

## **BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE IN THE CROSSHAIRS: THE FBI FILE ON B. F. SKINNER**

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**ABSTRACT:** Behavioral science and its practitioners have come under government scrutiny for a variety of reasons, such as when politicians take issue with grant funding or when a leading behavioral scientist puts forth controversial ideas or becomes actively involved in social concerns. One such case is that of B. F. Skinner. The FBI file on B. F. Skinner was obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. Skinner was aware that the FBI monitored his activities. The file reveals extensive checking on Skinner's contacts with a Chinese scientist and on his protests against nuclear testing and the Vietnam War. He had lent his name to newspaper (protest) advertisements that were signed by dozens of scientists. Both the government's cold-war anticommunist sentiment and the esteem in which Skinner was held by colleagues are reflected in the heavily censored pages contained in the file.

### **The FBI File on B. F. Skinner**

Governmental threats to the sciences, such as efforts to legislate the teaching of creationism rather than, or in addition to, evolution, are common. The social and behavioral sciences are not exempt from governmental intrusion.

Often governmental scrutiny seems to be directed at scientists who espouse new or unpopular views. Behavior analysis (behaviorism, behavior modification), and its most visible scientist, B. F. Skinner, have engendered such attention.

B. F. Skinner knew that his activities were monitored by the FBI. In Volume 3 of his autobiography (Skinner, 1983) Skinner wrote about his Chinese friend, Pei Sung:

In 1961 . . . Pei Sung gave my name to the President of the Chinese Psychological Society, who was working on machine teaching, hoping that I could be invited to speak there. Pei Sung reported that, "We do not see any obstacles standing in the way of obtaining an invitation from this end, but I have been reminded to use caution in this matter in view of the present world situation: the possible consequences of your visit to us on your return to the U.S." At the time I was amused, but later I discovered that the San Francisco Office of the FBI had been following the correspondence "between Tang and Professor B. F. Skinner, a.k.a. 'Fred.'" (p. 241)

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In late 1991, I wrote to the FBI and requested a copy of its file on B. F. Skinner. Citing its huge backlog of requests as reason for the delay, about two-and-one-half years later I received the file from the FBI. A great deal of its content had been withheld, blacked out as “unwarranted invasions of personal privacy” or because those sections could have “reasonably been expected to disclose the identity of a confidential source,” according to the FBI.

The file’s first correspondence regarding B. F. Skinner shows that on August 20, 1959 a San Francisco field agent reported to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. The subject was Skinner’s contacts with an individual in the Biology Department in Peking University in China. Skinner had sent Pei (though Pei’s name is blacked out) some journals and a book they had discussed, *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948). The field agent noted that in the novel Skinner had mentioned the obligation of a scientist to his society. The agent questioned whether Skinner really and wholeheartedly meant it. The memo concluded with a referral to the Boston FBI office where agents were advised to be “extremely circumspect” in view of the sensitive nature of the source involved.

In a subsequent memo dated October 21, 1959 the Boston special agent reported his findings to FBI Director Hoover. The agent wrote that his investigation had uncovered little of interest about Skinner, with one exception. That was a phone call to Skinner that had been made in 1952. The caller, and the content of the call, are blacked out. In any event, the agent recommended that Skinner not be interviewed due to Skinner’s status as a professor at an institution of higher learning. Further action was deemed unwarranted, and the Boston special agent closed Skinner’s file at that time.

Within a year, Skinner again drew agency interest, and this time he found himself in stalwart company. On August 10, 1960 the *New York Times* carried an advertisement that had been paid for by an organization called the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. The advertisement, which had been signed by many scientists, including Skinner, was in support of Dr. Linus Pauling. As Skinner described it in his autobiography, Pauling had run afoul of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee for refusing to disclose the names of other scientists who had helped Pauling circulate a petition calling for an end to nuclear bomb testing. At that time it was common knowledge that the Senate routinely kept tabs on dozens of organizations that were alleged to be fronts for the communist party. The Emergency Civil Liberties Committee was said to have been one such organization.

