

# The Abernathy Uproar

## Simmering Feud Comes to a Boil Over the Civil Rights Leader's Book

By Art Harris 10/15/89  
Washington Post Staff Writer

ATLANTA—So why are scores of black professionals, like 49-year-old Carl Franklin, standing in line, some for almost two hours? Why are they willing to plop down \$25 for a book and an autograph from a civil rights warrior some top black leaders have branded a "Judas" for serving up his allegations of Martin Luther King Jr.'s extramarital escapades?

Does no one care that the author has been attacked by such luminaries as Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, Walter Fauntroy, William Gray, Benjamin Hooks and John Lewis?

Or is there no concern for The Widow, Coretta Scott King, an institution herself who allowed loyalists to use the \$15 million Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change to launch the official shunning of her late husband's top deputy, confidant and best friend? Didn't Franklin take notice of last week's public graveside rebuke of the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy Jr.?

And doesn't Franklin, a government programs analyst, suffer a twinge of remorse for shrugging off calls to boycott a book that critics howl threatens to tarnish King and turn Abernathy into the movement's Salman Rushdie for rattling on the dreamer? Just why is Carl Franklin here, bending

over the soft-spoken minister with the salt-and-pepper hair and mustache who whispers gratitude, then signs his name in the shadow of New Age tape racks? A bodyguard with a .38 on his hip eyes the patient, racially mixed crowd of 150 standing in line at the Oxford Bookstore for their turn.

"I resent any so-called black or white leaders who try to make decisions for me, who want to dictate what I should read and think," says Franklin with a shrug.

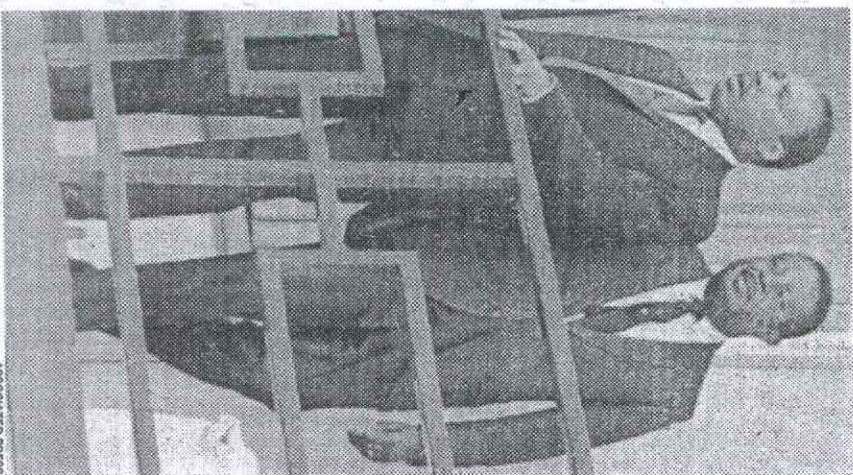
"God bless you," says Abernathy, the man under fire, fighting back in yet another chapter from the postwar trenches of America's long dormant civil rights movement.

It was the night before an intense session with Bryant Gumbel on NBC's "Today" show yesterday. All was not peace and love in the land of nonviolent social protest. Today there is "Donahue."

"We've had crank calls and maybe three or four death threats against Dr. Abernathy," said his bodyguard, Virgil Walker, a retired New York City police officer. "We've turned them over to the Atlanta police. They're patrolling around his house."

The latest skirmish for the hearts and minds of black America boils down to a long-simmering feud between King's most trusted colleague, who friends say has been hurt

See ABERNATHY, B14, Col. 1



Abernathy, right, with Martin Luther King Jr. on the day before King was assassinated.

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# Abernathy Controversy

ABERNATHY, From B1

by a lack of recognition over the years, and black leaders who have taken up the reins of the movement.

On one side is Abernathy, 63, slow of speech after two strokes—but “not of mind,” he says. On the other are barricades manned by an all-star cast of black leaders, including former members of King’s inner circle gone ballistic with virulent attacks to discredit one of their own.

