

Ex-Officials Say F.B.I. Harassed Dr. King to Stop

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WASHINGTON, March 8 — The Federal Bureau of Investigation mailed what some agents considered an “unsavory” tape recording made from an electronic room bug to Coretta King to frighten her husband, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., into halting his criticism of the bureau, according to a former high official of the agency.

The mailing of the tape recording to Mrs. King was part of nearly a decade of “harassment” of the late civil rights leader by the bureau, several former agents and officials say.

One retired agent, Arthur Murtagh, who was attached to the F.B.I.’s Atlanta field office, said the moves against Dr. King were second in size “only to the way they went after Jimmy Hoffa.”

Yet there was never a criminal prosecution of Dr. King and, these former F.B.I. men say, there was a “dubious” national security rationale for what they said were thousands of hours of electronic and physical surveillance. These sources believe that the alleged harassment of Dr. King should be investigated by the Congressional committees on intelligence. Several have written to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

Violation of Regulations

The sending to a private citizen of a tape recording obtained by a national security electronic surveillance is a violation of F.B.I. regulations and was a potential violation of the Federal Communications Act and the Federal Criminal Code.

The surveillance of Dr. King was briefly noted last year in a report by William B. Saxbe, then the Attorney General, and Clarence M. Kelly, director of the F.B.I., on the bureau’s Counterintelligence Program, or Cointelpro. The report said that Cointelpro techniques included “investigating the love life of a group leader for dissemination to the press.” Justice Department officials later identified the group leader as Dr. King.

A spokesman for the bureau said it had “no comment” on the alleged harassment of Dr. King.

The former high F.B.I. official who brought the matter to the attention of The New York Times asked to remain anonymous in the expectation that he might be called to testify in investigations of the bureau.

He said that in late 1964,



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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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His Criticism

erations, to arrange to send a copy of a tape recording secretly to Mrs. King in such a manner that it could not be traced to the F.B.I.

The source said that a copy of a tape recording was made by the bureau’s laboratory. It was wrapped in a small plain, unmarked package with no return address, and delivered to Mr. Sullivan’s office, the source said, and it had been addressed to Mrs. Coretta King, Atlanta, Ga.

Another source, attached to the bureau at the time, said that he believed the recording was of a party held by Dr. King and officials of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which Dr. King headed, in the Willard Hotel in Washington in the fall of 1963. The source said the party had been picked up by an F.B.I. electronic bug in the room and put on tape.

Bureau officials, according to sources at the time, felt that the content of the tape was detrimental to Dr. King and some of his associates because it recounted activities at the party they thought did not conform with the rights leader’s position as a religious leader.

Tracing of Tape

The tape and the package had been prepared so they could not be traced, one source said. He said Mr. Hoover wanted the tape mailed from somewhere in Florida and that Mr. Sullivan had ordered a special agent to fly to Tampa and mail the tape to Mrs. King. The source stressed that the agent had no idea of the contents.

The source said that Mr. Hoover believed the sending of the tape to Mrs. King would stop Dr. King’s criticism of the bureau and break up his marriage as well.

Mrs. King said in a telephone interview that she recalled receiving a tape recording in January, 1965.

"I received a tape that was rather curious, unlabeled," she said. "As a matter of fact, Martin and I listened to the tape and we found much of it unintelligible. We concluded there was nothing in the tape to discredit him."

Mrs. King said that she and her husband immediately realized that the tape had been made covertly and "presumed" it had been made by the F.B.I.

Mr. Murtagh, 53 years old, who now lives in Constable, N.Y., said the "trick" of sending the tape to Mrs. King to discredit her husband was well known "among senior agents in the Atlanta bureau and some of them bragged about it as a smart stunt."

According to two former senior F.B.I. officials, a wiretap on Dr. King later picked up a conversation in which Dr. King told a friend that he was deeply concerned about the pressure being placed upon him.

S.C.L.C. sources from that era say that Dr. King never wavered in his leadership of the movement and that the harassment failed.

The following incidents of harassment were either confirmed in earlier press accounts or uncovered in interviews with high bureau officials:

¶Mr. Murtagh and a former senior bureau official confirmed the bureau tried to disrupt plans for a banquet in Atlanta in 1964 by business leaders to laud Dr. King's winning of the Nobel Prize. It included covert contacts with community leaders with charges about Dr. King's personal life.

¶Two former bureau officials said that a "monograph" on Dr. King's personal life was circulated among Government officials by the bureau during the Kennedy Administration. President Kennedy became aware of what was going on and ordered Mr. Hoover to retrieve every copy of the monograph.

¶Mr. Murtagh said that efforts at harassment of S.C.L.C. leaders continued after Dr. King's assassination in 1968. He said he was ordered by bureau officials to obtain handwriting samples of Andrew Young, now a Democratic Representative from Georgia, and Hosea Williams to permit bureau experts to forge letters over the Young and Williams signatures that would harm their careers. Mr. Murtagh said he refused the assignment.

¶Two former senior F.B.I. officials said the bureau "routinely" sought to prevent Dr. King from receiving honorary degrees from colleges and universities by planting stories

about his personal life, including charges that he directed S.C.L.C. funds to his own use and to Swiss bank accounts.

¶Mr. Murtagh and other sources said there was a consistent practice of anonymous telephone calls, sometimes to make false fire alarm reports at locations where Dr. King was to speak and in other instances to friends and associates of Dr. King trying to sow distrust among them.

Infiltration Believed

In 1961 and 1962, bureau intelligence experts reportedly became convinced that two members of the Communist party had infiltrated the S.C.L.C. The intelligence men urged then Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to open a national security investigation of Dr. King, and he complied.

Reliable sources said that Dr. King was under electronic surveillance well before Mr. Kennedy had made his decision. On two occasions, members of the Kennedy Administration warned the S.C.L.C. leaders to disassociate themselves from the alleged Communists because they were leaving Dr. King open to attacks by Southern conservatives in the Senate, but Dr. King refused to do so unless the Government produced evidence of Communist affiliation.

In 1963, Mr. Kennedy authorized a national security wiretap on Dr. King, then legal under federal law. Court testimony and interviews with F.B.I. and Justice Department officials indicate that the electronic surveillance continued for at least two years, from 1963 to 1965, and produced a massive amount of recordings. One estimate held that 5,000 separate conversations went on tape.

Former agents said the room

bugs were planted in hotels from coast to coast as Dr. King moved about the country.

Despite this massive surveillance, veteran agents said, there was never a recommendation for prosecution for violation of any Federal or State law. Nor, several sources said, were grounds for any national security concern ever established.

Testimony in Case

In a 1969 Federal court case involving the boxer Muhammed Ali, a Federal agent testified that he believed the tapes from the King investigation had been destroyed. But other sources among former Bureau officials maintain that the tapes or transcripts of the tapes are still in the bureau and may be part of the material disclosed 10 days ago by Attorney General Edward H. Levi.

Mr. Murtagh said the bureau surveillance of the S.C.L.C. failed because it concentrated on gathering information about the mores and personal lives of the rights group's officials.

"This was a little naive because S.C.L.C. officials told me they couldn't care less," Mr. Murtagh said.

Under laws in force when the tape was reportedly mailed, it was both a potential crime and a violation of bureau regulations to use the tape in this manner.

The Federal Communications Act in force in 1964-1965 prohibited a police or Government agency from disclosing the contents of a taped or bugged conversation to a third party. Another section of the Federal criminal statutes makes it a crime for Federal employes to convert Government property and records to other than official use.