From Peoria to Peekskill:
The American Legion, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Perversion of Paul Robeson

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A teacher at Somerville High School in Princeton, New Jersey recalled a bright student named Paul Robeson, explaining that Robeson remained an “amazingly popular boy” because “he had the faculty for always knowing what is so commonly referred to as his ‘place.’” Robeson went on to exploit this faculty in a lifelong attempt to destroy this “place” which this teacher referred to, a cruel set of perimeters within which African-Americans were often forced to dwell. Years before the Federal Bureau of Investigation began their investigation of him, Robeson finished college and law school, then established himself in a career in singing and acting. He headlined international concert tours, starred in Broadway productions and Hollywood films. Robeson was truly gifted, and as both the son of a former slave and as an African-American living in the pre-Civil Rights Era, the spoils of his success seemed to only heighten his awareness of just how rare his circumstances were. Though his fame preceded his activism, it seems that the former was the mere means for the latter.

The FBI spied on Robeson from 1941 until his death in 1976. Robeson’s Communist sympathies were no mystery, but like many other American citizens in the tense post World War II atmosphere, his actual involvement with the Party along with his involvement in any illegal activity, was either exaggerated or imagined. Robeson’s life and career eclipsed in the early autumn days of 1949. A frightening series of riots organized by Westchester County veterans groups spoiled a scheduled concert in Peekskill, New York on August 27. Thousands picketed, ransacked the concert grounds, and attacked the concertgoers. Injuries inflicted by the rioters placed a dozen people in the hospital, but the fanatical display of hate and racism allowed the entire nation to experience trauma of the event. Organizers in turn cancelled Robeson’s initial performance in the interest of everyone’s safety, but it took place a week later under the protection of a volunteer security force made up of union workers of all ethnicities.
At Peekskill, veterans carried out outward expressions of great hostility and racism, and the Bureau’s stark unwillingness to investigate the violent protesters can be seen as an expression equally as disturbing. And while the symbolism of Peekskill is rich and infinite, the riot’s causes are easily taken as given: local Peekskill residents resisted the appearance of an unwanted speaker—unsurprising in a historical period defined by its racial and political tension. I, however, will attempt to demonstrate that this assessment simplifies—and possibly conceals—the forces behind the Peekskill Riots of 1949. The FBI files available for its investigation of Paul Robeson exhibit a strange and disappointing lack of coverage of this incident, but taken together with other first-hand accounts and related historical analyses, they indicate the possibility that the FBI was involved in the riots in a larger yet unseen way.

This paper intends to implicate the FBI in a considerable level of passive responsibility and complicity in the mass barbarism exhibited at Peekskill, as well as in the systematic neutralization of Robeson as a performer and activist in general. Special emphasis will be placed upon the consequences and implications of the American Legion Contact Program—the FBI’s secret recruitment of veteran informers throughout the country—which did not significantly aid the Bureau in intelligence operations, but instead founded a strategic relationship that allowed the FBI immeasurable influence over an organized group of compliant American citizens. In Peoria, Illinois 1947, the Legion pressured its local government to deny Robeson the use of public venues, an action that commenced the coming demise of Robeson’s career and political activism. But in 1949, the Bureau’s strategic inclusion of the Legion through its ongoing Contact Program paid off in a way far more valuable than the “intelligence” it was supposed to provide: in Peekskill, New York, the American Legion along with other veterans’ groups publicly, profoundly, and violently, chastised Robeson and his supporters. Their significant, deliberate
display of antagonism towards a “subversive” figure cannot be considered entirely unrelated to the flattering summons to assist the FBI through the American Legion Contact Program. By allowing citizens like those in the American Legion an opportunity to participate in its war against “subversives,” the FBI can be held accountable for compelling further, inexcusable participation like that which took place at the Peekskill Riots.

