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The Radical Challenge of Martin King

The first two phases of the King investigation have been explained by the FBI's preoccupation first with Stanley Levison's past and then with Martin King's personal life. The third and last phase of the King probe was marked by an emphasis upon information about King's political plans. That focus did not emerge until the late summer or fall of 1965.

Some who support this "political-intelligence" thesis contend that the true purpose of the FBI's pursuit of King and SCLC had *always* been to gather information on political strategy and demonstration plans, information that domestic security police obviously would want to obtain. Any ostensible FBI concern with "subversives" or with King's personal life, this argument says, was either a "cover" for or a concomitant of this larger political purpose. Proponents of this view have based their argument more on this presumption about the natural function of domestic security police than upon specific evidence.

Like the "conservatism" argument, the political-intelligence thesis is true, but only in part. As early as the 1962 wiretapping of Stanley Levison, the Bureau was using what it overheard to report King's and SCLC's political plans to the Attorney General and other officials. In May, 1963, the substance of King-Levison conversations about Birmingham was furnished to the Attorney General and apparently the President. Even in 1964, at the height of the obsession with King's private life, Bureau documents still spoke of how the wiretaps on King's home and office were supplying important "intelligence on the racial movement." Furthermore, what could be a clearer example of the use of FBI surveillance for political-intelligence purposes than the activities of DeLoach's "special squad" at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, and the hourly reports that were furnished to the White House?¹

All of this, of course, can be cited to support the claim that the Bureau principally used the surveillance of King to gather political information useful to a government worried about racial protests and mass demonstrations.² The problem, however, is that indications of such a focus before mid or late 1965 are the exception, rather than the rule, in FBI files on King and SCLC. Nothing presents this contrast more sharply than the Atlantic City events. The communications concerning that operation reflect a clear awareness of the strictly political purpose of the undertaking. Those indications are not mirrored in documents dealing with the Bureau's other electronic activities directed against King and his associates, and it is important to remember that the Atlantic City squad was created not at the Bureau's own initiative, but at the specific behest of Lyndon Johnson. As of the fall of 1964, the FBI had only an incidental interest in using its surveillances of King to gather purely political information for the government's own use.

Why did a greater interest in political intelligence not emerge sooner? First, through late 1963 there was an overpowering focus on the activities of Stanley Levison, and indications of a broader orientation to the King case were rare. Indeed, most of the political information that was collected and reported in 1962-63 was used not to learn King's political plans, but to show how great Stanley Levison's influence was on King. The substance usually received less emphasis than the matter of Levison's involvement. Then, from December,

1963, through mid-1965, the heavy emphasis was on collecting and disseminating material that could be used to "discredit" or "expose" King. Since political information did not suit this purpose, it received low priority. The personal material was paramount.

Throughout 1965 there was a gradual but noticeable decline in the Bureau's animus toward King. File references to the importance of "destroying" him as a public figure decreased sharply. As this occurred, the Bureau essentially had a major investigation that lacked clear purpose. True, an interest remained in identifying supposed "subversives" around SCLC, and in King's personal conduct, but both were greatly reduced from what they once had been. The political emphasis emerged gradually and without any apparent conscious decision to turn the investigation in that direction.³ It first appeared when King's comments about Vietnam received national press attention in August, 1965. It reemerged in more limited fashion when SCLC began groundwork for its Chicago project in the fall of 1965. Division Five's headquarters supervisors indicated an interest in SCLC's Chicago plans that they had not had for previous SCLC demonstration campaigns in Birmingham, Saint Augustine, and Selma. That interest apparently was grounded not in anything new or unique about the Chicago campaign, but in the fact that there simply was not much else to write reports about. The poor quality of the information from the Chicago field office inhibited the development of even this focus, however.

The lack of substance in the King and SCLC investigations by 1966 led some field agents handling the cases, especially in Atlanta, to believe that the FBI might best turn its attention elsewhere. They kept such views to themselves,⁴ however, and even though Division Five made no objection to terminating the SCLC office wiretaps, there was no indication that anyone at headquarters ever considered ending the King and SCLC probes.

