

FBI Hopes to Quash Wiretap Suit

By Drew Pearson

The Justice Department is pinning its hopes on Judge John Mowbry, Nevada jurist, to kill one of the most embarrassing law suits brought in the history of the FBI.

The suit, filed by the Fremont Hotel and Edward Levinson of Las Vegas, shows that the FBI had 25 wiretaps in this and other Las Vegas hotels, in violation of the laws of the State of Nevada.

As a result, the Fremont Hotel and Levinson are suing the Central Telephone Co. and four FBI agents for a total of \$6 million.

The suit, if it goes to trial, will involve J. Edgar Hoover and former Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, both of whom are now passing the buck to each other for responsibility in getting the FBI mixed up in such wholesale wiretapping.

The telephone company has already approached the Justice Department with a view to dumping the whole thing on its doorstep. At first telephone officials tried to cover up their part in the tapping, but got so involved in giving alibis that they finally made a clean breast and admitted that they

had cooperated in wiretapping at the request of the FBI.

Telephone officials have further informed the Justice Department that they do not plan to be hooked for the \$6 million, and it was up to the FBI and Justice to take the rap.

All this is why the Justice Department is maneuvering to quash the lawsuit.

LBJ Is Surprised

First word of the wiretaps came when Sen. Howard Cannon (D-Nev.) called on President Johnson early in 1964 to tell him that FBI wiretaps had been discovered in several Las Vegas hotels, which was a crime under Nevada law.

It was found, among other things, that the FBI had four hotel rooms in which it picked up conversations from electronic devices all over the Las Vegas strip, recorded them on machines, then transcribed the conversations. The FBI took pictures of some of the patrons of Las Vegas hotels and gambling casinos. The 25 basic phone lines gave the FBI the capability of 125 phone taps.

One bug was discovered in the bed of Carl Cohen of the Sands Hotel, where he and his wife slept.

President Johnson called in Robert Kennedy, then serving as Attorney General, who agreed to remove the taps.

Later Sen. Cannon went back to President Johnson with pictures of what the FBI

had been doing and informed him that despite Attorney General Kennedy's previous promise, the FBI was still eavesdropping.

The wiretapping started when Attorney General Kennedy launched his anticrime drive and wanted to check on underworld characters in Las Vegas.

Hoover Blames Bobby

There is considerable difference of opinion backstage in the Justice Department as to whether J. Edgar Hoover or Kennedy was responsible for this wide-scale wiretapping. Friends of Hoover assert he demurred, pin the blame on Bobby. But friends of Bobby deny this.

Defendants in the case include Dean Elston, top agent for J. Edgar Hoover in southern Nevada, together with three other FBI men besides the telephone company.

At one time an FBI official tipped off former Senate secretary Bobby Baker, recently indicted, that he was being tapped while at a Las Vegas hotel.

The original suit against the telephone company and the others was brought by Levinson, a co-owner of the Fremont Hotel. Later he was persuaded to drop the case allegedly on a promise that the Justice Department would call off an Internal Revenue investigation of him. He had come under Justice Department scrutiny

because of a loan he received from the Teamsters Union. Bobby Kennedy at that time was investigating almost everyone who had business dealings with the Teamsters or Jimmy Hoffa.

Though the suit was dismissed, it was refiled after Internal Revenue declined to call off its tax case.

Because of the time elapsed between the Justice Department's hope of quashing the two suits, the Justice Department claims the statute of limitations has run and is so arguing before Judge Mowbry next week.

The Fremont Hotel and Levinson have retained Edward Bennett Williams, top Washington attorney, to push their case.

Headlines and Footnotes

Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, who has given his cautious endorsement to the President's order to resume bombing of North Vietnam, has expressed private reservations inside the Senate cloakroom . . . There are serious shortages of supplies in Vietnam — including spare parts, jungle boots equipped with metal soles to prevent poison-tipped bamboo stakes from piercing GIs' feet, and up until the recent bombing pause, a shortage of conventional bombs.

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