On April 11, 1961 an internal FBI file memo was written about the alleged connection between Skinner, Linus Pauling, the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, and the communist party. This brought about another investigation of Skinner, an investigation of some length, which did not conclude until November 3, 1961. Ironically, the file shows that investigation had scarcely begun when Hoover received a request from the White House for a background check on Skinner—he was being considered for a Presidential appointment. The nature of the potential appointment is not discussed in the file.

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The investigation intensified. An agent reported on May 1, 1961 that Skinner was attending a meeting of the Acoustical Society in Philadelphia. Ten days later the New York City Police Department was contacted. It reported to the FBI that Skinner had no record with them. An individual who had resided in the same New York building as Skinner was interviewed by an agent there. Skinner had caused no trouble at any time that he had lived in New York City, the ex-neighbor said. There were checks with the building's supervisor and an elevator operator. All of the interviews were negative for procommunist or other subversive activities, according to the field agent's report.

FBI agents then searched Skinner's files at Hamilton College. They learned that he received a Bachelor's degree there in 1926 with an 89.5 grade point average. A professor had no recollection of Skinner directly but indicated to the agent that Skinner had made something of himself.

Other agents met with individuals in Bloomington, Indiana where Skinner had held a faculty position some years previously. Skinner was described by former colleagues as an outstanding man in his field, a man of good character. A Harvard colleague gave Skinner high marks for scholarship and citizenship. Several former Minnesota colleagues, where Skinner had been from 1936 to 1945, described him as brilliant.

Various neighbors, credit agencies, and police departments were questioned, and their records were searched. Nothing negative, and much that was favorable about Skinner, was unearthed, according to the heavily censored file documents.

The investigation included a check of Vermont (where Skinner had vacationed) State Police records, with no findings. The National Science Foundation people were interviewed, as were those at the Air Force, evidently because Skinner had earlier received Air Force clearance for a secret project in 1958. Again there were no findings of a subversive or anti-American nature. On May 17, 1961 an "urgent" (for reasons not clear) memo from the Philadelphia office indicated that someone who had known Skinner in Scranton, Pennsylvania had been interviewed. The person recalled a *Life* article about some of Skinner's experiments. However, the individual reported essentially little or no contact with Skinner since Skinner had gone away to college at Hamilton nearly 40 years earlier, and knew nothing else about him. The source stated that she had not known Skinner personally but from her association with his parents she would be willing to recommend him favorably. She recalled his mother as a lovely lady and his father as one of the most respected lawyers in the city of Scranton.

Given the lengths to which the FBI went in its investigation, one wonders whether Skinner was actually being considered for a Presidential appointment. Had a nonexistent "appointment" served as cover for an investigation of a high-profile behavioral scientist who had voiced opposition to activities of the congress? The answer remains unknown. The investigation continued.

An agent went to the New York City Public Library. He found four books by Skinner. They were *Science and Human Behavior* (1953), *Walden Two* (1948), *Schedules of Reinforcement* (1957), and *Cumulative Record* (1959). Whether the agent read all or parts of the books is not stated in the file, nor is the significance, if

any, of the books to the FBI. There was also reference to an unnamed fifth book, most likely the *Behavior of Organisms* (1938).

At the height of the 1961 investigation came an incident that may have intensified the FBI's suspicions about Skinner. Skinner traveled to Russia. On May 23, 1961 B. F. Skinner was in the Soviet Union, visiting laboratories with other American scientists. He would return on May 31. In a file letter dated a week later, J. Edgar Hoover wrote to White House Special Assistant Kenneth O'Donnel, a special assistant to the president, saying, in effect, that the bureau was continuing to check Skinner's character, loyalty and the like and that 18 other individuals had been, or would be, contacted for reference material about Skinner.

