

TAPS APPROVED, TOLSON STATES

Letter by FBI Official
Defends Hoover

By WILLIAM BARTON

WASHINGTON (AP) — The FBI claimed Wednesday the late Robert F. Kennedy authorized it to eavesdrop on telephone conversations of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

It said the wiretap "was specifically approved in advance in writing" by Kennedy, then the attorney general.

Clyde A. Tolson, the FBI's associate director, made the assertion in attempting to repudiate newspaper reports that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover acted on his own in permitting King's phone to be tapped.

In defending Hoover, however, Tolson revived a 1966 controversy over whether Kennedy okayed the use of electronic snooping devices while he headed the Justice Department.

DISPUTE DROPPED

At that time, Hoover said Kennedy did. Kennedy, then a New York senator, said he did not. Both men eventually allowed the dispute to drop.

The latest wiretap dispute

also recalled Hoover's attack on King in 1964 as the "most notorious liar in the country." That attack came about the time the device was installed on the civil rights leader's Atlanta home.

With both Kennedy and King now dead, Hoover left to Tolson, his close associate for 34 years, the task of answering the new round of criticism.

ARTICLE DENOUNCED

In a letter to columnist Carl T. Rowan, the No. 2 FBI official denounced an article published

Sunday in which Rowan accused Hoover of flouting the law by allowing King's phone to be tapped. Rowan suggested Hoover ought to resign.

In reply, Tolson called the article "malicious" and "scurrilous" and added:

"For your information, the wiretap on Martin Luther King Jr. was specifically approved in advance in writing by the late attorney general of the United States, Mr. Robert F. Kennedy. This device was strictly in the

field of internal security and, therefore, was within the provisions laid down by the then President of the United States."

HEARD IN COURT

The King wiretap was brought to light earlier this month during a Houston federal court hearing on whether former heavyweight champion Cassius Clay's conviction for refusing induction into the armed forces was tainted by illegally obtained evidence.

Robert A. Nichols, a special

FBI agent, told of supervising the tap on King's phone, and logs of a conversation between King and Clay were introduced into the court record.

The Justice Department would not comment on Tolson's statement.

But two weeks ago, a spokesman said Hoover was "accurate in every respect" when he told Congress the attorney general authorizes all FBI wiretaps in advance and in writing.