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Illegal FBI Check of Ray Family Endangered Case, Probers Say

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WASHINGTON — Illegal surveillance by the FBI of James Earl Ray's family could have jeopardized any chance of proving Ray was involved in a conspiracy to kill Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., congressional officials said today.

House Assassinations Committee investigators charged today that the FBI was so intent on capturing Ray it ignored the possibility of a conspiracy and actually damaged any case that it might have had through a combination of errors.

Previous testimony by FBI agents revealed that the bureau had dismissed a theory of conspiracy only 24 hours after King was shot down in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

Shortly after Ray was identified as the prime suspect in the case the FBI set out to track him down.

Then FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover recommended that agents place electronic surveillance devices in the homes of John Ray and Carol Pepper, (James Earl Ray's sister). Hoover, the committee charges, never had approval by the Department of Justice to instal the "bugging" devices.

"Not only does it show a lack of concern for the constitutional rights of the relatives, it establishes the bureau's lack of interest in a possible conspiracy involving the brothers," said G. Robert Blakey, the committee's chief counsel.

"Had the taps picked up evidence of such a conspiracy, the illegality of the surveillance would almost surely have tainted the evidence in a subsequent trial," concluded Blakey. 11/27/78