Born in 1898, Paul Robeson grew up in Princeton, New Jersey with a reverend father, schoolteacher mother, and six siblings. He excelled socially and academically at Somerville High in 1912, an unsegregated school. Robeson won a scholarship to Rutgers University, where he played football as an All-American, and won oratorical and academic prizes. After graduation, Robeson studied at Columbia Law School and married Eslanda “Essie” Goode. He made his theatrical debut in Eugene O’Neill’s *All Chillun Got Wings*. In 1925, Robeson sang southern spirituals all across the United States, making him the first Black soloist to headline a nationwide tour. Later that year, Robeson and his wife sailed to London where Robeson starred in another O’Neill play, *Emperor Jones*. In Europe, the Robesons befriended intellectuals like Emma Goldmann and Gertrude Stein. Most importantly, they enjoyed living as “respectable human beings,” unlike in the United States where racial prejudice prevented them from leading public social lives. In 1926, Florenz Ziegfeld gave Robeson a role in *Show Boat*, the famous production that features Robeson’s rendition of “Ol’ Man River.” In 1927, Robeson’s son, Paul Jr., was born.

In 1933, several newspaper interviews of Robeson revealed a new outspokenness and activism regarding his African descent. Enrolled at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, Robeson pursued the study of African linguistics—an endeavor he described as “homecoming.” In 1934, Robeson visited the Soviet Union upon filmmaker Sergei
Eisenstein’s invitation. As early as 1941, the FBI began to report Robeson as “a member of the Communist Party.” From 1943-1945, Robeson “crisscrossed the country in a whirlwind of rallies, concert appearances, meetings, dinners, and testimonials,” speaking about the nation’s “mission to defeat fascism with reminders about its obligation to combat oppression at home.”

In 1943, Robeson starred in the Broadway production of *Othello*, and reached his apex of fame and critical acclaim. In 1946, Robeson met with President Truman to ask for anti-lynching legislation, which ended in disappointment and even hostility. Within two weeks of this meeting, the House of Un-American Activities subpoenaed him. Not long after his HUAC citation, the Peoria, Illinois City Council passed a resolution that prevented Robeson from singing in their city. From 1946-1948 nearly every public place in the country prohibited Robeson to speak and sing, due to local officials’ disdain towards his communist affiliations. Robeson, however, continued his tour by speaking at church venues offered by mostly Black ministers.

In 1949, Robeson delivered his controversial Congress of the World Partisans of Peace speech in Paris. There he said, “It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country [the USSR] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind.”

Upon his return to the United States, Jackie Robinson and other prominent African-Americans testified against Robeson before the HUAC in response to his recent remarks in Paris. Not long after singing at an event now known as the Peekskill Riots, the State Department issued a “stop-notice” on Robeson’s passport in 1950. Then, though not permitted to leave the country to receive it, Robeson won the International Stalin Peace Prize in 1952. Robeson published *Here I Stand*, a manifesto-autobiography in 1958. In it, Robeson asserted that he was never involved in any sort of secret communist plot or organization. That same year, the Kent-Briehl Supreme
Court case allowed Robeson to successfully obtain a passport. He quickly left for Europe where his health further deteriorated and his depression deepened. In 1961, Robeson attempted suicide in Moscow. He was described to have had a complete mental breakdown, and that he thought that the responding doctors and his own wife were spies. He was hospitalized for years, undergoing electro-conclusive treatments in London and Berlin until he returned to the US to live in seclusion in 1963. Robeson died in 1976.

I.

The FBI files available for their investigation of Paul Robeson, including wiretaps and reports from what seem like intimate informants, prove the Bureau’s fervent interest in him. The FBI’s excessive surveillance of Robeson began in 1941 and continued until his death in 1976, but files become noticeably sparse for the dates surrounding the Peekskill Riots. Documents from August 2, 1949 from the Military Aide to the President state that Robeson will assist in a picket line at the White House in protest of the alleged racial segregation at the Bureau of Engraving in the Treasury Department. The next document available, dated September 12, 1949, is a correspondence from the SAC in San Francisco regarding a cancelled Robeson concert set for September 30. Just two letters from the public sent to the FBI in response to the riots—one of which will be addressed later in this paper—make up the only first-hand FBI documents regarding the Peekskill upheaval which spanned roughly from August 27 to September 5.

