

Wiretaps Reveal Dr. King Feared Rebuff on Nonviolence

BY BEN A. FRANKLIN
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 14 — Newly released transcripts of wiretapped telephone conversations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. show that days before his assassination in 1968 he was despairing about his standing as a civil rights leader.

He said he thought a planned civil rights march in Washington was doomed and his leadership position had been damaged by vandalism that broke out at a Memphis civil rights march he led in March 1968. His critics, he claimed, were saying "Martin Luther King is dead, he's finished, his nonviolence is nothing."

The transcripts of wiretaps conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, obtained by a New York scholar, also disclose that in 1967 Dr. King gave serious, if wavering, consideration to a "symbolic" campaign for the Presidency to dramatize his opposition to the Johnson Administration's conduct of the war in Vietnam.

According to the transcripts, the F. B. I. overheard Dr. King explain later that he had agreed to be detected from the Presidential candidacy by his advisers' fear of alienating white financial contributors to the civil rights cause who also supported the war.

Periods of Self-Doubt

The transcripts confirmed previous reports by aides and associates that Dr. King periodically suffered bouts of gloom and self-doubt in his position as a leader of the civil rights movement.

The conversation in which Dr. King discussed his doubts took place shortly after black youths participating in a nonviolent march he led in Memphis on March 28, 1968, broke ranks and vandalized downtown stores. The next day President Johnson, in remarks that were widely interpreted as a rebuke to Dr. King, offered Federal satellites against what the President called the "senseless violence" of "looting and burning."

These events took place a week before Dr. King's assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968, and a month before the scheduled start of his planned nonviolent mass protest in Washington.

to be called the Poor People's Campaign. The afternoon after the unsuccessful march in Memphis the F. B. I. transcribed a conversation in which Dr. King, shocked and demoralized by his inability to control the young Memphis marchers, declared, "I think our Washington campaign is doomed."

Delayed by Dr. King's death, a seven-week Poor People's encampment by thousands on the Mall in Washington was held from mid-May through June 1968, but the desired anti-poverty legislation stalled in Congress.

Critics 'Vindicated'

In his concern over violence in Memphis, Dr. King was overheard a week before his death remarking to Stanley D. Lerman, a New York lawyer and businessman, that his critics would not be "vindicated." He included among them others in the black community — Roy Wilkins, then the executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Richard Rustin, president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, and Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Democrat of Manhattan. Despite Mr. Lerman's counseling details that his loved one was tarnished, Dr. King went on.

"All I'm saying is that the Roy Wilkins, the Bayard Rustin and the others — and there are many of them — and the Negroes that are influenced by them — they read in the newspapers, and Adam Clayton Powell, for another example, you know, their point is 'This right, Martin Luther King is dead, he's finished; his nonviolence is nothing, his only hope is to let's face it, my dear, a great public relations set-back where my image and my leadership are concerned.'

Andrew Young, one of Dr. King's top aides who is now Mayor of Atlanta, said today in a telephone interview: "That was really the low period in his life. One thing about Martin, though, was that Stan was one of the few people that he could really let down his hair with. As low as his mood would be,

and I could see it — he wouldn't talk that way to me. But when you hear about how extremely depressed he was, it's a very sad set of violence to look at a kind of personal repudiation," Mr. Young continued, "we tried to tell him how unrealistic that was in a society that was so really geared toward violence. But he just felt that the only way America could survive was with non-violence. When something went wrong, it was not just his own personal loss, but it was almost a creeping repudiation of the nonviolent movement."

Conflicting Feelings on Vietnam

As far back as September 1965, the transcripts reveal, Dr. King felt overburdened by the demands of the civil rights movement and pressures on him to publicly oppose America's involvement in the Vietnam war.

In a conversation with Mr. Young, Mr. Lerman and others that was transcribed by the F. B. I., Dr. King said: "I don't really have the strength to fight this issue and keep my civil rights fight going. The deeper you get involved in this, you have to go, and I am already overextended and almost completely exhausted."

Dr. King's conversations are contained in thousands of pages of unsorted F. B. I. documents obtained by David J. Garrow, an associate professor of political science at City College of New York and the City University of New York Graduate Center, under the President of Information Act.

