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Mr. Hoover and Dr. King

Although the story of the FBI's surveillance of the late Dr. Martin Luther King is already a twice-told tale, it was not until this week that the extent and audacity of that operation came to light.

You would think, from the look of it, that Dr. King was the nation's public enemy number one — not a civil rights leader of distinction and bravery, loved by the people who followed him and honored as a foe of racial oppression by people all over the world.

Considering Dr. King's central place in the civil rights movement and in the Johnsonian Democratic party (which in the mid-Sixties had hinged the prestige of its civil rights program on his good faith) there may have been a case of sorts for the FBI surveillance evidently authorized by Robert Kennedy. There were charges that Dr. King was in touch with, even influenced by communists; that suspicion needed dispelling. One may imagine what havoc such indiscretions would have wrought upon his cause and those who trusted him.

But the full truth of the matter — disclosed to and by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence this week — is that the FBI's monitoring of Dr. King far transcended reasonable or authorized surveillance. And the excesses, unfortunately, stemmed from the pettiest personal motives. Dr. King had made some thoughtless and unfair charges against the FBI in Mississippi. In his usual manner Hoover nursed resentment of the charges into a vendetta. We had heard that Hoover had the sleazy habit of ingratiating himself by sharing with fellow officials, and some members of the press, certain documents concerning Dr. King's private life. We had not heard before that this vendetta ripened to the point of what can only be called blackmail — with the FBI in 1964 sending an anonymous threatening letter and materials to Dr. and Mrs. King.

In his flawed but in some respects professional management of the FBI Hoover could occasionally stoop to measures of petty retribution over criticism of himself or his agency. He is not here to explain these serious revelations, although it is in a way fitting that they go unrebutted into the record along with the discreditable stuff that he collected and disseminated about others. Indeed, Mr. Hoover gets off light. These shoddy measures against Dr. King did not produce the effect intended. What if Dr. King had responded to the 1964 letter by taking his life? Where would that leave the Hoover record?

From this morass of indecency and meanness, modest but very important lessons emerge.

One is that Mr. Hoover, in his lifetime directorship of the FBI, held too much power for much too long, for he was not immune to the corruptions of unchecked power. Another is that the FBI, like so many other investigative bodies we are learning about these days, has demonstrated a miserable inability to distinguish between real public business and poisonous intrusion into the personal affairs of the citizenry. Power, nosiness and puritanism are always a noxious mix.

Since the frailties of powerful officials were fully anticipated by those who wrote the U. S. Constitution — and especially by that undecieved student of human weakness, James Madison — why do their successors, the trustees of our constitutional legacy, so timidly trust benevolence to do the work of checks and balances? All the investigative bodies should have a regular housecleaning at the top, a mandatory housecleaning not easily deterred by toadying and the threat of blackmail. In respect of J. Edgar Hoover, whose tragedy all this is, the housecleaning came too late for his and the nation's good.