A summary of Paul Robeson’s whereabouts and actions dated January 9, 1950 compile a scant total of seven Peekskill accounts, five of which are newspaper excerpts, two of which are informant accounts. One informant reports that Robeson spoke at a rally sponsored by the Harlem Chapter of the Civil Rights Congress on August 31; the other informant reports that at a
meeting of a “[redacted] Communist Party, all comrades were told they must attend the Peekskill gathering on September 3 when Paul Robeson would appear.” This account also cites that it was the informant’s “impression that the Communist Party had intended to provoke the veterans and cause disturbances.”

Based on interpretation of the Paul Robeson files alone, the FBI would appear absent, even though their presence at Peekskill seemed to be known. Howard Fast, the chairman of the 1949 Peekskill concert, recalls being trapped by “a mob of about a thousand people” made up of “hoodlums joined by local police and Governor Thomas Dewey’s state troopers.” The mob trapped Fast and other concert organizers inside the picnic grounds, calling them “white niggers” and throwing rocks all through the night. Fast recalls, “Finally, an FBI car rolled in. They had been there all the time watching this and they finally decided to end it. So much for that first concert that never took place. It was a battle, not a concert.” Whether or not Fast did see the FBI at the concert, the sparse Peekskill files indicate a hard-to-believe lack of information regarding the planning of the Peekskill concert, while the logistics of other Robeson concerts and appearances in the files are thoroughly described. The newspaper and informant reports that appear three months after the Peekskill violence only further cloud the nature of the FBI’s involvement and knowledge of Peekskill.

II.

Existential or non-existent, the absent Peekskill files stir a compelling possibility that the FBI had a reason to conceal their observations—or perhaps involvement—in the event. Though the identity of the rioters was of no mystery to the public at this time, further investigation of the Robeson files and of other first-hand accounts seem to reveal increasingly complex motivations.
behind the violence. One of the only FBI files dated close to the Peekskill riots is a letter to the FBI dated September 6, 1949. It reads:

I think it’s about time the American Legion itself was investigated for un-American activities when it decides who shall sing songs and when and where, here in supposedly free America. I refer to the national disgrace of the Robeson affair near Peekskill NY this past week. It seems that Hitler (through the American Legion) has already won the war!  

Hoover responded to this letter in the next file, stating “Dear Madam: Your letter dated September 6, 1949, has been received and is being made a matter of record in the files of this Bureau.” A telling note at the bottom of his response cites “no identifiable information in Bureau files concerning correspondent,” demonstrating the Bureau’s suspicion of the opinionated correspondent. The Legion’s role remains a detail which the press pointedly acknowledged and the FBI pointedly ignored. In the September 5, 1949 issue of Time, an article on Peekskill reports that “hurling stones and brandishing clubs, the veterans charged… smashed the stage, set fire to the camp chairs lined up around it and burned the sheet music.” Another concert organizer recalled that a large crowd formed, “many wearing VFW and American Legion hats, lots drinking beer.” She said “they surrounded my car, began to rock it and were shouting things like ‘commie Jew bitch,’ ‘nigger lover,’ and other [epithets].” Almost two weeks after the Peekskill concert occurred, Time reported that the police seemed hardly interested in preserving order and that one policeman announced proudly: ‘we beat hell out of them. I got two myself.’” Time dismisses the mob’s attempt to lynch Robeson and calls the riots an “example of misguided patriotism and senseless hooliganism.”

III.