To reduce one's own case load voluntarily was a phenomenon rarely witnessed in the statistic-conscious FBI, but a stronger reason for going forward was the presence of Jim Harrison. Harrison was able to supply useful information to the Bureau at a fraction of the cost and effort needed to acquire material from wiretaps. Harrison also was intelligent enough so that his statements about SCLC plans and activities were better informed than the conclusions that could

be drawn from dozens of brief summaries of intercepted phone conversations.

Despite even the usefulness of Harrison, the Bureau's investigation of King and SCLC was strikingly quiet from the summer of 1966 through February, 1967. Perhaps it would have remained so had not King decided to speak out strongly against America's involvement in Vietnam. That decision, evidenced first in the late February speech in Los Angeles, and then in the much more widely publicized one of April 4 in Manhattan's Riverside Church, brought about a renewed intensification of FBI and White House interest in King, his advisers, and his political plans.⁵ That interest remained acute through the summer of 1967, and it intensified further late that year when the Bureau learned of King's plan to conduct the 1968 Poor People's Campaign.)

The FBI's response to both the Vietnam issue and the Poor People's Campaign can be cited to support the argument that after late 1965, and especially after early 1967, the Bureau's interest in King was grounded purely in political-intelligence concerns.

The Bureau was quite aware of how hostile the Johnson White House was toward King. Johnson's particular fear about King's position on the war made him extremely eager for reports on King's political plans, and especially on the possibility that King might run as an independent antiwar presidential candidate in 1968.

Word of the Poor People's Campaign rang another alarm bell at the White House. It also touched a sensitive nerve at FBI headquarters, where supervisors were especially interested in anything that portended urban strife. The late 1967 request for renewed wiretaps on SCLC explicitly stated that the purpose of the surveillance was "to obtain racial intelligence information concerning their plans." Further developments early in 1968 heightened the Bureau's fear of urban disorders, fears most starkly revealed in the early March order warning of a "true black revolution" and intensifying the "Black Nationalist Hate Group" COINTELPRO. FBI headquarter's response to the March 28 "riot" in Memphis was merely one reflection of this broader fear. It was a fear not simply of urban violence per se but of developments in the American black community that the Bureau knew it did not understand.⁶

This evidence of the Bureau's fears and of its responsiveness to

the White House's worries is striking. It gives strong and convincing support to the argument that the Bureau's activities against King and SCLC in 1967-68 were based on concern about King's political plans and a desire to know as much as possible about those plans.

In the last twelve months of his life King represented a far greater political threat to the reigning American government than he ever had before. An intensified FBI interest in his political activities was perfectly in keeping with that development. As the fortress mentality of the Johnson White House continued to increase, the FBI's heightened sensitivity to political dissent aimed at the policies of the Johnson administration went hand in hand.

The three successive phases of the FBI's pursuit of King and SCLC thus are accounted for by three seemingly distinct explanations: "communism," "personal conduct," and "political intelligence." However, there is a broader viewpoint that ties all three of these narrower perspectives together and reveals underlying themes they all share.

This broader viewpoint, the "cultural-threat" argument, asserts that certain crucial common themes appear in the Bureau's drastic concern about Stanley Levison, in its obsession with Dr. King's private life, and in the marked fears of King as a pronounced political threat in 1967-68. Each of these three themes from the King case connects with parallel strands of the "cultural-threat" argument that has been suggested by several previous writers. While other arguments about the Bureau's behavior presume that the FBI has been either the instrument of a few particularly influential individuals, or an institution whose functioning largely was the product of certain principles of organizational structure, this perspective focuses on *culture* rather than people or organization, and on how the Bureau actually was more a reflection of American beliefs and society than it was either the product of idiosyncratic individuals or a unique institutional structure.

