

Post. 8.19.70

Poster

Private Life or U.S. Property?

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

A decent regard for the family and friends of public men has inhibited cops, journalists and biographers from publishing embarrassing material about their private lives until after the principals have gone to their graves. This was the case with Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and so on through to Warren Harding and Franklin Roosevelt. In life and in death another rule has been used with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Time after time we pick up the paper and learn that he had a sex life, a rather ordinary one by American standards, and not much different from many other men of prominence. It wasn't what Dr. King may have done in bed that made him the superior of so many police chiefs, senators and presidents.

The newest furor over Dr. King's behavior as an American male comes from a book by black novelist John A. Williams. ("The King God Didn't Save," Coward-McCann, New York, 1970, \$5.95, and don't rush out to buy it expecting sexy passages because there aren't any.) In the book Mr. Williams says, "As a black man, I do not have to ask why such 'barnyard gossip' was never circulated about the alleged, red-hot romance between (deleted, white politician) and (deleted, movie star). Why should I ask after the alleged extracurricular activities of (deleted, President) or (deleted, President) or (deleted, prince) or (deleted, princess)? . . . Anything black people set into motion is going to be monitored, anything, and then if possible compromised."

Elsewhere the writer accuses the government of clandestinely snapping pictures and tape recording episodes in the civil rights leader's private life and then politically blackmailing him: "At some point along the way, someone in the government let him (Dr. King) know that he had been taped and photographed in situations that might be considered compromising by the Puritan masses. He was asked to soft-pedal his activities, to make the appearance of carrying on as usual when in sub-

stance, he would not be' . . . Black people assume that J. Edgar Hoover has served for so long simply because he must know a lot about a lot of people, things they would not be happy to see made public. A former Senate aide told me that once while attending a meeting of a group of senators, there was a serious discussion about forming a task force to go into Hoover's office, should he die suddenly, and remove the files. Presumably this was to prevent Hoover's successor from using the information."

Using other sources Time magazine (Aug. 17) corroborates Williams, saying, "Hoover explained to King just what damaging private detail he had on the tapes and lectured him that his morals should be those befitting a Nobel prize-winner. He also suggested that King should tone down his criticism of the FBI. King took the advice. His decline in black esteem followed . . ."

This version of what happened at the 1964 King-Hoover meeting is declined by some of Dr. King's associates, although they say they're still having their phones tapped. A number of newspapermen say that attempts were made to foist feeble tape recordings on them. Quite a picture that suggests Mr. Hoover and/or his agents peddling smut, trying to get it printed in family newspapers and all the time telling us it's Communists that're behind the obscenity.

The cop-God remains silent and invisible behind his bureaucratic iconostasis. What he might say in his defense is unknown. No committee of Congress, no one in the executive branch or the courts, has looked into these and other disturbing matters concerning his office and made the results public. If it's true he has a dossier on all the important figures in officialdom, their unwillingness to make inquiries is understandable.

But how should people who want to take a hand in public affairs defend themselves against the FBI when its prurient interests are aroused? Perhaps sex laws which are obeyed with the same punctilio as our traffic laws should be changed to make anything that happens in private between consenting adults legal. Such is the case in Illinois. Another response might be to encourage public nudity and lovemaking, thereby debasing the value of feeble pictures and dirty tape recordings so that they can't be used as blackmail.

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Private Lives

COMMENT, From C1

None of this exculpates Mr. Hoover and his representatives of what they did. First there is the question of what they were doing when King was murdered. If they were in a position to know what kind of underwear the man was wearing, where were these girlie-magazine cops when the rifleman was drawing a bead on Dr. King? How come they couldn't see that?

What was their role in the investigation of the murder? They appear to be the persons who discovered James Earl Ray, the man who is supposed to have done it alone, although he says he was involved in a conspiracy with other unnamed and seemingly unsought individuals. Lately a witness has been found locked up in an insane asylum who says the man running from the flop house bathroom where the shots were fired was not James Earl Ray. What knowledge does the FBI have of that?

Beyond such questions there is the matter of how the FBI appears to have used Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. A lot of public men lay claim to the title leader. They get it with the prefix "Honorable" but nobody's ever seen the pack of them walking up a street leading a hundred thousand people. Martin Luther King actually was a leader. Millions of people followed him, both literally and by holding their minds open to his instruction.

He made his mistakes, had his weaknesses, committed his stupidities as all leaders and all people do, but he remains the outstandingly admirable public figure of our time. He began as a leader of black men and died a leader of men; he began as a leader in a fight against the legal formalities upholding racism and died fighting for decent wages for Memphis garbagemen and for all of us in attempting to bring peace in Vietnam. He was such a leader that he taught even his enemies. Today, what he said 10 years ago can be heard coming out of the mouth of an Agnew, a Mitchell or a Nixon.

If Mr. Hoover misused the power of his office to bring him down, the FBI director and his accomplices have performed an act of unpardonable idiocy. Significant portions of both races trusted Dr. King to lead them to a new high ground of fraternal union; he stood for the legal and peaceful alternative to the killing that's happening to us now, to the development of our native Tupamaros. When Chicago police detective James Alfano Jr. died the other night of a sniper's bullet, he and every urban warfare victim could thank the FBI to the extent that Mr. Hoover contributed to Dr. King's destruction and made those of us who hope for progress through peace and law look like fools.