James Baldwin and the FBI

Author(s): James Campbell

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*James Campbell*

AT THE BEGINNING of October 1963, James Baldwin traveled by plane to Selma, Alabama, to support a voting registration drive for recently enfranchised blacks, held at the Dallas County Courthouse in the center of town. His brother David went with him. The pair had expected to be met at the airport by a person who did not show up, and so Baldwin telephoned another friend in Selma, then made for the Gaston Hotel, where he took a room. Once installed, he tried to put through a call to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, but did not succeed.

These skeletal but oddly vivid details of Baldwin's arrival in Selma are available courtesy of a special agent of the FBI, who *was* at the airport to witness the two brothers' disembarkation. The agent knew the identity of the missing friend, and of the man or woman whom Baldwin called once he realized he had been stood up. Presumably the agent learned about the call to Kennedy by snooping around at the Gaston Hotel. Throughout their stay in Selma, the Baldwins were tailed and photographed. They were snapped outside the county courthouse, in the company of SNCC leader James Foreman, arguing with the police. From Baldwin's own reports (though not from the FBI's), we know that the police were willfully—and illegally—restricting the black people's right to register to vote. When Baldwin or Foreman approached the people lined up under the midday sun to offer them refreshments, the police harried them and told them not to block the sidewalk. Or else, pretending to protect the applicants, the sheriff admonished Baldwin with "I'll not have these people molested in any way." Baldwin estimated that of the 325 men and women who tried to register to vote that day, twenty were admitted to the courthouse. The remainder were told to try again.

The special agent from the Mobile office sent his reports to the FBI director in Washington, where they were classified and filed, together with the photographs, to be retrieved in the future only for reference. They were unseen by anyone outside the Bureau until copies of the whole lot arrived on my doorstep in 1989. I had requested access to Baldwin's FBI file eighteen months earlier, under the Freedom of Information Act, as part of the research for the book I was writing, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin*. It is likely that I would have had to wait a good deal longer for the 1750-page file had it not been for the efforts of a Washington lawyer, James Lesar, who threatened to sue the FBI, on my behalf, on the grounds that it was endangering my livelihood by withholding information unnecessarily. The files came, in heavily censored form; I made what use of them I could, finished the book, and put the matter aside.

After *Talking at the Gates* was published in 1991, however, James Lesar asked my permission to use the case to challenge the FBI to release more information about the surveillance of Baldwin. So began *Campbell v. U.S. Department of Justice*, which, after a series of stumbles in the district court, ended late last year in the United States Court of Appeals with what Lesar calls a "substantial victory." The three appeals court judges concluded on December 29 that "the district court erred in finding that an adequate search had been made, and [we] remand the case so that the FBI can be afforded the opportunity to search for [further] records responsive to Campbell's FOIA request, and to proceed as the results of such searches require." Needless to say, the decision impinges on other FOIA requests besides this one. How much material will be released by the FBI, and how much of it will be of practical use, remain to be seen. There is no expectation of an entirely uncensored file, of course (unwittingly implicated individuals are entitled to their privacy, for one thing), but the judges' decision should result eventually in more light being cast on what one of them, Judith D. Rogers, described as "an awkward period in the history of the FBI."

THE BUREAU opened its file on James Baldwin in 1960, after he lent his name to a petition sponsored by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Baldwin was never interested in conventional party politics, but anyone who demanded "fair play" for Cuba was likely to be seen by J. Edgar Hoover as a subversive, or, in the words of a later memorandum on Baldwin, "a dangerous individual who could be expected to commit acts inimical to the national defense of the United States." By the middle of 1961, the FBI was taking occasional note of Baldwin's movements in New York, but it was not until 1963 that his name was added to the Security Index, the list of citizens who would be arrested first in the event of a state of emergency. In May of that year, Baldwin had had a raucous meeting with Robert Kennedy, which left the Attorney General feeling bruised and humiliated after a typical tongue-lashing from Baldwin and a number of his friends. Four days after the meeting, a memo circulated in the Washington headquarters requesting information on Baldwin and "the other individuals who participated in the recent conference with the Attorney General" (Lena Horne and Lorraine Hansberry were among those present), while in the New York office a search was made of the indices for material on Baldwin, "particularly of a derogatory nature."

What did they find? Well, there was the night he spent in prison in 1954, following a bit of horseplay on Third Avenue. There was the suspicion that he was homosexual ("a pervert," in Bureau lingo). There was, as part proof, his authorship of the novel *Another Country*, the action of which is propelled by every racial and sexual permutation available to its cast of characters. And there was his signature on the petition of the FPCC, which was invoked every time information concerning Baldwin was requested over the next ten years. It enabled the FBI to mark Baldwin's card "communist," confirming its notorious inability to distinguish among communist, radical, and liberal.