This cultural-threat thesis has its intellectual roots in Richard Hofstadter's pioneering essay on the importance of the "Paranoid Style in American Politics," and has been applied to the FBI in particular by Frank J. Donner.⁷ It argues that the FBI long has been an official representative of just such a "paranoid style," and that the essence of the Bureau's social role has been not to attack critics, Commu-

nists, blacks, or leftists per se, but to repress all perceived threats to the dominant, status-quo-oriented political culture. This argument thus appropriates many of the valuable aspects and contributions of previous hypotheses that by themselves are incomplete or overly simplistic. It also makes the powerful and persuasive point that the Bureau was not a deviant institution in American society, but actually a most representative and faithful one.

"Throughout virtually all of Hoover's administration," James Q. Wilson has remarked, "the mission of the FBI was fully consistent with public expectations, beliefs, and values."⁸ Though nowadays most reformers would prefer to ignore that point, the cultural perspective argues that the enemies chosen by the FBI were the same targets that much of American society would have selected as its own foes. American popular thought long has had strong themes of nativism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism. These very same qualities were writ large in the FBI.⁹

Such a conclusion allows for a far more meaningful understanding of the attitudes that the Bureau displayed toward a whole host of groups and individuals. Fear of secret, subversive conspiracies always has played a major role in such paranoid American thought, and the FBI's long-standing obsession with domestic communism was but one reflection of the widespread popular preoccupation with this same xenophobic fear. Anything that appeared foreign or strange to the dominant culture of which the Bureau was so true a reflection thus became the recipient of a hostility that was societal as well as institutional, and this deep-seated fear of those who were distinctly different in any of a number of ways is the common thread that connects the three narrower explanations offered for the distinct phases of the King probe.

Each of the three major themes of the King case connects with a parallel portion of the cultural-threat perspective articulated by Hofstadter and Donner. First, even though the FBI's concern about Levison did have some basis in fact, the Bureau jumped to the conclusion that anyone who had once had close and unrenounced ties to the Communist party must of course be functioning at its behest nearly ten years later. This eagerness to label Levison a Soviet agent even in the early 1960s is but one reflection of the widespread American tendency to see evil conspiracies virtually everywhere. As Hofstadter described this style of thought, its "central preconception

. . . [is] the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character."¹⁰ The conspirators always were thought to be adherents to some foreign, sacrilegious ideology, and to be "strangers" in other ways as well. Communism was far from the first villain in American history to produce this response, and essentially the same dynamics of reaction can be witnessed in the Salem witchcraft trials of the 1690s or the nativist fear of immigration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹¹

The FBI's exaggerated stance toward communism was a perfect example of exactly this style, as Frank J. Donner in particular has argued. When applied to notable instances of mass domestic dissent, such as the civil rights movement, the paranoid style has been quick to explain the eruption of dissent not by reference to economic or social causes, but by reference to some "outside agitator," identified or unidentified, who is stirring up the happy natives who otherwise would be perfectly satisfied with their lot.¹² This pattern of recourse to the evil, conspiratorial outsider, usually tagged a "Communist," is visible, indeed often pronounced, in local white response to civil rights campaigns from Montgomery in 1956 to Memphis in 1968. It also is reflected in the FBI's eagerness to view Stanley Levison as the malevolent Soviet puppeteer standing secretly behind the entire American civil rights movement.

Another facet of the paranoid style's reaction to the challenge of widespread dissent is a strong tendency to see the challengers not simply as evil foreign puppets but also as immoral, sensually obsessed individuals. As Hofstadter noted, the strange opponent always is perceived as "a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, unquitting, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving."¹³ Again, Hofstadter's observation is a striking description of the Bureau's stance in the King investigation, this time in regard to the second phase, the obsession with King's personal life. Not only was it the case, as in the first phase, that the civil rights movement might be heavily influenced by the goals of a hostile foreign power, but the domestic leaders who were the supposed tools of that international conspiracy were viewed, as the FBI perceived King, as carnally consumed beings. Donner too has noted this, observing how the Bureau "perceived black leaders," and especially King, "as corrupt, criminal, oversexed demagogues who had to be destroyed and

replaced by 'respectable' figures who alone could be trusted to lead the ignorant blacks." Especially in cases where black people were involved, and visibly so in many COINTELPRO poison-pen letters to black people, themes of sexual misconduct or overindulgence regularly were voiced by the men of Division Five.¹⁴