The F. B. I.'s secret electronic surveillance of Dr. King, through telephone taps at his home and offices in Atlanta and by hidden microphones in hotel rooms when he traveled, had been lifted at its published reports in the mid-1960's. Dr. King was generally aware of the wiretapping but dismissed its importance as being on the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The broad scope of the F. B. I. surveillance was confirmed in 1975 and 1976 in Congressional testimony on F. B. I. abuses under J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the bureau for 29 years until his death in 1972. Secret F. B. I. documents disclosed then showed that Mr. Hoover

and his top aides had sought to use the bureau to destroy Dr. King by, among other tactics, circulating transcripts made by Federal agents through microphones hidden in hotel rooms in which the civil rights leader engaged in personal encounters with women.

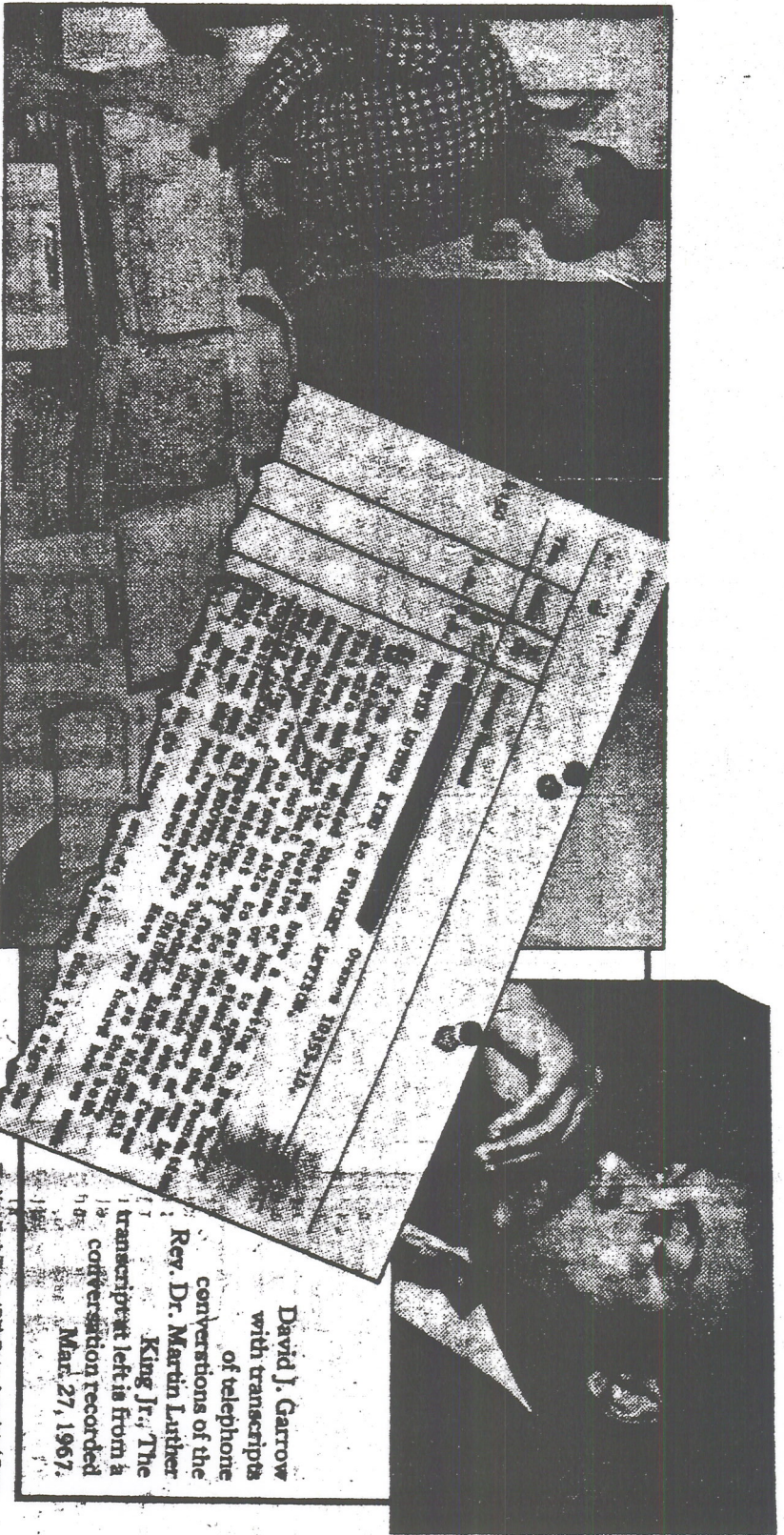
Because much of the bureau's covert file on Dr. King is under a court order that will keep its contents sealed in the United States Archives until the year 2027, no verbatim transcripts of wiretaps on Dr. King's home or office telephone or from the secretly bugged hotel rooms can be made public under the Freedom of Information Act. The Federal court seal was obtained in 1977 in the settlement of a lawsuit brought by Dr. King's former aides.