For years, J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI tried to peddle stories about King’s reportedly active sex life in an attempt to sabotage a movement the bureau viewed as a communist plot. Those reports were not ignored by such earlier chroniclers of King’s life and times as David J. Garrow.

“It’s truly inescapable to avoid dealing with in the FBI context,” says Garrow, a 1987 Pulitzer Prize winner for his biography, “Bearing the Cross.” “This has been part of the record. It’s something one has to confront. What’s unique about King’s private life was not anything he did, but the extent it was surveilled and recorded. Only because of the FBI’s obsession has it attained this sort of cultural status.”

But the Rev. Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that King—and later Abernathy—once headed said the latest book “can do serious harm” by serving up kinky ammunition to such movement enemies as Sen. Jesse Helms, the North Carolina Republican who tried to shotgun the national King holiday.

“We don’t care what the David Garrow types write, what strangers write, the people who have been getting stuff out of FBI files for years,” says Lowery. “But this comes from a person who claimed to be his closest and dearest friend. That puts it in an entirely different category.”

Lowery, among dozens of leaders who banded together against Abernathy in recent days, not only disputes the accuracy of the recollections about how King spent his last night in Memphis, but other aspects of the book,

conjuring an Abernathy afflicted with mental and physical infirmities.

But at least one movement legend, James Farmer, jumped to Abernathy’s side. “It’s nothing new, except that the other books have not dealt with his last night,” said Farmer, now a history professor at Mary Washington College. Farmer also said he understands why others are upset about the book, acknowledging that “they feel it tarnishes the image of Dr. King. . . . [But] I think it’s largely irrelevant. King did so much good, he accomplished so many things of terribly great importance. I think that history will dwell on those good things, just as most historians have dwelled on the good things done by John F. Kennedy, and not on his affairs with Marilyn Monroe and many other women.”

Bristles Lowery, “I’m questioning his memory, his motive. I’m questioning it all.”

“I can’t see anything but jealousy,” says Abernathy, reflecting in a Sunday school classroom at his West Hunter Street Baptist Church. He sits beneath a poster proclaiming “Smile, God Loves You.”

Why did he write that King emerged from a bedroom at a supporter’s Memphis home after a late steak dinner they shared the night before he was gunned down? Why did he have to write that King passed that night in the company of two different women and that King shoved a third woman across his motel bed after an argument—mere hours before the fatal shots?

Why did he write all this in “And the Walls Came Tumbling Down”?

Abernathy writes that after the late dinner, he and King were driven to the Lorraine Motel, where Martin’s brother, A.D. King, had arrived from out of town: “. . . When we got to A.D.’s motel room, we found that he was not up. A.D. had had a couple of drinks, and there was a white woman with him.

“But there was a black woman in the room as well, a member of the Kentucky legislature; and she had clearly come to see Martin. They had known

each other before. Their relationship was a close one. Knowing that someone would be with Martin to watch out for him, I spoke to the women, then excused myself and went off to bed.”

He left the motel room they were sharing unlocked, he says, and the next morning encountered a third woman who was irate that King had apparently not spent the night in his bed. Abernathy writes that King “lay down on his bed, curled up like a small child, and looked over at me. ‘She’s mad at me,’ he said. ‘She came in this morning and found my bed empty.’”

King then asked Abernathy to “do something,” he writes. “Call her and see if you can straighten things out.” Soon there was a fight, King “lost his temper . . . and knocked her across the bed. It was more a shove than a real blow.” She stormed out, heading to the airport as King shouted for her to stay, Abernathy writes.

“I wrote nothing out of malice,” Abernathy says. “Martin was my closest friend, my buddy. . . .”

“For years, he had been placed in the position of being a saint, a Jesus, a God, but he was merely mortal, flesh and blood. . . . If I hadn’t written about what I saw, they would have accused me of whitewashing history. It’s only two pages out of more than 600. The book is a tribute to my friend.”

