Senator Joseph Clark and *Washington Post* columnist Drew Pearson, but even with a provenance such as this, they were taken seriously.⁷⁹

So firmly had the assumption been planted in the minds of FBI officials about the Christian Right as "extremist" that such flimsiest of hearsay accusations could prompt detailed months-long investigations. In each inquiry, the suspects were exonerated, but this did not dispel the distrust that had already been entrenched. Nor did the exoneration allay McIntire's worries, for though he never directly blamed the FBI, he did suspect that the public mention of his name in connection with the Kennedy investigation was deliberate, proof of a frame-up and a targeting of conservatives.⁸⁰ Be that as it may, investigation was soon followed by repression. The official responsible, the assistant director in charge of the Domestic Intelligence Division since 1961, the aforementioned William C. Sullivan, a Catholic active in ecumenical activities, was the very man whose initiative it was some three years later to start the White Hate COINTELPRO program.⁸¹

Sullivan's decision followed in the wake of the so-called Air Force Training Manual controversy of 1960–61. Instigated by Hargis, McIntire and Bundy, this was about a manual used in officer training that repeated their charges about the NCC's Communist linkages, the use of which was discontinued after the NCC had alighted to it (after which they, the Democratic National Committee and the Kennedy White House used the manual as grounds for a coordinated attack on Christian "hate groups").⁸² Responding in a public address, Sullivan insisted that the majority of Christian clergy were thoroughly loyal to the United States. The Communist Party had never made "substantial progress in exerting domination, control or influence over America's clergymen or religious institutions on a national scale"; accusations to the contrary were causing "consternation, dissension, doubt and fear among church members." A very small number of clergy had entered Communist front groups "without apparently being aware of their true nature and purpose," but to Sullivan, this was of very slight importance when compared with the dire harm done by those who exaggerated these facts: "anyone who succeeds in demoralizing America's churches is aiding their [ie. the Communists'] cause."⁸³

Predictably, mainline church leaders praised Sullivan for these words ("a real service to our country"), and both the NCC and Hoover's own Presbyterian church adopted resolutions of thanks for his and Hoover's "statements on behalf of American clergy."⁸⁴ By contrast, from the Christian Right, Sullivan was subjected to instant vehement criticism, and it was this that finally brought things to a head and prompted repressive measures. This Christian Right criticism of Sullivan and the rest of the FBI at this point tells us just as much about the vicissitudes of the Christian Right-FBI relationship as do the secret repressive measures that followed, so both deserve attention.

⁷⁹Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, 179–181.

⁸⁰"Garrison's Plot Fails", *Christian Beacon*, 14. Nov. 1968, 1.

⁸¹Keller, *The Liberals*, 75–6; Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar*, 51, 87–89.

⁸²Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalist*, 152–153.

⁸³"FBI Official Says Reds Have Little Success Infiltrating Churches", (Warren OH) *Tribune Chronicle*, [27?] Feb. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-26X; [name redacted] to J. Edgar Hoover, 17 Aug. 1961, 94-HQ-37990-41.

⁸⁴[Name redacted] to J. Edgar Hoover, 17 Aug. 1961, 94-HQ-37990-41; Eugene Carson Blake to J. Edgar Hoover, 6 June 1962, 100-HQ-50869-948.

Bundy and Hargis now claimed that either the Attorney-General, Robert F. Kennedy, or his brother, the President, had ordered the FBI to cease investigation of Communist subversion and to turn instead against anticommunists. Bundy asserted that Sullivan was “the plant of the Kennedy administration” inside the FBI, placed there by top mainline Protestant and Catholic leaders as part of a broader attack on conservatives. Bundy was growing increasingly concerned about this “new role which the FBI is evidently playing now.”⁸⁵ So convinced was he in fact that he started now to publicly criticize Hoover and suggested that all conservatives should join him in coordinated media appearances that would take the Director to task.⁸⁶ At least the ACCL’s Verne P. Kaub agreed, telling Bundy how “it is a sad thing if Christian patriots definitely must list Hoover and the FBI as enemies, but if this is true we might as well face it.”⁸⁷

