

# F.B.I. Taps Called Plan to Discredit Dr. King

By WALLACE TURNER

A former agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation says that in the nineteen-sixties the bureau used material gained in an electronic surveillance of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in an apparent effort to undermine the late civil rights leader's support among his white backers.

The former agent also said that many newspapermen were urged to write articles disclosing intimate details of Dr. King's personal life—details to be supplied by the bureau after they were picked up in the telephone taps. These taps of Dr. King were said to have been much more widespread than had previously been reported.

The former agent, Arthur Murtagh, a 51-year-old lawyer now practicing in Constable N.Y., told The New York Times in an interview that important figures in the F.B.I. even tried to persuade community leaders in Atlanta that they should not attend a banquet that was held to honor Dr. King after he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. The persuasion was said to have included a warning that the bureau had derogatory information about Dr. King that might eventually embarrass those who attended the banquet.

## Tap Disclosed in 1968

Mr. Murtagh retired from the bureau in September, 1971, after 21 years of service, including 11 years in the Atlanta office. His account to The Times has been confirmed in interviews with various independent sources.

The fact that Dr. King's telephone was tapped has been well established. It was disclosed in 1968 while Senator Robert F. Kennedy campaigned for the Democratic Presidential nomination.

After Mr. Kennedy was murdered in early June, 1968, his former associates said that the tap was installed when Mr. Kennedy, as Attorney General, acquiesced in 1963 to J. Edgar Hoover's repeated demands for authority to tap. Mr. Hoover argued that Dr. King had associations with subversive groups who sought to use the civil rights movement against the best interests of the United States.

In 1969, the tap on Dr. King was further described briefly in court hearings involving the draft violation conviction of Muhammad Ali, then the world heavyweight boxing champion.

These brief glimpses made clear that the tap was instituted in October, 1963, and was continued at least into 1965. There were suggestions that it lasted until 1968, when Dr. King was assassinated, and the bureau has never given any information about the tap.

"Martin Luther King became the No. 1 bureau office as far as the Atlanta office was concerned," Mr. Murtagh said. The former agent was a member of the 15-man group assigned to the security squad and it was this group that



The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. leaving the office of J. Edgar Hoover after conferring with the F.B.I. director on Dec. 1, 1964. Dr. King had requested the meeting.

conducted the electronic surveillance of Dr. King, Mr. Murtagh said.

The former agent, who describes himself as one of a half-dozen liberals who survived in the bureau to reach retirement age, said he is now preparing his notes to write a book on his experiences.

Mr. Murtagh said he retired from the bureau on the first day he was eligible. He was very critical of the bureau in the interviews, which were held at his home.

He said that he could not offer proof, but that he believed completely that Mr. Hoover, as bureau director, sought the authority to tap Dr. King's phones in order to get information to destroy the civil rights leader and silence his criticism of the bureau's alleged failures to investigate the complaints of Negroes against white law enforcement officers in Albany, Ga., from 1961 to 1963.

Mr. Murtagh would not name agents who took part in the surveillance. He said that he believed they had been taking orders, and that to name them now would cause them undeserved embarrassment. He said he had not taken part in the surveillance because he had told the supervisor in charge that he believed the tap was illegal.

When asked to explain how he could enforce such a refusal in a highly disciplined organization such as the F.B.I., Mr. Murtagh said that he had become known as a critic of some activities, and that his work in the Atlanta office was valuable to the agents assigned to direct the office.

He was the paymaster, and "control," for a network of "undercover informers who were in place" in black organiza-

tions that were growing in importance at that time. He said, for example, that he was able to learn almost anything he wanted to know about the operation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which Dr. King headed.

## 5,000 Conversations

Mr. Murtagh said he once challenged the agent who ran the surveillance to say whether there was justification for the contention that Dr. King was involved with subversives—the justification for the telephone tap. He quoted the agent as replying, "I would try to tell others that there was, but I wouldn't try to tell it to you."