The third major strand of the cultural-threat perspective is how the paranoid style fears political change just as much as it is obsessed with foreign agents and notions of the enemy's immoral nature. With reference to the FBI's reaction to the civil rights movement, and especially to King in 1967-68, this third portion of the paranoid-style argument stresses how the Bureau was an institutional opponent of political change and those who embodied it. William Sullivan conceded this point to his interrogators in the mid-1970s, admitting that Director Hoover and most of the Bureau were "opposed to *change* in the social order."¹⁵ This truth was appreciated by some Church Committee staff members, and was utilized with telling effect in the analysis of the FBI's COINTEL efforts of the late 1960s. "The unexpressed major premise of the programs," one report concluded, "was that a law enforcement agency has the duty to do whatever is necessary to combat perceived threats to the existing social and political order."¹⁶ Though the committee did not explicitly note it, this same cast of mind lay behind the Bureau's fear of King in 1967-68 as well as behind the "Black Nationalist" and "New Left" COINTELPROs.

These three strands of the paranoid-style argument, and the three apparently separate themes or phases of the FBI's behavior in the King case, come together to form a wider understanding not only of the conduct of the Bureau itself but of how the Bureau accurately represented many of the major beliefs and fears of American society.¹⁷ Nowhere was this meshing of the strands clearer than in Division Five's 1964 instructions to Bureau field offices that events necessitated a new and more inclusive definition of the Communist threat. Coupled with that new definition was a warning that "we are in the midst of a social revolution with the racial movement as its core." Three years later, when King gave his first 1967 speech attacking America's involvement in Vietnam, Division Five warned its superiors that King's stance was "revolutionary."¹⁸

What was foreign, unknown, and hence frightening to the FBI was not simply the supposed ties of Stanley Levison, nor the unin-

hibited nature of King's personal life, nor vocal opposition to the basic policies of the American government. All three of these themes represented a challenge to the established social order that the FBI believed in and faithfully represented. Within the Bureau "Communism" came increasingly to be not a label for any specific organizations or adherence to a certain doctrine, but simply a catchall term of opprobrium to be applied to anyone whose political beliefs and cultural values were at odds with those of mainstream America and the men of the FBI. It was not simply that Stanley Levison excited the paranoid fears of foreign-dominated conspiracies, or that King's opposition to the Vietnam War made him a "traitor,"¹⁹ but that some of his personal conduct represented just as much a challenge to the cultural traditions exemplified by the FBI as did his political stance in the last years of his life. As Frank Donner has written, "the selection of a target embodies a judgment of deviance from the dominant political culture," and that conclusion is borne out not simply by the final phase of the Bureau's activities against Dr. King but by all three of them.²⁰

All three strands come together in this question of what Hofstadter termed "ultimate schemes of values."²¹ The Bureau's conduct toward King, towards the civil rights movement, and toward a host of people identified with the "Left" in the 1960s is best understood in terms of this conflict of cultural values. This broad analysis is more telling than emphasis on either idiosyncratic individuals such as Hoover and Sullivan or on the organizational behavior of the FBI as an institution. The individuals themselves are best viewed as representatives of that native American culture, and the Bureau itself expressed in its conduct not the self-interested behavior of a rational organization—the activities against King certainly were not "rational" in terms of protecting the FBI—but the underlying attitude of much of American society toward the threat that King and the movement represented. Coretta Scott King later remarked that it seemed in retrospect that "the FBI treated the civil rights movement as if it were an alien enemy attack on the United States." Her comment was right on the mark.²² The Bureau functioned not simply as a weapon of one disturbed man, not as an institution protecting its own organizational interests, but as the representative, and at times rather irrational representative, of American cultural values that

found much about King and the sixties' movements to be frightening and repugnant. The FBI's primary role was to serve as a "relentless guardian" of "acceptable political and cultural values," and to protect and maintain "the existing social order" against those who appeared "to threaten that order." The Bureau was not a renegade institution secretly operating outside the parameters of American values, but a virtually representative bureaucracy that loyally served "to protect the established order against adversary challenges."²³