Hoover himself was dragged into the controversy, persuaded by his subordinates to write a personal letter to Bundy. While “some clergymen have been drawn into the communist movement,” Hoover allowed, “the overwhelming majority of American clergymen are wholly loyal to this nation.” Hoover underlined that “communism should be strongly opposed by careful, constructive, positive action and this opposition should always be kept within the due process of law.” He told Kaub as much – and then asked the ACCL chairman not to include public source quotes from him in future ACCL pamphlets.⁸⁸ Privately, though, Hoover noted with concern how his own mainline church membership was now being used against him by these men, and when press reports started to circulate about his being not just a member but an actual ruling elder in his church, he told his subordinates to swiftly deny it.⁸⁹

In this situation that had developed publicly, those of the Christian Right’s leaders who had worked the closest with the FBI at once disassociated themselves from Bundy’s charges. They also became accomplices in the repression that the FBI unleashed, in the first instance on Bundy’s CLA. Chief among them was the Circuit Riders’ Myers Lowman. He phoned his fundamentalist allies who had printed Bundy’s accusations and tried to pressure them into retractions and apologies.⁹⁰ Other conservatives struggled between the urge to acknowledge the charges (which they believed) and their sense that they could never “say anything” that Hoover “might take umbrage at” lest their own cause suffer.⁹¹ Still others wrote to McIntire, Bundy’s chief sponsor and friend, beseeching him to disavow the criticism of Sullivan because all such “ill-considered accusations” would only “reflect unfavorably upon the FBI” and so “play into the hands of the Communists.”⁹²

At the same time, Lowman started assisting the FBI in gathering all available derogatory data on Edgar Bundy. From the start, this data was collected with a view to using it

⁸⁵Billy James Hargis to J. Edgar Hoover, 22 Sept. 1961, 100-HQ-424-820-17; SAC Chicago to FBI Director, 5 Aug. 1961, 100-HQ-36062-30; D. C. Morell to Cartha DeLoach, 9 May 1962, 100-HQ-50869; “Correlation Summary”, 3 Mar. 1964, 94-HQ-37990-87; Edgar C. Bundy to Verne P. Kaub, 16 Apr. 1962, ACCL Records, reel 36; SAC Chicago to FBI Director, 5 Aug. 1961, 100-HQ-36062-30.

⁸⁶Edgar C. Bundy to Verne P. Kaub, 5 May 1962, ACCL Records, reel 33.

⁸⁷Verne P. Kaub to Edgar C. Bundy, 13 Apr. 1962, ACCL Records, reel 33.

⁸⁸J. Edgar Hoover to Edgar C. Bundy, 7 Mar. 1961, CMMC; Hoover to Verne P. Kaub, 23 Apr. 1962, 62-HQ-100-432-44.

⁸⁹SAC Chicago to FBI Director, 5 Aug. 1961, 100-HQ-36062; M. A. Jones to Cartha DeLoach, 17 Apr. 1962, 100-HQ-50869; D. C. Morell to DeLoach, 14 Nov. 1963, 100-HQ-50869-1039.

⁹⁰Myers G. Lowman to Carl McIntire, 21 June 1961, CMMC, box 163.

⁹¹J. Howard Pew to L. Nelson Bell, 20 June 1961, and Pew to Edmund G. Mason, 19 May 1961, Christianity Today International Records, box 1.

