

FBI Bugging And Blackmail Of King Bared

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The FBI attempted for years to discredit the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a concerted, undercover campaign that included bugging his hotel rooms and even mailing a blackmail letter that King took as a suicide suggestion, Senate investigators disclosed yesterday.

Once the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had decided in 1961 that King was "no good," members of the Senate intelligence committee were told, the bureau laid elaborate plans to smear him and even decided on "a new national Negro leader" to promote in his place.

The committee's chief counsel, Fritz Schwarz, said the threatening letter was sent to Dr. King in 1964 34 days before he was scheduled to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

According to a draft found in FBI files, the note read, in part:

"King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what it is. You have just 34 days in which to do (the exact number has been selected for a specific reason). It has definite practical significance. You are done. There is but one way out for you."

Sen. Walter F. Mondale (D-Minn.) asked if the letter was taken by Dr. King "to be a suggestion for suicide." Schwarz said this was correct "as we understand it."

The draft copy was found in the file of former FBI assistant director William C. Sullivan, in charge of the bureau's intelligence division, who "claims that it's a plant in his file and that someone else in the bureau wrote the document," Schwarz said.

In any case, New York City lawyer Harry Wachtel, the attorney for the King estate and for King's widow, Coretta, told reporters during a break

that the undated, anonymous letter did in fact get to King "and his wife."

Wachtel said there were "other materials" sent along with the letter, which "when read with the letter, were intended to be distressing."

Senate committee staff members said later that the packet included "information which the bureau gathered illegally and improperly through taps and bugs" but refused to elaborate. "We are not going to let these hearings be used to accomplish the aims the government had," Schwarz said.

The FBI secretly installed 16 separate bugs in hotel rooms across the country where King stayed in 1964 and 1965, according to Senate lawyer Mike Epstein, who

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headed this aspect of the committee's FBI investigation. The bureau also secretly wiretapped the offices of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference in New York and Atlanta from the fall of 1963 until as late as 1968.

Other disclosures during the explosive day-long hearing made clear that the campaign against King was not unique for the bureau. With sessions devoted entirely to the findings of an unprecedented half year's investigation of the FBI's domestic intelligence gathering, the committee was also told:

—Hoover's so-called "personal files," a set of files that Senate investigators learned about by happenstance, were largely destroyed in 1972 either shortly before or after the FBI director's death. Schwarz said Hoover had started an apparently systematic review of the files, reclassifying some as "official confidential" and thereby preserving them, but finished only the documents filed under letters A, B and C, before his death.

The document disclosing the FBI's "do not file" system to cover up its burglaries or so-called "black bag" jobs was, for example, filed under B and therefore survived destruction. As for the contents of what was destroyed, Schwarz said, "we can only guess."

The FBI conducted extensive spywork at the 1964 Democratic National Convention on behalf of the LBJ White House, and even obtained National Broadcasting Co. press credentials "through cooperation with the management of NBC News" so that it could attend various meetings and news conferences. FBI documents show the bureau reported various findings to White House aide Walter Jenkins, including such tidbits as "information . . . that congressman Adam Clayton Powell was carrying a revolver."

One member of the FBI's so-called "special squad" at the convention, Bill D. Williams, was later quoted in an FBI memo as saying it was obvious that assistant FBI director Cartha deLoach, the man in charge, "wanted to impress Jenkins and (White House aide Bill) Moyers with the bureau's ability to develop information which would be of interest to them." Williams said he also recalled Jenkins

and deLoach discussing the President's "image" in a telephone conversation.

The hotel rooms of Dr. King were bugged by the FBI both at the 1964 Democratic and the 1964 Republican conventions the committee was told. In fact, staff lawyers reported the campaign against King, who was assassinated in Memphis in April, 1968, continued even after his death.

When proposals were pending in Congress to declare King's birthday a national holiday, Schwarz said, for instance, "the bureau devised plans to call in friendly congressmen for briefings (about King) . . . in hopes they could keep the bill from being reported out of committee." Investigators said that they had not been able to determine whether such briefings did in fact take place.

FBI documents also showed that in March, 1968—a month before King was killed—the bureau decided on an expansion of its program to disrupt so-called "black nationalist hate groups" and observed in passing that one of their aims was "to prevent the rise of a messiah who could unify and electrify" such groups.

"Martin Luther King might aspire to that position . . . if he abandoned his supposed obedience to white liberal doctrines," the bureau reportedly added. In short, Schwarz charged, King was "to be destroyed because he might someday abandon nonviolence."