The extent of the FBI's interest in Skinner was, perhaps, revealed in another way in that memo. Hoover wrote that Skinner's activities during the year 1927, 34 years earlier, were still being checked. Also on that day, May 31, 1961, the file was further updated with an extensive biography. Numerous present and former colleagues, relatives and friends had been interviewed and their remarks had been recorded by FBI special agents all over the country.

A Harvard University psychologist described Skinner as, "a brilliant scientist, loyal and reliable and of excellent character. . . ." A second Harvard faculty member who had been acquainted with Skinner for more than 20 years stated that Skinner was, "honest and trustworthy and an individual whose character and loyalty and reputation and associates were above reproach."

A third Harvard faculty member (unnamed, perhaps Fred S. Keller) said that he had been acquainted with Skinner since 1931 and had never had any reason to question Skinner's character, loyalty, or reputation. He recommended Skinner very highly for a position of trust with the government.

Minnesota colleagues and former colleagues were interviewed as well. One stated that Skinner was recognized nationally as an outstanding psychologist. The summary report of these interviews concludes as follows:

Eighteen other individuals, including neighbors, social acquaintances, present and former professional associates were interviewed. They described Dr. Skinner as a loyal American of good character, reputation and associates. Those who know him well recommended him for a position of trust and confidence. (FBI file, May 31, 1961)

Ultimately Skinner, himself, was interviewed. The file indicates that Hoover wanted a "mature agent" to conduct the interview. Evidently the interview was not recorded. Only a one-page summary of its content was placed in the file.

The teletyped communication regarding that meeting, labeled "Urgent" and sent to Hoover, focused upon Skinner's activities when, as a young man, following his graduation from Hamilton College in 1926, he worked for approximately 9 months on a book manuscript having to do with management and labor relations in the coal industry. Skinner described this period extensively in his autobiography (Skinner, 1983). The agent wrote to Hoover that this book was written under the auspices of the Anthracite Commission, which Skinner recalled as being a federal agency. Skinner told the agent that while writing the book he had resided at his

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parents' home in Scranton. Then, in the spring of 1927, he had moved to New York City where he was employed by a publishing company in various capacities until the Spring of 1928, when he traveled through Europe on a vacation trip that lasted until he entered Harvard University.

The FBI's interest in Skinner's 9 months in Scranton 34 years earlier evidently had been put to rest. But the FBI continued to be concerned about his recent trip to the Soviet Union and, on the day after Skinner returned, June 1, 1961, one of Skinner's Harvard colleagues was interviewed. It was the colleague's understanding that the trip to Russia was sponsored by the Ford Foundation under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences. About 10 scientists had made the trip with a goal of studying laboratories and facilities used in research in the field of social sciences in the Soviet Union.

Much about Skinner that was positive, and nothing negative, had been brought to light. Even so, the FBI continued to be concerned about Skinner's activities decades earlier in 1926. Thus, a "SPECIAL INQUIRY" (significance unknown) was immediately initiated. A synopsis of its findings indicated that various former Scranton neighbors were unable to recall Skinner's having returned there for 9 months following his graduation from Hamilton College. The agent discovered that, "Their memories [by 1961] are somewhat clouded to account for a 9-month period of time in 1926."

On June 12, 1961 Hoover wrote a letter addressed to the White House saying, in essence, that little or no unfavorable information regarding Skinner could be found and that the investigation was concluded.

Two late additions to the 1961 investigation followed. On October 27, 1961 a memorandum was sent to the White House: "Investigation re Skinner favorable except that he was listed as a supporter of Dr. Linus Pauling's refusal before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee to disclose names of other scientists who circulated the petition concerning nuclear bomb testings." It remains unknown whatever became of the alleged potential Presidential appointment, if indeed one had ever been considered.

A few sputtering embers of the 1961 investigation continued to smolder. On November 3, 1961 a Boston special agent sent a memo to Hoover indicating that Skinner's China correspondence showed no intelligence activity. FBI agents were intercepting and reading the mail of a leading behavioral scientist. The implied threat to all of the sciences probably should be viewed as a threat to the culture on a par with the bugging of the conversations of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an FBI activity also taking place around the same time.

