

The Dark at the Top

By Tom Wicker

The outlines were generally known but still it was hard to credit the details disclosed in Washington about the Central Intelligence Agency's plots to assassinate foreign leaders and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's efforts to assassinate the character and career of the Rev. Martin Luther King.

In fact, if Dr. King was right in believing that the F.B.I. was trying to drive him to suicide—and documentary evidence appears to support that interpretation—then the bureau can be said to have tried to assassinate him physically. Its method was only slightly more devious than the C.I.A.'s poisons and its deals with Mafia killers.

Can these things actually have been done in the name of the American people, by their authorized security agencies, through the consent or indifference of their elected political leaders? The answer is "yes," and that fact has to be faced in all its implications before anything effective can be done to prevent such obscene actions in the future.

The Senate intelligence committee, for example, is going to offer legislation to outlaw assassination plots against foreign leaders. But what good will that do if nothing else is done? Both C.I.A. and F.B.I. officials have shown themselves repeatedly willing to ignore and break the law. Even the committee's own report tells how a former C.I.A. official, Richard Bissell, waived aside suggestions that planning to kill Patrice Lumumba might be legally a murder plot; and Richard Helms, the former C.I.A. director and still this country's accredited Ambassador to Iran, told the committee himself that it had never occurred to him to check on the agency's legal authority for the mail intercepts it used in snooping on American citizens.

But the intelligence committee is centering its recommendations on greatly improved Congressional oversight, including a joint House-Senate oversight committee. Here again, the intention is good, but if nothing else is done little will be changed in the actual operations of the F.B.I., the C.I.A. and other security agencies. They have shown time and again their ability to co-opt or to dupe their Con-

gressional overseers, not to mention their supposed political masters in the executive branch; and a major reason why they so frequently disclose their great desire for more formal oversight arrangements is that they know such committees as that now being proposed usually become the ardent defenders and proponents of the agencies supposedly being overseen and controlled.

The more important necessity, without which oversight is likely to be futile, is for Congress to rewrite and

sharply restrict the missions of the security agencies to clearly defined activities. The open-ended authority the C.I.A. now has to do virtually anything either directed by the National Security Council or not specifically prohibited by it is one root of its troubles. Another probably is the linkage between its intelligence-gathering and analysis function, and its covert operations.

Not all covert operations are bad—for example, the clandestine organization of democratic labor unions in third world countries where there might otherwise be no such unions—but to vest the power to conduct them in a huge secret agency which also provides the Government's basic intelligence estimates gives that agency too much power to influence rather than serve foreign policy. And the very scope of the C.I.A.'s mission now insures that it can usually find some justification and necessity—not to mention means—for doing almost anything it thinks useful to "national security."

Somewhat similarly, the F.B.I.'s sweeping authority to conduct counterespionage operations gave it the

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opening to engage in domestic political spying; since American Communists or fascists or dissidents might become foreign agents, they had to be watched and reported on, in the bureau's view. And Congress itself, by requiring such abominations as the "security register" of Americans to be arrested and confined in the event of a war, gave the bureau an even broader mandate to check up on the political views and activities of thousands of citizens.

But oversight, new laws and more restricted missions still will not "control" the security agencies unless the example is set for them at the top, in Congress and the executive branch. Who stood up to, and demanded accountability from, J. Edgar Hoover in his prime? In fact, when President Johnson and Congress combined to exempt him from mandatory retirement in 1965, they gave him license to pursue his own peculiar version of "national security"—including his war on Martin Luther King, which became known at the time both in the White House and Congress.

As for the C.I.A., if its efforts to murder Fidel Castro and Patrice Lumumba were not actually ordered by President Kennedy, the agency still drew its impressions of what was desirable and permissible in no small part from the political atmosphere in which it operated. More than any other factor, that atmosphere, in the executive branch and Congress, determines finally whether oversight and the law will prevail or become ciphers.