He disputes critics who charge that he ranks as an assassin of sorts who gunned down a memory leaders have fought to build up as an icon of hope to blacks. Rather, Abernathy says, he wanted to portray a great man with “human frailties,” to inspire ghetto youths that it is possible to achieve great things even if “they may have made mistakes.”

He said it was understandable that King’s charisma drew fans who swarmed after he emerged from jail or public speeches. “He yielded to temptation just like I yielded,” he said, perhaps referring to an incident his attackers are quick to point out—an episode detailed in “Parting the Waters,” the recent Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Taylor Branch.

Branch reports that an irate husband chased Abernathy down from his



The Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, left, greets Benjamin Hooks yesterday.

Montgomery, Ala., church with a gun and hatchet, claiming the pastor was sleeping with his wife. The man, a former Alabama State college football player was charged with assault with intent to murder but was acquitted later that year.

"When anyone wanted to joke about Ralph," says one critic, "we'd just say, 'Hatchet.' That was our code for Ralph."

Once they were like brothers, sharing a friendship that took root in Montgomery in the mid-'50s, when the civil rights movement was barely starting to rumble. Rosa Parks had just been jailed for disputing a bus driver over designated white seating.

It was time to stand up, figured two young pastors, and so began an epic chapter in the fight for racial justice in the emerging South: Abernathy, a Montgomery-born grandson of a slave and World War II veteran, and King, the preacher's son from Atlanta, began organizing the historic Montgomery bus boycott to end segregated public transit.

That crusade lasted 381 days, ending with a Supreme Court decision declaring unconstitutional Alabama's laws on bus segregation. During that time, Abernathy saw his church and home bombed. None of his family—his wife, Juanita, or his four children—were hurt.

After the boycott, King and Abernathy founded the Montgomery Improvement Association, a forerunner to the SCLC. Later, at the SCLC, King and his top deputy Abernathy, plotted strategy; side by side, they faced violence from white mobs and wound up in jail 13 times together.

On the stump, Abernathy says he readily took a back seat to King, warming crowds for the main event. Publicly, King designated him successor—a fact supporters say rankled not only Mrs. King, but ambitious young Turks in the ranks, like Jesse Jackson.

But some historians and former colleagues say it was Abernathy who smarted that his role was not larger in King's lifetime, or the hereafter. Taylor Branch calls Abernathy's book a reaction to "a lifetime of cumulative bitterness by Abernathy over the fact he

was never considered King material. . . . If this [the sexual disclosure] was a burst of honesty, why was it not more than just a blip in this whole book?"

"With two recent books—both Pulitzer Prize winners—talking openly about Martin's infidelity, I knew that if I ignored the subject, then reviewers and readers would say, 'He's not telling the truth so the rest of his book is unreliable as well,'" said Abernathy in a statement he passed out to reporters.

After Abernathy's book began making the rounds, Atlanta insurance millionaire Jesse Hill, chairman of the board of the King Center, pressed Abernathy to repudiate his work, then rallied black leaders to attack him. Abernathy fired back that they were just part of a black establishment grown rich, famous and lazy living off of King's image—and called for rededication: He urged them to work less toward immortalizing King and more toward attacking problems of the ghetto poor. Abernathy said that if he failed to use this opportunity to refocus the debate, "I know Martin would admonish me for the desecration of his dream."

If critics hoped to derail sales, the plan backfired. Harper & Row, the publisher, has ordered 10,000 more books after a first printing of 30,000. "We certainly didn't expect a firestorm like this," says a delighted publicist.

"The truth doesn't diminish my appreciation for what Dr. King accomplished in civil rights," says Carl Franklin, two books in hand, one for his daughter, an aspiring writer.

"I just don't believe in censorship," he says, as the crowd in Oxford Bookstore snakes forward. "I have a great deal of faith in Dr. Abernathy. . . . I don't feel he's going to lie. . . . Dr. King was a great man. He did great deeds, but being a hero doesn't keep you from being human, with desires and needs of fulfillment.

"It should be told as it happened."