The documents made public by Mr. Garrow were the fruit of diligence and a stroke of scholarly luck in collecting material for his new book on Dr. King, "Beating the Cross," to be published next year by Morrow. Mr. Garrow, 32 years old, is the author of two earlier books on the Southern Christian Leadership Conference under Dr. King, "Pretext at Selma" and "The F. B. I. and Martin Luther King Jr."

By focusing his requests for the F. B. I. files on lesser-known King associates, Mr. Garrow believes he has, to some extent, bypassed the 1977 court order by gaining access to transcripts of those with whom Dr. King had frequent telephone conversations and whose wires also were tapped.

Warnings of F. B. I. Taps

The author's most fruitful requests were for the F. B. I. file of wiretaps on the home and office telephones of Mr. Lerman, an influential confidant of Dr. King. Mr. Hoover and Robert F. Kennedy, who as Attorney General gave initial approval to plans to wiretap Dr. King, believed that Mr. Lerman was a secret member of the American Com-



David J. Garrow with transcripts of telephone conversations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The transcript left is from a conversation recorded Mar. 27, 1967.

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numist Party, a Hialeah that Mr. Levison repeatedly denied before his death in 1979 and that Dr. King refused to believe.

The Levison transcripts confirm that even after private warnings to Dr. King by friendly Government officials that his contacts with Mr. Levison were being monitored by the F.B.I. and that charges of a "Communist connection" could be damaging to the civil rights movement, Dr. King consulted Mr. Levison frequently by telephone. For a time Dr. King sought Mr. Levison's counsel through intermediaries, but the telephones of the go-betweens were tapped too.

The files also reveal the huge cost in

manpower and the numbing tedium involved in the F.B.I. telephone surveillance. The Levison transcripts show that for more than seven years, round-the-clock teams of bureau personnel recorded and typed up such intelligence as Mr. Levison's consultations with his wife about New York restaurants and movies at which he would meet her after work.

In an interview, Mr. Garrow said he had received 180,000 of transcripts and other documents from the F.B.I. and that requests for 150,000 more were still being processed. The F.B.I.'s surveillance of Mr. Levison, which continued for a year and a half after Dr. King's death, was authorized by Mr. Kennedy

and was continued by his successors as Attorney General, Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, Ramsey Clark and John N. Mitchell.

The possibility of an antiwar Presidential candidacy by Dr. King was urged upon him by such peace activists as Dr. Benjamin Spock.

After months of indecision, as revealed in the transcripts, over whether his role as a "moral leader" required him to oppose the war more aggressively, Dr. King finally declared at a news conference in Atlanta on April 25, 1967, that he had no interest in being a candidate.

By then Mr. Johnson had already

been given F.B.I. reports of Dr. King's confession to his advisers, including Mr. Levison, that to preserve the confidence of the political center he would have to avoid linking the civil rights movement with the increasingly strident and radical politics of the anti-war activists.

Dr. King was overheard by the F.B.I. describing his proposed Presidential candidacy as an effort "to punish" Mr. Johnson for his conduct of the Vietnam war by robbing him of black votes.

But according to Harry C. McPherson, a top Johnson aide who is now a Washington lawyer, the equivocal plan for a King-Johnson opposition was never regarded as a threat by Mr. Johnson.