Of this, the homosexuality and the familiarity with drug-taking, which are dramatized in *Another Country*, could be used to discredit Baldwin in the eyes not only of the general public but of the ultra-respectable Southern civil rights leaders themselves. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, headed by Martin Luther King, Jr., always felt queasy about admitting Baldwin as a "spokesman," and there was an unkind joke going about in which he figured as "Martin Luther Queen."

In mid-1963, Baldwin was riding high on the success of *The Fire Next Time*; *Another Country* was on top of the paperback bestseller list. These books, following on from *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), marked him out as the new great black hope—probably, in the field of literature, the greatest there had ever been. Lionel Trilling commented then that there was "no literary career in America today that matches James Baldwin's in the degree of interest it commands."

The interest, or at least the literary part of it, began to wane from that moment on. By the end of the 1960s, Baldwin was in Istanbul, telling a reporter from the *San Francisco Examiner* that he was "in some ways" the last unassassinated Negro of his generation—"my countrymen have killed off all my friends." He added that he was living abroad "in preparation, not flight," and that there was no way to shut him up "except death." Among his persecutors he would certainly have included J. Edgar Hoover. Earlier in the decade, Baldwin had alarmed Hoover by threatening to write a book about the FBI and its baleful role in the civil rights struggle. This, too, cropped up in memo after memo. The book had a title, *The Blood Counters*, but was never written.

The wasting of Baldwin's artistic gifts in the 1960s was the result, mainly, of his day-to-day involvement in civil rights duty, and of the emotional hammerblows caused by the murders of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, one after the other. But the constant presence in his life of FBI informers and agents (note that the special agent in Selma was photographing Baldwin and his colleagues, not the policemen who were wrongfully interfering with them) greatly contributed to his own private state of emergency. Between 1963 and 1972 he published only one novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, a book far less well-organized than any other he had written up to that time, and—probably to compensate—far more strident in tone.

When Hoover added Baldwin's name to the Security Index, it was with a note that Kennedy considered him "a nut." He became aware of the sudden FBI interest in his life even as stories about the Kennedy–Baldwin meeting were running in the press. Inquiring telephone calls were made to his house on bogus pretexts (the commonest way of confirming a subject's address), an attempt was made to gain entry while he was absent, and friends were detained at Customs as they arrived in the country. Lucien Happersberger, a Swiss friend who lived with Baldwin in New York at the time, recalls the constant presence in his life of threats, assassination fears, and the suspicion (which turned out to be well-founded) that certain members of his inner circle were acting or had acted as informers.

To judge by the evidence of the file, many of the FBI's informers were not worth whatever money they were paid. The curse of all FBI files is duplication of previously misinterpreted, or plain mistaken, information. The FBI had Baldwin married when he wasn't, had him coming from Boston when he was from New York; they got the name of his street in Greenwich Village wrong, and had him living there after he had moved out; and they had him as the author of the novels *Go Tell It to the Mountains* and *Another World*.

There was, moreover, an almost reassuring reluctance to arrive at conclusions. On July 17, 1964, a memo was returned to its sender with a scribbled note from Hoover, asking: "Isn't James Baldwin a well-known pervert?" Three days later, he received a solemn reply: "While it is not possible to state that he is a pervert, he has expressed a sympathetic viewpoint about homosexuality on several occasions." By 1966, in spite of a lifelong refusal by Baldwin to make a secret of his sexual proclivity, the FBI still thought it safer to leave the question open:

> Nothing is known about the current location of JAMES BALDWIN, the Negro Author and Playwright. BALDWIN was at an affair held for PAUL ROBINSON in 1965 at the Americana Hotel. It has been heard that Baldwin may be homosexual and he appeared as if he may be one.

This is a good example of one type of FBI memo: full of misspellings (Paul Robeson was among the most famous Americans alive at the time), misuse of capital letters and subjunctives, cluttered sentences—and no information at the end of it.

The FBI closed its file on Baldwin in 1973, as sure a sign as any of his dwindling status, but he struggled on—heroically, in my view—as a foot-soldier in a cause which was partly won, partly lost, withstanding further jibes from people within the movement itself, such as Eldridge Cleaver, and trying to recover the "something" in him that died along with King. In 1976 he wrote: "We must be careful—lest we lose our faith—and become possessed." I don't expect new details from an FBI file to add to that.□