Such an analysis of the most important meanings of the Bureau's stance toward Martin Luther King, Jr., does not infer the quite different point that the FBI's hostility toward him was, from its point of view, misdirected or misconceived. Any conclusion that the Bureau's antipathy toward him was thoroughly wrongheaded carries with it the erroneous presumption that King was not so much a threatening challenge to the central values of American society as he was an embodiment of the ideals for which the country always had stood. After his assassination King unfortunately came to be viewed by many people as a thoroughly successful American reformer whose triumph affirmed the myth of American society as both essentially good and increasingly perfectible. In truth Martin King was much more a radical threat than a reassuring reformer. It is ironic that the FBI adopted that view far more readily than did many others.²⁴

The FBI's still "Top Secret" quotation of King saying "I am a Marxist" probably would be discounted by most observers as something King could never have said. Actually, however, such a statement would not have been surprising, for King made mention of his distaste for the American economic order to many friends, even in the 1950s.²⁵ In a divinity school term paper in 1950–51 King spoke of "my present anti-capitalistic feelings,"²⁶ and he reiterated this theme in several sermons in 1956 and 1957, if not earlier. King's intellectual style was heavily influenced by a rather basic appreciation of the Hegelian dialectic, and as a result he tended to view alternatives as antitheses from which he should create a middle way. That was precisely how he initially handled the thesis of capitalism and the antithesis of communism, and in public remarks he had strong criticisms of both.²⁷ In private, however, he made it clear to close

friends that economically speaking he considered himself what he termed a Marxist, largely because he believed with increasing strength that American society needed a radical redistribution of wealth and economic power to achieve even a rough form of social justice.

As the years passed King increasingly recognized just how extensive and thoroughgoing this change would have to be. In part he was influenced by the realization that purely idealistic and moral appeals to southern white business to support desegregation did not work, while boycotts and protests, which reduced business volume and profits, triggered quick, positive responses.²⁸ By 1967 King was telling the SCLC staff, "We must recognize that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power," and by early 1968 he had taken the final step to the admission that issues of economic class were more crucial and troublesome, and less susceptible to change, than issues of race. "America," he remarked to one interviewer, "is deeply racist and its democracy is flawed both economically and socially." He added that "the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced."

King himself was fully conscious of his journey from reformer to revolutionary. "For the last twelve years," he remarked to the SCLC staff in 1967, "we have been in a reform movement. . . . But after Selma and the voting rights bill [in 1965] we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution. I think we must see the great distinction here between a reform movement and a revolutionary movement." The latter would "raise certain basic questions about the whole society. . . . this means a revolution of values and of other things," reaching far beyond the question of race. "The whole structure of American life must be changed," King emphasized, and by early 1968 he publicly was stating, "We are engaged in the class struggle." While his emphasis was not purely materialistic, redistribution of economic power was the central requirement. To one audi-

ence King stated, "We're dealing in a sense with class issues, we're dealing with the problem of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots."²⁹