The dismissive Time quote epitomizes FBI director J. Edgar Hoover’s approach to racial violence, an approach guided by prejudice and reluctance. In later years, Burke Marshall, the
head of the Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice observed that “The FBI was grudging about doing anything” against the Ku Klux Klan or other initiators of racial violence. Marshall stated that “Mr. Hoover viewed the civil-rights activists as lawbreakers,” and that it wasn’t until the president ordered him to change his mind” that any progress would be made. 19

Robeson was intimately involved in two civil rights organizations—the Civil Rights Congress and the Council on African Affairs—listed on Attorney General Tom Clark’s List of Subversive Organizations. Robeson’s membership in these organizations not only increased the FBI’s interest in Robeson, but furthered its disinterest in investigating the crimes against him at Peekskill. In 1949, this event preceded the FBI’s pattern of systematic neglect towards the increased racial violence of the Civil Rights Movement. Not only did the FBI evade requests for an investigation of the Peekskill violence, but the Westchester Grand Jury—who did investigate the riots—concluded that Paul Robeson himself incited the violence by daring to sing there, and suggested that the “security force” of union workers that volunteered to protect him could be considered a private militia under the Constitution. But the injustices of Peekskill go far beyond that of the authorities’ indifference towards the hate-driven lawlessness. The exhibited letter along with first-hand accounts of the riots all point out the same, pardoned criminal: the American Legion.

Founded after World War I by Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., President Theodore Roosevelt’s eldest son, the American Legion gained recognition as an official American patriotic society by a Congress charter in 1919. As one of the oldest and largest veterans’ organizations in the country, the Legion takes credit for the attainment of many considerable American veterans’ benefits, most notably the GI Bill of Rights in 1944; a member of the Legion wrote the bill, Legionnaires promoted it and handled its legal presentation, and a former Legion Commander secured its
unanimous approval in the Senate. Though the Legion prides itself in its service to veterans along with its programs for youth and community needs, Legion posts have, on occasion, involved themselves in less admirable issue-politics and violence. In the town of Centralia, Washington, Legionnaires stormed a hall maintained by the Industrial Workers of the World, digressing into an event known as the “Centralia Massacre” of 1919. In the clash, IWW members killed four Legionnaires. The Legion, in response, kidnapped and lynched a single IWW member, Wesley Everett. Always flexing its nationwide presence, the Legion has proved itself as a proficient force for advocating selective change for selective American “interests.” Seth Rosenfeld’s recent exposé, Subversives, confirms the Legion’s involvement in the increasingly controversial politics of the University of California. When UC President from 1930-1958 and staunch anti-communist Robert Gordon Sproul implemented the infamous “Rule 17” in 1937, prohibiting students from using the campus for distributing political literature or hearing political speakers, he also enlisted the help of the American Legion to help investigate and intimidate student activists. In 1959, a question that asked “What are the dangers to a democracy of a national police organization, like the FBI, which operates secretly and is unresponsive to public criticism?” appeared on the UC application, a Legionnaire called the question “communist propaganda,” alerted the FBI, and ultimately compelled the UC Board of Regents to rescind the question.

The Legion’s concern with Paul Robeson emerged two years prior to the Peekskill Riots in an event less violent. In April 1947, the city of Peoria, Illinois denied Paul Robeson a public place to sing for the first time in his career. Days before a scheduled concert appearance, the Peoria City Council, passed a resolution that prohibited the appearance of “any speaker or artist who is an avowed propagandist for an Un-American ideology.” This resolution targeted Robeson
alone, passed in light of his recent House Committee on Un-American Affairs citation. Peoria Mayor Carl O. Triebel agreed momentarily to make City Hall’s assembly room available to Robeson, but “patriot” groups, including the American Legion forced him to withdraw the offer.  