On November 30, 1961 the White House requested that a copy of the investigation's results be sent to the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. If ever a Presidential appointment had been considered, that memo would seem to provide at least some evidence of it.

This, the largest of the investigations of Skinner, was over. However, the FBI turned its attention to Skinner several more times over the next 10 years. In August 1963, a San Francisco agent somehow learned that Skinner was considering a visit to "Red" China.

The agent's report indicated that Skinner's Chinese contact was concerned that Chinese authorities might not allow Skinner to visit. The residual strength of FBI interest in Skinner quickly rebounded, even if briefly. "The above data is [sic] submitted to Boston for information purposes and Boston may desire to make the necessary checks to determine if SKINNER does actually intend on traveling to Red China to see [deleted] and be a guest of [deleted, Pei possibly] located in Peking." This finding was followed 2 months later in October 1963 by another report to Hoover that included copies of Skinner's passport photos and copies of passport checks regarding Skinner's 1961 trip to Russia, his trip to England in 1951, and for the much earlier trip to England in 1928. Then, as quickly as it had sprouted, the 1963 investigation wilted and died, evidently for lack of nourishing evidence.

The next file entry came in October 1968. It was a request to the FBI from the White House. Again Skinner was being considered for another alleged Presidential appointment whose details were unstated. Because extensive investigation of Skinner had been done earlier, the 1968 report was relatively short and straightforward. Its genesis may have been an October 26, 1967 advertisement in the *Cambridge Chronicle and Sun* in which the Cambridge Neighborhood Committee on Vietnam had placed an antiwar advertisement. Skinner had signed the ad. A similar ad had appeared in the *New York Times*. Skinner described it in his autobiography (Skinner, 1983): "And I had contributed a few dollars to help pay for full-page advertisements in the *New York Times* in which I joined hundreds of other scholars in protesting the war and urging that it be ended" (p. 307).

Perhaps FBI concerns about Skinner would have been put to rest had the agency known his feelings about the actions of some Harvard students who opposed the war, especially radical students who had forced deans out of their offices and who had rifled through private papers when they took over administration buildings. His thoughts at the time were that such activity was completely unacceptable. In a note to himself (Skinner, 1983) he wrote, "It is ridiculous to call that the mark of a democratic society. How do I explain it? I have been asked that question a dozen times recently. My answer must be clear in [Beyond] *Freedom and Dignity*" (p. 315).

It is important to attempt some critical analysis as to why J. Edgar Hoover's FBI was obsessed with communism and intellectuals, including behavioral scientists, to the virtual exclusion of other matters, such as organized crime. In New York, 400 agents investigated communism during 1959. Only four were assigned to organized crime. There were two reasons, according to Hoover biographer Anthony Summers (1993).

In 1990, aged eighty, New York mob boss Carmine Lombardozzi said (Mafia chief Frank) Costello and Edgar [FBI Director Hoover] "had contact on many occasions and over a long period. Hoover was very friendly towards the families. They took good care of him, especially at the races . . . they had an understanding. He would lay off the families, he would turn a blind eye. . . ." (p. 239-40)

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Another Mafia boss, Joseph Bonanno, articulated the principles of the game. It was a strict underworld rule, he said, never to use violent means against a law enforcement officer. "Ways could be found," he said in his memoirs, "so that he would not interfere with us and we wouldn't interfere with him." The way the Mafia found to deal with Edgar, according to several mob sources, involves his homosexuality. (p. 240)

On May 2, 1972 J. Edgar Hoover died. The winds of change were blowing toward mistrust of the government, toward outrage at investigations of unoffending citizens such as Dr. King. Skinner had been fully investigated and there was little else to be said about him by the FBI, although one other entry appears in his file. It is dated September 18, 1975. Evidently it was yet another alleged request for information from the White House for purposes unknown. A one-page file memo included this paragraph:

In 1966 a Harvard University official advised that the Pavlovian Society held a meeting in late February 1966, at Harvard. The society was composed of students or those friendly disposed to the teachings of the noted Soviet psychologist Pavlov who was universally famous for his experiments dealing with condition reflexes among animals. The host for the Harvard meeting was psychology professor Burrhus F. Skinner, who had become famous for, among other things, his experiment dealing with pigeons who are conditioned to play ping pong.

