

## 1948-1969

### Fred Hampton

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Early in the morning of December 4th, 1969, Chicago police raided the home of a man named Fred Hampton and fatally shot him while he slept beside his girlfriend, Deborah, who was then nine months pregnant with their son. Only 21 at the time, Hampton had already been named the chairman of the Illinois Black Panthers and deputy chairman of the national party.



He was an extraordinary public speaker, with a prodigious understanding of the forces that oppress black Americans, and was committed to cooperating with other groups to bring about systemic social change. To the FBI under President Nixon, he was deemed a “radical threat.” Even before he became president, Nixon launched a campaign to vilify black Americans and justify raiding their homes unprovoked, incarcerating them in mass numbers, and even killing them under the pretense of “protecting the public.”

“The whole problem is the blacks,” Nixon once told his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman. “The key is to devise a system that recognizes that while not appearing to.”

Hampton’s death became the first truly high-profile case of police brutality in American history, not because it was the first to occur, but because new, lightweight, handheld cameras enabled filmmakers to expose the lies behind the Chicago Police Department’s official narrative.

At a news conference after Hampton’s death, State’s Attorney Edward V. Hanrahan said “the immediate, violent, criminal reaction of the occupants in shooting at announced police officers emphasizes the extreme viciousness of the Black Panther party. So does their refusal to cease firing at the police officers when urged to do so several times.”

A T.V. reporter at the scene reiterated the same version of events: After describing Hampton’s home as nothing but an arsenal of weapons, the reporter quoted a sergeant in the raid saying it was “15 minutes of hell, and a miracle. A miracle because not one policeman was killed, a miracle because not more policemen were shot.” The police were armed with a 45-caliber submachine gun and two shotguns.

But when the filmmakers Howard Alk and Mike Gray gained access to Hampton’s apartment, on the 2300 block of West Monroe Street, they found no evidence of gunshots from the room where Hampton was sleeping.

Obviously there were no smart phones in 1969, and police brutality went unchecked virtually without exception. Alk and Gray's 1971 film, *The Murder of Fred Hampton*, changed that. The 90-minute film begins with footage of Hampton when he was alive, speaking to crowds, articulating the Black Panthers' mission, and establishing the terms of the fight against injustice. The film is worth watching for those speeches alone. More than 50 years later, Hampton's words could not be more resonant.

The second half of the film draws on the techniques of investigative journalism to help uncover exactly what happened that December morning in 1969: Hampton's death was not only a murder, it was premeditated. At a house dinner the night before, he was drugged by an FBI informant who had infiltrated the Illinois chapter of the Black Panthers, to ensure that Hampton would not wake up during the raid.

In 1994, another of Nixon's co-conspirators in the Watergate scandal named John Erlichman affirmed Nixon's racist agenda to the journalist Dan Baum. Erlichman told Baum that "the Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did."

Pause. Read those last three sentences again: "We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? *Of course we did.*"

As the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis proves, we still have a long way to go before we attain anything close to justice in this country. But we can work toward it, every day. And we can start by listening to Fred Hampton.

#### **Source**

"The Murder of Fred Hampton' Still Has Much to Teach, Watch it Here," by David Alm, June 3, 2020, [forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com)