On September 12, 1947, World War I veteran and Peoria Legionnaire Clifford A. Hazelwood, wrote to J. Edgar Hoover to complain that the American Legion had accused him of being a Communist. Hazelwood asked that the Bureau investigate him and the all African-American Legion Post he was the commander of so that he could be exonerated from the false accusations. Hazelwood explained that the Legion carried out its accusations in response to the advertisement for the upcoming Robeson appearance he published in the local newspaper which he was the editor of. Hazelwood asserted that he believed “Robeson had a right to sing to the people in this city.” The FBI files show that Hoover sent Hazelwood’s requests to the Attorney General, Tom C. Clark, who responded to Hazelwood on October 7, citing that “neither the Federal Bureau of Investigation nor the Department is empowered to initiate investigations in the absence of some indication that a violation of federal law is involved.” The response explains to Hazelwood that his letter “fails to disclose facts which would constitute such an offense” and regrets to say that “it is not possible to comply with your request,” an ironic appeal to “federal law” in light of Clark’s list of Subversive Organizations. This list, along with the charges brought against Hazelwood, offer examples of racism justified by fear of Communist subversion—racism rooted in the belief that African-Americans at this time were more vulnerable to communist manipulation. The Legion’s success at Peoria marked the start of a political mobilization among veterans that would culminate at the Peekskill Riots—dismissed as
a result of “misguided patriotism and senseless hooliganism”—but in fact a choreographed act of violence.

IV.

Given their context in the pre-Civil Rights era, Hazelwood and Robeson’s race surely played a role in the malice the Legion directed towards them. At the same time, their fates cannot be reduced to the unfortunate circumstances of rampant prejudice, and nor can the Legion’s role in both Peoria and Peekskill be reduced to mere coincidence. In 1985, Athan Theoharis presented the controversy surrounding the FBI’s recently released American Legion Contact Program policy file, which revealed the existence of a covert surveillance program wherein the FBI again relied on conservative activists to monitor dissent and insure internal order. During World War I, the FBI had a formal relationship with the American Protective League which operated as a private vigilante organization with a publicly sanctioned mission to investigate American citizens involved in “unpatriotic” trade union and antiwar activities. Unlike that with the APL, the American Legion Contact Program which Theoharris describes was established without public or congressional awareness. Theoharis regrets that neither the value nor the detriment of the program can be measured conclusively because in 1947 and then again in 1956, Hoover authorized the destruction of most files maintained by FBI field offices that recorded the information provided by Legion informers. The violence at Peekskill, however, appears as measurable proof itself. The Legion’s voluntary and zealous decision to organize a large-scale protest to prevent the Paul Robeson concert strongly demonstrates the program’s overlooked efficiency— not as an intelligence operation, but as a means to cultivate aggressive suspicion among militant Legionnaires. This aggressive suspicion, of course, incriminated people who shared and supported political views like those of Paul Robeson.
Raymond Moley’s *The American Legion Story*, an apologetic history of the organization, notes that the Legion hoped to use its eleven thousand posts to organize their own investigative staffs to counter subversion in 1940. Attorney General at the time Robert H. Jackson rejected this plan, and as a result, Legionnaires felt that they were being shut out of an important aspect of the national defense effort.\textsuperscript{28} Hoover proposed an altered program that same year which would enlist the Legion’s help until the program was officially terminated in 1966. The program allowed Special Agents in Charge to develop extensive Legion contacts as informers and informants. Considering the nationwide presence of the Legion, the FBI increased surveillance of dissident activities without having to seek increased appropriations from Congress to hire additional FBI agents.\textsuperscript{29} Though great ambiguity will always reside in the details of what the FBI explicitly expected of these Legion contacts, the secret yet official friendliness between the Bureau and countless former US soldiers scattered across the country appears to be an alarmingly purposive forging of the “internal order” which Theoharis suggested.

Theoharis concerns himself with the way in which the Contact Program increased the FBI’s autonomy and independence, and created what he calls a “quasi-autonomous internal security bureaucracy administered by individuals indifferent to the legal and constitutional restrictions central to a federal system of divided government.”\textsuperscript{30} Beyond Theoharis’ assessment, the implications that this program placed on citizens themselves must be considered. While the American Legion Contact Program did epitomize the inherent danger in unaccountable bureaucracy, it also gave private individuals the opportunity to conduct and justify their actions under the same unaccountability. Like the FBI, the Legionnaires who rioted at Peekskill exhibited criminal indifference towards their own “legal and constitutional restrictions” and the legal and constitutional rights of other citizens. The Legion’s pressure on the local Peoria
government along with its accusations against Hazelwood does not qualify as contributions to FBI intelligence. Instead, it seems almost as if the Legion provided the FBI with a service: overt action against figures which fit the description of the FBI’s ever-sought “subversive.”