⁹²[Name redacted] to Carl McIntire, 5 July 1962, 94-HQ-7990-57.

against Bundy so that his operations would suffer. "These people must be dealt with firmly," Sullivan himself instructed his subordinates. "Sooner or later we are going to stand our ground and cut him off."⁹³ Thus, Sullivan had both the FBI Central Research Section and the field offices scour public sources and interview Bundy's associates for information that could be used to discredit him.⁹⁴ On Hoover's instructions, "two mature and experienced agents" were sent to his offices to threaten reprisals. The IRS was brought in to find dirt, as was the military's Office of Special Investigations, and the U.S. Information Agency was told to drop plans for hiring him as a consultant. Likewise, the American Legion and the Sons of the American Revolution were told that their relations with the FBI would suffer were they to continue to work with this man. When told that the Reserve Officers Association planned to sponsor Bundy's anticommunist seminars, Sullivan spied yet another opportunity "to stop him in his tracks," and he sent agents over to talk the association out of the plan.⁹⁵

Nine months into the investigation highly useful derogatory information was furnished by a disaffected fundamentalist follower of Bundy's and it was immediately decided to put it to use "to isolate" and "expose" him. The FBI was now told that Bundy could be implicated in a series of homosexual acts, some with minors, that spanned several decades and were on-going, well-known to fundamentalists but covered up so that the Christian Right's anticommunist and religious projects would not suffer.⁹⁶ "He is despicably evil and consumed with strange emotions," agents concluded, a man whose activities could be explained by the psychopathology of the "sexual pervert." Because of this, he was also susceptible to being blackmailed.⁹⁷ Immediately and for years, *precis* of this information was given to selected trusted individuals so as to persuade them to decline cooperation with Bundy.⁹⁸

Here, far from aligning the FBI with the Cold War era Christian Right, Hoover's much-adumbrated "war on gays" actually set the two further apart. In other instances, Hoover's "Sex Deviates Files" were used against known, alleged or suspected Leftists, especially in the civil rights movement; here, they were used against a leading figure of the Christian Right, supposedly the FBI's ally. In each case, those so targeted were targeted and repressed not because they were gay but because Hoover and the rest of the FBI regarded them as dangers to the reigning containment order's institutions and ethos for other reasons.⁹⁹ Accusations

⁹³W. C. Sullivan to A. H. Belmont, 6 Mar. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-26X3; W. C. Sullivan to A. H. Belmont, 14 Mar. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-26X5.

⁹⁴R. W. Smith to W. C. Sullivan, 23 Aug. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-46; SAC Cincinnati to the FBI Director and to W. C. Sullivan, 8 Dec. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-58.

⁹⁵FBI Director to SAC Chicago, 29 Aug. 1961, 100-HQ-36062-32; F. J. Baumgardner to W. C. Sullivan, 22 Nov. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-55; [redacted] to W. C. Sullivan, 1 Sept. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-49; Cartha DeLoach to J. P. Mohr, 22 Jan. 1962, 62-HQ-104576-63; W. C. Sullivan to A. H. Belmont, 30 Jan. 1962, 62-HQ-104576-63; M. A. Jones to Cartha DeLoach, 17 Feb. 1964, 62-HQ-104576-111; "Name Check: Edgar Bundy", 31 Jan. 1967, 62-HQ-104576-145.

⁹⁶SAC Cincinnati to FBI Director and W. C. Sullivan, 8 Dec. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-58; F. J. Baumgardner to Sullivan, 14 Dec. 1961, 62-HQ-104576-59; A. H. Belmont to FBI Director, 7 May 1963, 62-HQ-104576-91; R. W. Smith to Sullivan, 16 Apr. 1964, 62-HQ-104576-113; SAC [redacted] to FBI Director, 29 Dec. 1967, 62-HQ-104576-158.

⁹⁷R. W. Smith to W. C. Sullivan, 6 May 1963, 62-HQ-104576-92; SAC [redacted] to SAC Chicago, 3 Sept. 1965, 100-HQ-36062.

⁹⁸W. C. Sullivan to A. H. Belmont, 9 Apr. 1963, 62-HQ-104576-89; Cartha DeLoach to J. P. Mohr, 13 Sept. 1965, 62-HQ-104576; M. A. Jones to Mr. Bishop, 18 Feb. 1971, 62-HQ-104576-194.

