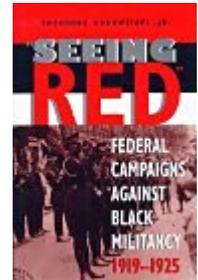


Theodore Kornweibel, Jr. *"Seeing Red": Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925.* Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998. xv + 225 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-33337-7.



Reviewed by Kenneth O'Reilly

Published on H-Pol (May, 2000)

This fine book makes the case that former Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer should be remembered for something more than those raids which bear his name. "The Negro is 'seeing red,'" Palmer announced in 1919, addressing his warning to what another former Justice Department official, J. Edgar Hoover, liked to call "the real America" (hard working, tax paying, Christian, white). It was taken to heart by the bureaucrats who ran the State Department, Military Intelligence Division, Office of Naval Intelligence, Post Office Department, and most of all the Justice Department's General Intelligence Division (GID) and Bureau of Investigation (the word "Federal" was added in 1935). Hoover himself worked off a GID desk before moving up in 1924 to take over the Bureau. Collectively, this nascent World War I-era intelligence empire shared a common and eminently simple assumption. Namely, that "second-class" citizens would have second-class loyalties and thus were fair game for informants, bugs, taps, mail openings, dirty tricks, bogus prosecutions, and other imperial habits.

Theodore Kornweibel has been plowing this field for some time. In 1980 he began work on

"Seeing Red" and six years later edited for micro-film publication some twenty-five reels of federal records housed in the National Archives. (The Archives has 955 reels of old Bureau of Investigation files alone.) Kornweibel also has another book in the works on more or less the same subject. He knows as much or more than any other scholar about how the American intelligence community from the get go used what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the color line" to grow an empire long before the Cold War dawned. History, of course, can be a strange thing, and thus it should be remembered that Du Bois himself unsuccessfully sought a commission in military intelligence.

Sometimes, when one knows so much, it is difficult to tell the proverbial forest from the trees. What this means here is that Kornweibel's theme, such as it is, comes across as rather limp. The author argues that federal surveillance played an important role in rolling back civil rights militancy and further that all those intelligence agents had no right to do what they did because their targets broke no laws. It was not a crime to espouse black pride under the rubric of Pan Africanism. Nor was it a crime to condemn

"the burning of Negroes" (lynching). Or to ask President Woodrow Wilson, as William Monroe Trotter did, to make America safe for blacks while he was busy making the world safe for democracy. Had Kornweibel gotten further across the color line we would have had a more interesting book. Race, unfortunately, seems always to locate at or near the center of everything -- most notably, economics and electoral politics. *"Seeing Red"* clearly demonstrates that race locates dead center on the question of why America developed an intelligence empire. Yet a more direct approach here would have made a more interesting and perhaps arresting theme for the book as a whole.

Still, this is a minor criticism and Kornweibel no doubt will make a major interpretive contribution with the manuscript that remains in progress. With this book, one settles happily for a wealth of detail about what actually happened. From a chapter outlining a general fear of Bolshevism on the march among blacks, Kornweibel moves on to tell a series of eye-popping stories. A good portion of intelligence community energy was directed towards newspapers and other publications, including the Chicago *Defender*, the *Messenger*, the *Crusader*, and the more complex case of the NAACP's *Crisis*. There is also a separate chapter on the pursuit of Marcus Garvey, the "black Moses" who ran the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Surveillance of the African Blood Brotherhood attracts the author's attention as well, along with the Justice Department's habit of spying on any black member of the Industrial Workers of the World.

Finally, Kornweibel focuses throughout on the strange tale of black agents hired by the old Bureau of Investigation to infiltrate black groups and otherwise go places where white agents could not. Before signing up and being told to take care of Garvey, one of those agents, James Amos, had served as President Theodore Roosevelt's valet. If history is sometimes a strange thing, the stories well told in this book are usually just that.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Kenneth O'Reilly. Review of Kornweibel, Theodore, Jr. *"Seeing Red": Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4134>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.