Theoharis concedes that FBI officials received little information of value from their American Legion contacts and recognizes that the real advantage lay in the organization’s extensive contacts with conservative publicists and law-makers, as we saw in Peoria. In regards to its role in FBI intelligence, inspector C. W. Stein lamented in a 1954 internal file about the Legion Contact program’s “costliness, inefficiency and inaccuracy.” Stein recommended the program’s termination but made a point to assert that FBI agents accept as many speaking engagements as possible from the various Legion posts. In a 1965 evaluative memorandum, FBI Supervisor F.J. Baumgardner characterizes the Legion Contact Program as one of considerable value in the public relations field, deeming the Legion a numerically strong and powerful militant group and concludes that although the program should end, excellent relations with this group must be maintained. The purpose of the Legion Contact Program further transforms as Theoharis’ research confirms that FBI officials intentionally leaked information from FBI files to Legion publicists and officers as part of a broad-based program to ‘educate’ public opinion. Theoharis reveals the complicity, most notably, of FBI Assistant Director Cartha DeLoach—who simultaneously headed the FBI’s Crime Records Division and the American Legion’s Public Relations Commission. The Bureau’s increasing acknowledgement of the Contact Program’s ultimate failure coupled with its emphasis on continued, strategic relations with the Legion alludes to the true utility of their relationship—the infinite utility of welcome influence over thousands of private citizens. With the mere establishment of the Legion Contact Program, the FBI offered the Legion a role in the tangible
fight against subversion, persuading a structured group of patriotic citizens that they too had an obligation to smear and subdue those who fell under the FBI’s characterization of subversion—a characterization that seemed to be equivalent to dissent. Whether or not Legionnaires themselves could trace the origins of their motivations, their actions in Peoria and in Peekskill fulfilled this obligation.

V.

Of course, proving the FBI’s direct involvement at Peekskill and Peoria would require Bureau correspondences with local Legion leadership outlining a mutual scheme, although Legion Commander of Peekskill Post #274 did publicly declare that “our objective was to prevent the Paul Robeson concert and I think our objective was reached.” But without such correspondences, this paper aims to ultimately suggest that if the FBI did have an objective at Peekskill, Peoria, or both, it was an objective bigger and beyond the neutralization of Robeson. Because we know that Robeson never posed a threat of communist conspiracy or attempt at government overthrow, the FBI had to have found its larger task among the private opinions and political interests of American citizens as a whole. The Peekskill Riots can be seen as part of an attempt to frighten and stir the nation. Here, the Legion’s lurid brutality towards Robeson and his supporters—a significant act in pursuit of intimidation, not intelligence—becomes a necessarily public presentation of intolerance towards people with these private opinions, these political interests.

In *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex*, Tony Perucci cites the work of Oliver C. Cox, the African-American sociologist, who calls the practice of lynching a “pedagogical spectacle.” Perucci compares the violence at Peekskill to Cox’s analysis of
lynnings, claiming that it was not spontaneous, irrational mob behavior, but a “strategic enactment of ‘aristocratic’ power in disregard for the law.” At the first concert, protestors lynched Robeson in effigy, harassed concertgoers, and destroyed the concert equipment. At the rescheduled concert, protestors continued their harassment and proudly passed out bumper stickers that read “Wake Up America—Peekskill Did!” while veteran bands and parades were brought in to literally drown out Robeson’s performance. These assertions of power and intolerance indicate not only the deliberateness of the violence, but indicate that the Legion understood that Robeson and his supporters were guilty of something and needed to be stopped. Legionairres’ visible zeal and confidence in their barbarism and hostility further suggest that they must have felt that both the community and the authorities would approve—as if their actions were a form of vigilantism.