This radical and revolutionary vision of King's last years was coupled with a profound change in his view of human nature. Twelve years earlier, at the beginning in Montgomery, King had been a faithful believer in the optimistic notions of human perfectibility propounded by the "social-gospel" theologians whose works he had read during his own religious education.³⁰ The experiences of the 1960s had taught him that that optimism was unjustified, and that appeals based on persuasion were less effective with reluctant whites than a painful boycott or disruptive street demonstrations. He came increasingly to see the need for political realism and the coercive use of practical power that had been most convincingly set forth as a social philosophy by Reinhold Niebuhr.³¹ This shift was reflected in King's changing tactics; it also was revealed by his increasingly radical goals, such as his aspirations for the Poor People's Campaign and his vocal attacks on the American imperialism and militarism manifested by the expanding conflict in Vietnam. At his death King's optimism had been wholly erased. Many who were close to him sensed a profound sadness that had not been present in earlier years. Though even in 1968 King retained a sense of hope that was rooted in his own strong religious faith, his view of man and society was light years different from what it had been a decade or more earlier. As he remarked to an aide less than a week before his death, "Truly America is much, much sicker, Hosea, than I realized when I first began working in 1955."³²

King's evolution from reformer to revolutionary, from tactics of persuasion to those of coercion, and from optimism to realism was accompanied by an increasingly sophisticated view of himself as a public figure and private man. By 1965 King was aware, as one person articulated it, that "the ability to control his own life had been taken away from him." He told a friend, "I am conscious of two Martin Luther Kings. I am a wonder to myself," and he was greatly troubled by the fame and attention that came to him. Not only was he upset that his position weighed him down with responsibilities and tasks that unrelentingly consumed the great majority of

his time, but he was concerned that the Martin Luther King most people knew as a symbol bore little resemblance to his own image of himself. He told one old friend, who recalled it several years later, "I am mystified at my own career. The Martin Luther King that the people talk about seems to be somebody foreign to me." There was, King said, "a kind of dualism in my life," and, the friend recalled, King always said "that that Martin Luther King the famous man was a kind of stranger to him."³³

King's pronounced ambivalence about his fame and symbolic role led him to agonize over his position much more often than he enjoyed or reveled in it. He frequently thought that he had not done enough to deserve the great acclaim that showered down on him. These doubts made King his own harshest critic. His private questioning of himself, of his motives, and of his political wisdom was never-ending. His penchant for self-criticism often was heartrending for his friends and associates to witness. Stanley Levison saw more of it than most people. "Martin," Stanley explained in 1969,

could be described as an intensely guilt-ridden man. The most essential element in the feelings of guilt that he had was that he didn't feel he deserved the kind of tribute that he got. [He believed] that he was an actor in history at a particular moment that called for a personality, and he had simply been selected as that personality . . . but he had not done enough to deserve it. He felt keenly that people who had done as much as he had or *more* got no such tribute. This troubled him deeply, and he could find no way of dealing with it because there's no way of sharing that kind of tribute with anyone else—you can't give it away; you have to accept it. But when you don't feel you're worthy of it and you're an honest, principled man, it tortures you. And it could be said that he was tortured by the great appreciation that the public showed for him. If he had been less humble, he could have lived with this kind of acclaim, but because he was genuinely a man of humility, he really couldn't live with it. He always thought of ways in which he could somehow live up to it, and he often talked about

taking a vow of poverty—getting rid of everything he owned, including his house, so that he could at least feel that nothing material came to him from his efforts. . . . The house troubled him greatly. When he moved from a very small house to one that was large enough to give the growing family some room, he was troubled by it and would ask all of his close friends when they came to the house whether they didn't think it was too big and it wasn't right for him to have. And though everyone tried to tell him that this big house wasn't as big as he thought it was—it was a very modest little house—to him it loomed as a mansion and he searched in his own mind for ways of making it smaller. . . . Martin found it very difficult to live comfortably because he had such a sensitive conscience and such a sense of humility. . . . Martin was always very aware that he was privileged. . . . and this troubled him. He felt he didn't deserve this. One of the reasons that he was so determined to be of service was to justify the privileged position he'd been born into. . . . [He felt] he had never deserved and earned what he had, and now he didn't deserve nor had he earned in his own mind the acclaim that he was receiving. It was a continual series of blows to his conscience, and this kept him a very restive man all his life.³⁴