⁹⁹For a contrary view, see Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

about sodomy just happened to be useful tools of repression, given the public opinion of the time. Several Cold War Christian Right figures belonged to this class of *ipso facto* suspicious people, and they were treated accordingly.

Other Christian Right leaders were not repressed directly to such an extent (though rumors about homosexual activities circulated about several of the others too, including about Hargis and Schwarz, and were noted at the Bureau).¹⁰⁰ But in the 1960s and the 1970s, the FBI did continue to surveil them, as did the IRS and the Federal Communications Commission. Even Lowman was subjected to an IRS investigation, and his Circuit Riders lost its tax-exempt status. Repeatedly, McIntire too had to allow agents into his offices on rummages of his files of correspondence with the John Birch Society.¹⁰¹ In the early 1970s, when McIntire started to organize pro-Vietnam war marches and emerged as a vituperative opponent of president Richard Nixon's policies of détente, the FBI and the Secret Service classified him as "potentially dangerous because of background, emotional instability or activity in groups inimical to the U.S." Throughout, undercover agents continued to infiltrate many of his pro-war marches.¹⁰²

Only in 1972 with the changing of the guard (William C. Sullivan having been forced out the previous year and J. Edgar Hoover having retired) did the FBI's new interim director instruct his agents to cease referring to McIntire as an "extremist."¹⁰³ From this, it took another eight years before Edgar C. Bundy felt that the Bureau had really mended its ways and could now once more, perhaps, be trusted by anticommunists and conservatives, given that his old friend and past Church League of America collaborator Ronald Reagan was now president.¹⁰⁴ The unavailability of FBI files from this turning point onwards makes it impossible to ascertain whether Bundy was correct – or whether surveillance and repression still continued. But at least from the late 1950s until then, surveillance and repression was real – just as real as the better known surveillance and repression of the political and religious Left.

VII. Conclusion

By the 1980s, some of the Cold War Christian Right's leaders knew from documents what the FBI thought of them and that it had surveilled and repressed their activities. They had suspected as much anyway, but by now some of them had made their own Freedom of Information Act requests and had received a sampling of their own FBI files.¹⁰⁵ Regardless, they kept up with their expansive public praise of the FBI, and to the day Hoover died, they continued to lavish their various awards on him as the most "patriotic" or the most "American" of all the public servants of their time. Some five years after Hoover's passing,

¹⁰⁰M. Dorcas Burch to Verne P. Kaub, 14 Nov. 1958, ACCL Records, reel 25; "The Sins of Billy James", *Time*, 16 Feb. 16, 1976, 52; M. A. Jones to Cartha DeLoach, 27 Nov. 1961, 94-HQ-50868-245.

¹⁰¹R. W. Smith to W. C. Sullivan, 6 May 1963, 62-HQ-104576-92; G. E. Malmfeldt to Mr. Bishop, 6 Aug. 1968, 100-HQ-424820-65; Circuit Riders, Inc., "We Intend to Win", Feb. 1965, and "Now Its Up to You", June 1966, J. B. Mathews Papers, box 83, Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, NC; Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalism*, 154–157, 179, 181–186, 248–250.

¹⁰²Betty Cowles memorandum, nd [Oct. 1976], CMMC, box 145; R. D. Cotter to W. C. Sullivan, 31 Mar. 1970, 94-HQ-37990; R. D. Cotter to C. D. Brennan, 17 Sept. 1970, 94-HQ-37990.

¹⁰³Acting FBI Director to SAC Tampa, 21 Aug. 1972, 94-HQ-37990-122.

¹⁰⁴Edgar C. Bundy, 'Conservative Gains Resulting from Republican Landslide', *News and Views* (Dec. 1980), 1–4.