But like most “subversives” under FBI surveillance, Robeson committed no crime in vocalizing unpopular political opinions, just as there was no crime committed by the Peekskill concertgoers in their attempts to watch Robeson perform. Fittingly, Cox bridges the significance of Peekskill and lynchings in “the reproduction and normalization of fear rather than the ‘actual’ criminality of the accused.” At Peekskill the American Legion was not interested in finding out if Robeson or the concertgoers were really communists; they were interested in terrorizing and humiliating them. Cox contends that “the purpose of lynching is not particularly the elimination of a dangerous individual from society; rather the ideal is to make the occasion as impressive as possible to the whole population.” And thus, like the bumper sticker that declared “Wake Up America—Peekskill did,” the riots themselves seemed to articulate a statement. Both messages suggest that Peekskillites prided themselves in rising to what they felt to be their responsibility: quelling Robeson and his supporters. The question is how these citizens
developed this responsibility. Perucci uses the Peekskill Riots as an example of the “quasi-militarization of civilian life” and goes on to identify what seems to be the FBI’s unseen contribution to the Peekskill violence: “requisite fear in Americans in order to compel voluntary participation in Cold War theatricals.” 38

In order to prevent the performance planned for August 27, 1949 in Peekskill, New York, the American Legion had to organize a performance of their own. The performance, of course, took the form of a large, harrowing series of riots and acts of violence. Inescapably unclear is the FBI’s role in this counter-performance, but inescapably suspect it remains. As Theoharis suggested, the Legion Contact Program provided the FBI with literally immeasurable influence over a network of “conservative activists,” and possibly most importantly, over a critical mass of private citizens not bound to the same limitations as federal agents are bound to. The FBI, a national security agency created to protect American democracy, perverted its purpose in both its American Legion Contact Program and its investigation of Paul Robeson. Even after several internal recommendations to terminate, the Legion Contact Program lived on so that the FBI could engage the participation of citizens protected by democracy, in order to circumvent democratic protections altogether, and impede on other citizens’ rights in its own interests.

Donning their Legionnaire hats and accompanied by marching bands and parades, Peekskill rioters took pride in their actions in upstate New York that autumn of 1949. Not only were they unafraid of getting caught, but they were convinced of their patriotism. They assembled as if it was their duty to be there, and acted as if they were defending their country in battle. Even out of critical context, the Peekskill Riots astound us with their explicit displays of hate and prejudice along with the federal authorities’ subsequent indifference. And in light of the conspicuous absence of FBI files for this considerable act of domestic terror, the research for this
paper began as a search not for these files—but for the FBI itself, along with its role in such an act—which was ultimately found in the revelatory work of Athan Theoharis concerning the American Legion Contact Program, invaluable to the arguments made here. We must concede with Theoharis, in that the full scope of the American Legion Contact Program is indeterminable, and measuring its every consequence would be an arduous if not impossible task. No historical study can factualize the assessment that the FBI—through the Legion—waged war against Paul Robeson and his supporters. At the same time, it is naïve to ignore the Bureau’s palpable yet passive provocation of the riots. Over a twenty-six year period, the FBI included thousands of American veterans in its already debatable process of fighting communist subversion, condoning if not encouraging citizens to impede upon the rights of other citizens. The Contact Program’s purpose transformed into what appeared to be a mere means of influence over “conservative activists,” along with “conservative publicists and local lawmakers.” Robeson’s cancelled Peoria and Peekskill concerts should be seen as poignant moments wherein this influence dispensed startlingly significant progress in its passive yet systematic attempt to suppress political freedom.