Mr. Murtagh also said that the extent of the electronic surveillance was never well understood outside limited circles within the bureau. He said that it went on for at least three years, and that more than 5,000 telephone conversations were monitored.

Previously published accounts of the telephone tap have indicated that only three telephones were involved—those in Dr. King's home, at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference offices in Atlanta, and at an office in New York that was used by the person the Mr. Hoover had argued was subversive attempting to mislead Dr. King. It was this contention that caused Robert Kennedy to approve the telephone tap.

Mr. Murtagh said that telephones all over the United States were tapped, and that was not uncommon for the Atlanta bureau to discover that it had monitored a call, and that the other end of the call had been monitored by a different listening post.

"The surveillance was massive and complete," Mr. Murtagh said. "He couldn't wiggle. He had him."

Sources in Washington confirmed the broad outlines of Mr.

Murtagh's description. These sources confirmed that when Dr. King left Atlanta, the F.B.I. electronic surveillance went with him, and that his telephones in hotels in other cities were tapped, with reports of information derived from these taps fed into Washington as was the Atlanta data.

In another part of his interview, and again in a way that avoided the use of names, Mr. Murtagh said that after Dr. King won the Nobel Peace Prize, the bureau made a well-orchestrated attempt to undermine the success of the banquet that was held in Dr. King's honor in Atlanta.

The former agent said that persons who understood his critical attitude toward the bureau's activities in the civil rights field told him that an agent from the Atlanta office and one of the top officials from Washington headquarters had called on two religious leaders and on the late Ralph McGill, editor of The Atlanta Constitution, to attempt to persuade them not to attend the banquet.

Mr. Murtagh again would not name the agent or the headquarters official. But he said that the morning after the Washington man arrived at the Atlanta office, the agent said to Mr. Murtagh, "We're going to get him today. Hoover is going to take care of King today."

## No Attack by Editor

Mr. Murtagh said that the bureau had agents assigned to be the contact men for persons such as newspaper editors, and that the man he quoted had been the contact for Mr. McGill. This agent took the Washington man to see Mr. McGill and the next day told Mr. Murtagh, "I guess McGill will be taking care of King." But the editor made no attack on the civil rights leader.

While the death of Mr. McGill and the refusal of Mr. Murtagh to name the agents made it impossible to corroborate his story, an interview with Eugene Patterson, former editor of The Constitution, produced a recollection that parallels the story told by Mr. Murtagh.

Mr. Patterson, now president and publisher of The St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times, said that in the spring of 1964, he was called on by an F.B.I. agent, whom he would not name.

"You people have been giving support to Martin Luther King," Mr. Patterson quoted the agent as saying. "Don't you owe it to your readers to tell them what kind of man he is? Our information is that while he postures as a great moral leader, he is running around with women. Don't you think your readers ought to know this?"

"I told him we didn't run a keyhole-peeking newspaper," Mr. Patterson remembered saying. "I told him that kind of thing had nothing to do with the civil rights movement."

## Urged Coverage

Mr. Patterson said the agent told him that Dr. King would meet a woman at an airport in Florida that weekend, and insisted that The Constitution send a reporter and photographer to record the meeting.

Mr. Patterson refused. Some days later, the agent returned and again insisted that "he couldn't understand why a newspaper would not print the news if we give it to you," Mr. Patterson said.

A day or so later, according to Mr. Patterson, the agent called and said, "our information is that the meeting is off so it's a good thing you didn't send anybody down there."

In reflecting on the electronic surveillance of Dr. King, Mr. Murtagh said, "from all the things I saw it appeared to me to be a 'get King' movement in the bureau. It was triggered by Hoover's hatred of King as a result of King's criticism of the bureau back in '62 and '63."

He also said that he was somewhat ashamed as he remembered that one Saturday night, when the telephone tap had been in existence for years, he agreed to spend four or five hours manning the listening post when another agent had an emergency that took him off duty.

"I don't really know why I agreed to do it," he said. "I guess it is that you go along and watch it run and it gets so you really believe this is too mammoth and there is nothing I could do."

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