That restiveness and self-criticism grew more pronounced in the last two years of King's life. The evolution of his own political views, and the increased public criticism of him that followed from it, and especially from his outspokenness on Vietnam, made both King's efforts in the public struggle and his private self-examination even more intense. The frenetic pace of his life increased even further in the final months as he strove to make the Poor People's Campaign an effort that would have a dramatic impact even though the sheen of the civil rights movement was largely gone. His inner tension increased dramatically. He smoked more, drank more, and slept less. Sleep, and the sense of aloneness and repose that went with it, became especially difficult. Almost everyone who knew him well

had vivid experiences where King would sit up talking, arguing, and drinking until nearly dawn, seemingly unable to break away from the companionship of conversation.³⁵

The increased anguish manifested itself in many of his public remarks as well. In the last year and one-half of King's life a good number of his sermons ended with a refrain that articulated his deepest sentiments. God, he stated, would not desert one even if everything was going badly, even if criticism was coming from all sides, and even if hope for a better future had grown very dim. One must hold on to some amount of faith, for "He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone, no, never alone, no, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone."³⁶

The endless self-examination that so struck Stanley Levison grew even stronger in King's last months, as he came to as relentlessly frank and realistic an appraisal of himself as he did of American society and the basic tenets of human nature. He became as unremitting in his criticism of himself as he was of the American economic system and America's conduct in Vietnam, and certainly the knowledge that the FBI appeared to be watching his every action increased the intensity of that self-criticism, just as it had in the very painful and anguished days of January, 1965, following receipt of the anonymous tape.³⁷ On many occasions the belief that the government was sparing no effort to surveil him made King even more determined to pursue his own personal freedom without inhibition. He often would joke with his colleagues about how any chance remark might be immortalized by one of the Bureau's hidden recorders.³⁸ The determination not to be inhibited or intimidated was only part of King's response, however. The constant reminders that others were standing by to judge him contributed noticeably to the harshness with which King judged himself in his own most reflective moments. The relentless self-analysis came through with striking clarity in many of his sermons, as he returned again and again to the theme that all people are sinners, that everyone's inner self is a mixture of the admirable and the unpleasant. He noted repeatedly that "there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us," and that there is a "strange mixture in human nature." He told his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church that "each of us is two selves. And the great burden of life is to always try to keep that

higher self in command. Don't let the lower self take over. . . . every now and then you'll be unfaithful to those that you should be faithful to. It's a mixture in human nature. . . . Because we are two selves, there is a civil war going on within each of us." To admit that one is a sinner is to avoid the far worse fault of being a hypocrite, and Martin King emphasized that to confess that to oneself and one's God was the important challenge. "God's unbroken hold on us is something that will never permit us to feel right when we do wrong, or to feel natural when we do the unnatural," King told his Ebenezer listeners in a sermon he entitled, "Who Are We?" "God has planted within us certain eternal principles, and the more we try to get away from them the more frustrated we will be."³⁹

Four weeks before his death King summed up those themes of the last year of his life in a sermon at Ebenezer. Speaking of his life and his disappointments, he said, "We are constantly trying to finish that which is unfinishable. We are commanded to do that, and so we . . . find ourselves in so many instances having to face the facts that our dreams are not fulfilled." Life, he said, "is a continual story of shattered dreams," but one must strive always to hold that dream in one's heart. "There is a schizophrenia . . . within all of us. There are times that all of us know somehow that there is a Mr. Hyde and a Dr. Jekyll in us." Even that truth should not cause one to lose faith, however, for "God does not judge us by the separate incidents or the separate mistakes that we make, but by the total bent of our lives. . . . You don't need to go out this morning saying that Martin Luther King is a saint, oh no; I want you to know this morning that I am a sinner like all of God's children, but I want to be a good man, and I want to hear a voice saying to me one day, 'I take you in and I bless you because you tried. It was well that it was within thy heart.' " The final and essential question, as he had said into that endless phone line that agonizing day three years earlier, "is only between me and my God."⁴⁰