Under the Contact Program, the American Legion—which today, boasts almost 3 million members with 14,900 posts throughout the United States—served as a nationwide network which the FBI could turn to explicitly for intelligence, and implicitly for unlimited opportunities to cultivate strategic intolerance towards presumed subversives throughout the country. The FBI’s continued intimacy with the Legion must be viewed with the possibility that the FBI considered the relationship advantageous to its permanently overarching task to conscribe and censor the exchange of ideas in American society, in this case, manifested in its attempts to literally prevent people from hearing what Paul Robeson had to say. The tragic irony of Clifford A. Hazelwood, a true victim of the Legion Contact Program, can be found in his desperate
appeal to the FBI—the very agency which indirectly caused the communist accusations brought against him. The Legion pointed authorities to Hazelwood, a Legionnaire himself, after he published an advertisement for the upcoming Paul Robeson concert. The Legion interpreted Hazelwood’s support of Paul Robeson as subversion—a harsh and bigoted judgment that suggests even more about its perception of Paul Robeson himself. In reference to Hazelwood’s dilemma, Robeson must have been seen to have embodied communism, thus making Peekskill a battleground upon which the Legion could, in a way, fight communism.

Robeson, though fully aware of his own innocence, never asked the FBI for exoneration like Hazelwood did. Just as his high school teacher once said, Paul Robeson had the faculty of “knowing his place,” and in this case, that place took its shape as the mutual adversary of the FBI and the American Legion. In an address in response to the Peekskill Riots, Robeson declared, “They tell us to stay in our place. Well, I’m staying in mine—out here with the field hand—the little fellow, the guy who gets pushed around.” He demanded, “Where will the next Peekskill be? What new battle ground have the reactionary police and those behind them selected?” Robeson acknowledged his helplessness and framed it as part of a collective struggle against his own abstraction of an oppressive American aristocracy, which he considered the Legion and the FBI to be fundamentally a part of. Though it has not been the focus of this paper, perhaps it was this inescapable oppression he experienced in the United States that turned him to communist ideals. In the same post-concert address, Robeson asserted that if Peekskill was a battle, he certainly fought back.

They revile me, scandalize me, and try to holler me down on all sides. That’s all right. It’s okay. Let them continue. My voice topped the blare of the Legion bands and the hoots of the hired hoodlums who attempted to break up my concert…It will be heard above the screams of the intolerant, the jeers of the ignorant pawns of the small groups of the lousy rich who would drown out the voice of a champion of the underdog.
The people and institutions that promised Robeson freedom and security not only failed him—but turned on him. Caught in the massive web which the American Legion and the FBI built upon their mutual relationship and wove all across the United States, Paul Robeson found himself not only alienated in his own country, but criminalized in the use of his own freedoms. At the very least, the Federal Bureau of Investigation won a disturbing yet historical victory in its war on “subversion” at the Peekskill Riots by transforming this war into an obligatory intolerance to dissent, and then systematically summoning this convenient perversion through its American Legion Contact Program.

2 Ibid., 170.
3 Ibid., 253.
4 Ibid., 255.
5 Ibid., 277.
6 Ibid., 338.
7 Ibid., 342.
8 Ibid., 497.
9 Letter, Director, FBI to Military Aide to the President, Washington, D.C., August 2, 1949, PAUL ROBESON, Bureau File 100-12304-156.
10 Report, New York, January 9, 1950, PAUL ROBESON, Bureau File 100-12304-184 (p. 9).
12 Ibid., 66.
13 Letter, [sender name and address redacted], to FBI Headquarters, September 6, 1949, PEEKSKILL RIOTS, Bureau File 100-12304-159.
14 Letter, Director, FBI, to [recipient name and address redacted] September 12, 1949, PEEKSKILL RIOTS, Bureau File 100-12304-159.
21 Ibid., 99.
24 Letter, Clifford A. Hazelwood, Peoria, Illinois, to Director, FBI, PAUL ROBESON, Bureau File 100-12304-84.
27 Ibid., 271.
30 Ibid., 286.
31 Ibid., 273.
32 Ibid., 280-281.
33 Ibid., 283-284.
37 Ibid., 143-144.
38 Ibid., 152.
40 Ibid., 229.
41 Ibid., 230.
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