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Abernathy's Betrayal of King

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For years, his enemies in the FBI sought to discredit Martin Luther King Jr. by leaking audio tapes of a supposed sexual encounter between Martin Luther King Jr. and an unnamed woman. No reputable newspaper took the bait.

Now the man who was King's most trusted friend has succeeded in doing what his bitter enemies could not accomplish. The detailed confirmation of King's alleged sexual escapades—three in the single night before his death—has been supplied by Ralph David Abernathy, an intimate of King for virtually the whole of King's public career and the man tapped by King himself as his successor.

Abernathy knew about the FBI tapes but says in his new book, "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down," that he saw no evidence that King himself was concerned about the attempts to have the transcripts published. "In fact, he seemed less concerned about public exposure than I was."

Maybe that's because he didn't know his good buddy Ralph as well as he thought he did.

The question that crackles like wildfire throughout the civil rights community is: Why? Why did Abernathy betray his friend?

The answers range from jealousy (except for leading the ill-fated Poor People's Campaign here shortly after King's death, Abernathy never really became King's civil rights successor) to money ("You think they would have published the book if he had left that out?") to mental weakness ("Ralph had this stroke, you know . . .").

None of the answers satisfies King's erstwhile colleagues or present-day admirers, and none satisfies me. It isn't that I think King needs a phonied-up history to sustain his place as an American hero. Nor would I argue that the details of the night before his death are too lurid to be told.

If the account had come from an academic or a journalist or a historian trying to pull together a complete picture of King, I might have admired the research. If it had come from some uncommitted functionary, someone who flitted in and out of the movement in an effort to get close to what was the major story of the time, it might have served as a cautionary tale.

Who can hold it against Elizabeth Colton, for instance, that she has used her brief tenure as press secretary of the Jesse Jackson presidential campaign to bring us stories of Jackson's unorthodox methods, his volatility and his temper? It was Jackson's business, not Colton's, to protect his privacy.

But in the case of Abernathy, the revelations are neither research nor insider gossip—but tales out of school, the betrayal of a trusting friend.

I'm perfectly willing to believe that Abernathy didn't intend it that way. Some who have read the advance copy of the book call it an admiring work, an effort to render the great man in his full humanity. My colleague Juan Williams [who read the galleys] says it is a good book—a book that eschews "all childish deification of King" and instead presents "the reality of King's mortal struggle to deal with the

pressures of competitors, the media spotlight and the civil-rights struggle."

Maybe that will be my own judgment when I read the book. My purpose here, however, is not to judge the book but to question its pandering (however brief or parenthetical) to prurient interests.

Abernathy says he considered deleting references to the sexual escapades (which occupy only a few pages of the book) but was talked out of it by an editor for Harper & Row. No doubt that is because the editor knew what Abernathy should have known: that it is the sexual revelations that will sell the book.

If Abernathy wanted to establish that King, for all our sanctification of him, had human weaknesses—including a weakness for women—couldn't he simply have said as much? What could have been his point in supplying details that even J. Edgar Hoover never tried to peddle? What purpose did he imagine would be served by the revelations?

Here is a man at pains to paint himself as closer than a brother to King: his confidant, alter ego and most trusted adviser. And then he proves his closeness by betraying the confidence.

According to one report, Abernathy now intends to contribute his share of the book's profits to some civil rights cause. This gesture, the rough equivalent of Judas dropping his 30 pieces of silver into the church collection basket, may be his way of acknowledging what King's admirers already know: that Abernathy's tales-out-of-school didn't diminish King; they diminished Abernathy.