Army's History of Spying On African Americans

Jack Colhoun

The Commercial Appeal of Memphis, Tennessee, knew Stephen Tompkins had a big story, so it timed publication to maximize its impact. Two weeks before the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the paper ran Tompkins’s investigative report across the front page of its March 21, 1993, Sunday edition. The banner headline read: "Army feared King, secretly watched him; Spying on blacks started 75 years ago."

Tompkins revealed that U.S. Army Intelligence agents had been monitoring King on April 4, 1968, the day the civil rights leader was killed in Memphis. Tompkins detailed how Army Intelligence operatives teamed up with the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama to spy on King and other black leaders such as Stokely Carmichael (now known as Kwame Toure) and H. Rap Brown. The Army provided KKK members with paramilitary training, and Klansmen supplied Army Intelligence operatives with information about local civil rights activists. U-2 spy planes were also used to monitor the civil rights movement.

Big Exposé Gets Minimal Coverage

Tompkins’s story, the result of a 16-month investigation and more than 200 interviews, is one of the best and most explosive exposés of recent years. But readers of the national news media would never know it if they depended solely on the major media’s coverage.

The New York Times and the Washington Post gave the Commercial Appeal’s investigative report minimal coverage and softened its impact, the way the power media often do when a non-elite news organization breaks a big story with the potential of exposing government politics in Washington.


The Post’s AP dispatch did, however, feature retired Army Maj. Gen. William Yarborough’s explanation for the illegal spy operation. "The Army was over a barrel," declared the head of Army Intelligence in the 1960s. "Blacks were using the uncertainty of the Vietnam period and taking advantage of it. You couldn’t expect people to be rational and look at this in a cool way. We were trying to fight a war at the same time where the home base was being eroded."

The AP dispatch also minimized troubling questions raised by the presence in Memphis of Army Green Berets, detailed to spy on King, the day King was killed. "James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to the assassination and is serving 59 years," AP reassured readers—without pointing out that Ray unsuccessfully attempted to withdraw his plea the day after he entered it. "The Commercial Appeal said its investigation found no evidence of Army involvement in King’s death."

Army’s Spying Enrages Black Neighborhoods

The Commercial Appeal story touched off a storm of anger in African-American neighborhoods in the District of Columbia, which is about 70 percent black. I learned about it while waiting to appear as a guest on Larry Hicks’s talk show on black-owned WOL-AM radio station on March 23. I had been invited to WOL to discuss my investigation of the ways in which cocaine and heroin money-laundering by the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCl) and other banks in the United States fuels the deadly turf wars among drug gangs in D.C. and other cities.

But the previous segment in which Hicks discussed the Tompkins report ran over into the next time slot. I didn’t mind. I got a first-hand opportunity to experience the intensity with which African Americans reacted to the Army spying story and the elite media’s lack of interest in it. Listeners were outraged when they learned about the details left out of the AP summary the Washington Post published.

Callers dismissed the Army’s rationale for spying on blacks as racist claptrap. Army intelligence officers had considered African Americans “ripe for subversion” by the German Kaiser in World War I when the Army began in 1917 to monitor black preachers and other leaders.

King Designated a National Security Threat

When King started to link civil rights issues to opposition to the Vietnam War in 1967 and 1968, the Army designated him a major national security threat. A 1967 Intelligence document cited by Tompkins asserted King “repeatedly has preached the message of Hanoi and Peking.” Army Intelligence believed King and others were bankrolled by China and the Soviet Union to speak out against the war.

But King’s message was prescient. "A few years ago, it seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program," King declared over and over in speeches. "And then came the buildup in Vietnam ... and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor.... Somehow this madness must cease."

Callers to WOL were furious that the Washington Post did not use its resources and political influence to put the subject of Army spying on African Americans high up on the agenda in the
nation’s capital. They wanted to know why the Post, with its famous investigative reporting team led by Bob Woodward, had left it to a newspaper in a mid-sized city like Memphis to break such an important story.

WOL kept the story alive for a week. News Dimensions, a black weekly newspaper in D.C., published a special edition March 26, reprinting the Commercial Appeal report in an effort “to thwart [the] local White media cover-up.”

WOL distributed 10,000 copies of the special issue in two days. Dick Gregory appeared on WOL to discuss the implications of the Commercial Appeal exposé with regard to the King assassination. Two hundred copies of Gregory’s and Mark Lane’s Murder in Memphis: The FBI and the Assassination of Martin Luther King (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1993) were sold in two hours.

The Washington Post played catch-up with a March 23 editorial. The editorial said that if the Commercial Appeal’s report were accurate, “that piece of ugly history... can’t be allowed to remain in silence.... The need for full public disclosure of all the facts is strong.” The editorial noted an Army investigation into the matter would be completed soon. But neither the Army nor the Washington Post has revisited the subject yet.

Green Berets Worked with KKK
Tompkins revealed how Special Forces personnel, recently returned from Vietnam, were assigned to monitor King’s activities in the South. Green Berets attached to the 20th Special Forces Group, headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama, were directed to gather intelligence on the civil rights movement.

They formed an alliance with the “Klan guys who hated niggers,” a former Green Beret told the Commercial Appeal. “So...
The U.S. Army decided that Martin Luther King, Jr., was a threat to national security. Here he is threatening Chicago civil rights leader Al Raby in 1966.

The mainstream national media could play a crucial role in turning up the heat on the Army. It's time for the media to put the issue of the Army's spying on African-American leaders on Washington's political agenda. The public deserves to know the truth.

Douglas Valentine pointed out in *The Phoenix Program* (New York: Avon Books, 1992) that there are allegations that the Army's 111th Military Intelligence Group (MIG) in Memphis kept Martin Luther King, Jr. under 24-hour-a-day surveillance and reportedly watched and took photos while King's assassin moved into position, took aim, fired and walked away" (p. 338).

Why would Army Intelligence turn SOG and other Special Forces assassins loose on King and other black leaders, whom it had designated national security threats? Were the Special Forces "dumped" into the South for "safe-keeping"? Or were they redeployed in the South to terrorize African Americans into submission? What does Army Intelligence know about the King assassination?

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