## Conclusions

Many questions arose as I reviewed the FBI file on B. F. Skinner. Was there ever any legitimate reason to open a file on him? What good came from monitoring his comings and goings, his phone calls, his mail? What did FBI agents think they might find out by chatting with elderly former neighbors who hadn't seen Skinner in 35 years? Was there ever a contemplated Presidential appointment? If so, would it have involved a position so sensitive that an arduous background check by the FBI was necessary? When a high profile behavioral scientist criticizes the government can an FBI investigation be expected? When that occurs what should be the reaction of the behavioral sciences community?

If nothing else, Skinner remained philosophical about intrusions by government into scientific and scholarly activities. Skinner had wondered when he might come under scrutiny by "administration bloodhounds" who would look into the government's practice of giving grant money to its critics. In his autobiography (Skinner, 1983) he described that concern and subsequent events:

Shortly after the publication of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* I had my answer. Congressman Cornelius E. Gallagher, speaking on the floor of the house, questioned the propriety of my NIMH Career Award. Should the government subsidize a person who is "advancing ideas which threaten the future of our system of government by denigrating the American traditions of individualism, human dignity and self-reliance?" Gallagher was proposing that congress create a "committee on privacy, human values and democratic institutions." The

committee would be “designed to deal specifically with the type of threats to our congress and our constituents which are contained in the thoughts of B. F. Skinner.” In particular it would limit the use of wiretapping by government investigators, an issue in which, it soon appeared, Gallagher had a personal stake: His name came up in a wiretap on the phone of a gangster named Joe Vicarelli, and within a year he was serving a jail sentence for nonpayment of income taxes. (p. 323)

Another vocal Skinner critic was the Vice President of the United States, Spiro Agnew. Skinner (1983) described it this way:

Another critic of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, higher in the government, was also only briefly there. At a meeting of the Illinois Agricultural Association, Vice President Spiro Agnew said that my book advocated “‘conditioning’ people to conform to a bizarre view of what society should be like—a utopia to be achieved through what the author calls a ‘technology of behavior’ . . . Dr. Skinner holds in effect, that man has neither soul nor intellect and is completely a creature of his environment. If you can control man’s environment, he theorizes, you can control his actions and his thoughts . . . Skinner attacks the very precepts on which our society is based . . .” (p. 323).

Notwithstanding his high sounding rebuke of Skinner, Agnew soon resigned the vice presidency after pleading no contest to charges that he had taken payoffs from building contractors shortly before becoming Vice President of the United States.

Skinner was deeply troubled that his ideas were misrepresented, and that such misrepresentation could only be detrimental to our culture and to individuals in it. Around the time of Agnew’s criticism, Skinner (1983) took time to reflect. In one of his notebooks he had recorded these thoughts, which serve as an upbeat note at this article’s conclusion:

Listening to the last part of *Das Rheingold* I read a few pages of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* and for the very first time felt resentment at my critics. It is a good book—a great book, I believe. Every sentence is as clear and honest as I could make it. There are no appeals to emotion. No rhetoric. No padding. No false support, such as mathematicizing, model-building, physiologizing, or brain analogies. I found myself weeping slightly, not in anger at the vicious criticism but in gratitude for having been able to write the book. That is something granted to very few men. (But why the metaphor of “granted”? By whom? Something only a few men succeed in doing—to be reinforced by the result. I have held a winning ticket.) (p. 323-324)



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