¹⁰⁵See CMMC, box 145; and Billy James Hargis Papers, box 1, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville.

even McIntire, who by then knew the facts, still maintained publicly that with Hoover's death the *only* voice (apart from his own ministry) that had ever alerted Americans to the immensity of the Communist menace had now been silenced.¹⁰⁶

These public statements should not lead us astray in our overall assessments of the FBI-Christian Right relationship during the Cold War. From the Christian Right's side, they tell us only what we knew anyway: that foundationally the fundamentalists who comprised the era's Christian Right were invested in the tropes of law and order and of respect for divinely instituted authority, impelling them to stand up for the FBI, and that they saw the Bureau (not inaccurately) as chief among all the agencies that combated internal Communist subversion, both real and alleged.¹⁰⁷ Christian Right organizations were also dependent on donations from the public, and given that the public too saw the FBI in just this way, it behooved them to advertise and inflate the importance of their (real or professed) links with the FBI. In the process, they crafted elaborate narratives about the FBI as a protector of and enforcing agent for "Christian America."

While there were indeed areas of agreement and overlapping policy preferences between the Cold War Christian Right and the FBI, this fact tells us little regarding what the FBI felt about the organized Christian conservative movement itself, and it tells us not a thing about how it dealt with that movement. A close perusal of the relevant FBI files *does* tell us all this – and it simply does not lend credence to the claim that the Bureau was responsible for the rise of the Christian Right (or "white Christian nationalism") to national prominence and power. The fact is that throughout the Cold War the FBI remained very suspicious, critical and concerned about the most ardent ones of its conservative Christian supporters who constituted this movement. Special agents and assistant directors alike, and oftenest the Director himself, simply did not regard the Cold War Christian Right as a reliable partner in the waging of the Cold War, spiritual or otherwise, either at home or abroad.

Traditional interpretations of FBI counter subversory activities have amply documented how its agents repressed many left-of-center advocacy groups, the black civil rights movement and the gay rights movement. The Cold War Christian Right too argued and organized against the two first-mentioned (but against the gay rights movement only from the Cold War's last stages), so on these matters it and the FBI did operate on parallel and mutually reinforcing lines. But what of the fact that the FBI was *also* at the same time engaged in surveilling and repressing the Christian Right itself? What price the alignment when J. Edgar Hoover and his agents worried just as much about those who advocated for the rollback of Soviet power from all the countries the Communists had conquered and for purging the churches of those supporting a social welfare state and the regulation of the free enterprise system, and who presumed to usurp the Bureau's bureaucratic privileges in going about the counter subversory tasks at hand?

These were also among the key concerns of the Cold War period's FBI, and they issued in nonstop surveillance, harassment and repression of entirely legitimate conservative Christian public advocacy. Far from being some "reactionary" empowering agent of an

¹⁰⁶W. W. Breckbill to J. Edgar Hoover, 1 May 1952, CMMC, box 710; Billy James Hargis to J. Edgar Hoover, 26 May 1961, 97-HQ-3475; Hargis to Hoover, 22 Sept. 1961, 100-HQ-424-820-17; M. A. Jones to Mr. Bishop, 30 Apr. 1971, 94-HQ-37990-110; Carl McIntire, 'American Citizens March, May 28', *Christian Beacon*, 2 June 1977, 7.

¹⁰⁷See Griffith, *God's Law and Order*.

equally “reactionary” conservative Christian movement, in the Cold War years the FBI actually acted as a policing and enforcement agent for a notably centrist, establishment-imposed containment order demarcated by what were at the time highly conventional notions of respectability in deportment and policy, one that excluded alike most of the period’s Left and most of the political and religious right.

Markku Ruotsila (PhD, Cambridge) is currently the Adjunct Professor (Title of Docent) of North American Church History at the University of Helsinki, and Research Fellow and Visiting Professor at the Center for Faith and Human Flourishing, LCC International University.

Cite this article: Markku Ruotsila, “Policing the Containment Order: The FBI and the Cold War Christian Right,” *Church History* (2025): 1–22. doi:[10.1017/S0009640725101868](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640725101868).