

# The Guardian

## How the FBI used a gossip columnist to smear a movie star

**Duncan Campbell on a story that is only now emerging after 30 years**

**Duncan Campbell**

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More than 30 years ago, a small item appeared in a gossip column in the Los Angeles Times which suggested that a prominent American actress, who was married to a well-known European, was expecting the child of a leading Black Panther. The story was taken up by Newsweek, which identified the actress as Jean Seberg and her husband as Romain Gary, the French writer and diplomat. The Black Panther was Ray "Masai" Hewitt, the party's minister of information.

Seberg was deeply upset by the story, gave birth prematurely and the child died after two days. The actress later committed suicide having never, according to her friends, fully recovered. Now, finally, the whole story of how a malicious and untrue story was successfully planted by the FBI and its director J Edgar Hoover is emerging.

Seberg was an unknown teenage student from Iowa when she was chosen by director Otto Preminger to play the title role in the 1957 film of Saint Joan. Although it was not a hit, Seberg went on to find critical success in such films as *Breathless*, *Lilith* and *Bonjour Tristesse*. She also appeared in the 50s British comedy, *The Mouse That Roared*. During the 60s, she married Gary, and became increasingly involved in radical American politics, most notably as a supporter of the Black Panther party, which Hoover was then describing as the greatest threat to internal security in the US.

The FBI, as has since emerged, was deeply involved in covert operations to damage or disrupt radicals it classified as dangerous, whether they were leading protagonists such as Martin Luther King or minor players such as Seberg, who had just given \$10,500 to the Panthers. Seberg's phone was tapped. When, in 1970, the FBI discovered that she was pregnant, it decided to see if it could spread a story through the gossip columns that the real father was not Gary but Hewitt.

An FBI memo, later disclosed under the Freedom of Information Act and headed Counterintelligence Program Black Nationalist Hate Groups, Racial Intelligence - Black Panther Party, was sent to Hoover himself. "Bureau permission is requested to publicise the pregnancy of Jean Seberg, well-known movie actress, by [deleted] Black Panther party [deleted] by advising Hollywood gossip columnists in the Los Angeles area of the situation," it read. "It is felt that the possible publication of Seberg's plight could cause her embarrassment and serve to cheapen her image with the general public."

The memo suggested that a letter from a fictitious person in which the rumour would be planted be sent to gossip columnists. Hoover approved the tactic, although he advised waiting until Seberg was visibly pregnant so that she would not suspect that her phone had been tapped.

The first paper to bite was the LA Times whose gossip columnist, Joyce Haber, duly ran the story under the headline of Miss A Rates as Expectant Mother. Although the story did not name Seberg, it gave enough clues for people to identify her: "a handsome European picked her for his wife . . . the outgoing Miss A was pursuing a number of free-spirited causes among them the black revolution . . . According [to] all those really 'in' international sources, topic A is the babe Miss A is expecting and its father. Papa's said to be a rather prominent Black Panther."

Haber's column was syndicated across the US in more than 100 newspapers. It was not long before Newsweek picked it up and printed Seberg's name.

She was devastated. Her husband wrote a furious article in the French press and Seberg took an overdose of sleeping pills but survived. That August, she gave birth to a premature baby girl who died two days later. At the funeral, Seberg opened the coffin to show that the baby was white and therefore her husband's. Her mental health deteriorated and she made other suicide attempts on the anniversaries of her baby's death. Finally, in 1979, she was found dead in a car in Paris having taken an overdose of barbiturates. She was 40, and by then married for a fourth time.

Now, Jim Bellows, features editor at the LA Times when the story was run, has written his memoirs, *The Last Editor*, and explained in his old paper how the smear happened. The paper's then metropolitan editor, Bill Thomas, had been told the story by one of his reporters. Thomas duly wrote a note to Haber suggesting that Seberg was pregnant by Hewitt and intending to have the baby. "I don't know if you care, but this comes from a pretty good source," he wrote on his note to Haber. Thomas now says, "the way it was told to me by my sources was that the FBI actually believed she was pregnant by this Black Panther . . . I wasn't in the business of killing off informative tips of any kind."

Bellows says now that it was "a big mistake" to run the story unchecked and he regrets that he did not try for a reaction from Seberg or someone close to her. In his own defence, he says that Haber had originally put Seberg's name in the story but he had removed it for libel reasons. Nevertheless, it was clear to anyone in the business who Miss A was. Haber was fired in 1975 because her material was by then deemed to be too inaccurate. She died in 1983 without revealing her source for the story.

Such a story seems unlikely to appear in today's LA Times. There are still gossip columns in the paper: *City of Angels*, which appears in the Living section, mainly covers events such as opening night parties and is mostly benign; the syndicated columnist Liz Smith, who appears daily, is also mainly complimentary to the stars she mentions and is not featured prominently in the paper.

Gossip as a staple of daily papers is much less prominent in the US than in Britain. Although the supermarket tabloids carry a weekly dose of often inaccurate material about celebrities, the daily newspapers in most cities are far less fixated on celebrity than their British counterparts.

When Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman parted company, for instance, virtually every British newspaper, including the broadsheets, ran the news as a front-page story. In the LA Times, it was tucked away over a few paragraphs on an inside page of a feature section as a simple statement from the actors' publicist. The New York Times ignored the story. But the revelations about Jean Seberg serve as a reminder that the cheery "too good to check" motto of many gossip columnists can sometimes have deadly consequences.

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