

The FBI and Martin Luther King

IT IS QUITE CLEAR, as Attorney General Edward H. Levi has recognized, that the questions about the relationships between the FBI and the late Dr. Martin Luther King can be answered only by a full investigation of FBI files across the country. Enough is already known from the files in Washington to raise substantial doubts about the legality of some of the operations the agency mounted against Dr. King. The real question, however, is whether the Department of Justice has sufficiently straightened itself out under Mr. Levi's direction to be able to win public confidence in the integrity of an internal investigation.

We are sympathetic to what Mr. Levi is attempting to do in keeping the investigation internal as distinct from naming a commission of prominent citizens to conduct it. He has taken this opportunity to demonstrate his belief that the department has recovered from its unsavory recent past. He may well be right. But whether he is right in thinking the public can be persuaded to share that belief may depend not only on the quality of the investigation he has ordered,

but also on the results it produces. In a perverse way, it seems likely that the more dirt the investigation uncovers, the more confidence it will generate in its own integrity.

Mr. Levi could have chosen a far easier course by asking outsiders to survey the files and run the investigation. And he—or his successor—may still have to do that if the internally generated report even seems to have an unpersuasive ring to it by any reasonable test. The hard fact is that reputations, once lost, are hard to restore. Moreover, Mr. Levi did not have an easy choice; it is worth keeping in mind that the country's experience with commissions named to investigate such situations has been far from satisfactory. A good many people have never accepted the findings of the commission that investigated the assassination of President Kennedy, and there is no assurance that any new inquiry conducted from within the Justice Department or from outside of it will be able to satisfy all those who are troubled about the way the FBI treated Dr. King.

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