

Plot theory rejected

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How FBI considered plants to cast doubt on Coretta King

WASHINGTON (UPI) — After James Earl Ray's conviction for the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., FBI leaders considered planting a news story and having a book written to discredit King's widow and other conspiracy theorists, newly released FBI files disclosed.

But the King assassination files also show the FBI was still checking out its own conspiracy tips as late as December 1976, when it dismissed a "tip" that King's successor as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, had taken out a \$265,000 "hit" contract on their leader.

Insights into the bureau's suspicion of Mrs. King and her husband's followers — whom it apparently wiretapped even after his murder — emerged from more than 40,000 pages of investigative files released under the Freedom of Information act.

Files reviewed earlier showed the FBI concluded Ray acted without conspirators, a belief questioned by Mrs. King and many others.

The FBI leadership's hostility toward conspiracy theorists, and King's intimates in particular, is set forth in a series of memos written to J. Edgar Hoover by his aide, Cartha DeLoach, starting on March 11, 1969.

That was two days after Ray pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 99 years in prison for shooting King to death in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

"Now that Ray has been convicted," DeLoach wrote, "I would like to suggest that the director allow us to choose a friendly, capable author, or the Readers Digest, and proceed with a book based on the case."

In the memo signed off with Hoover's "O.K.," DeLoach suggested such a book would polish the FBI's image while preserving "the true history of this case" against the attacks of conspiracy theorists.

Then he proposed attacking Mrs. King and Abernathy through a planted news story.

"I would also like to suggest . . . advising a friendly newspaper contact, on a strictly confidential basis, that Coretta King and Rev. Abernathy are deliberately plotting to keep King's assassination in the news by pulling the ruse of maintaining that King's murder was definitely a conspiracy.

"This, of course, is obviously a rank trick in order to keep the money coming to Mrs. King, Abernathy and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," DeLoach said. "We can do this without any attribution to the FBI and without

For whom the Bell tolls

BATON ROUGE, La. — A request to increase Louisiana's nickel pay phones to 20 cents has been submitted to the state's Public Service Commission. Louisiana is one of only a handful of places in the United States where a pay phone costs only five cents.

anyone knowing that the information came from a wiretap."

The files disclosed nothing more about the wiretaps, nor do they show whether the book or the news article projects were ever carried out.

Investigation of the hit-contract allegation about Abernathy was reported in a memo dated Dec. 15, 1976, from the FBI's Birmingham bureau to Washington headquarters.

It said agents had just spent several weeks checking a tip that Abernathy and an SCLC colleague identified only as the Rev. Shuttleworth "had bought a contract for \$285,000 to have Martin Luther King killed."

The rumored motive, they said, was the underlings' belief that "King had gone soft with his nonviolence and the money coming into SCLC and the civil rights movement had fallen off considerably . . . if he were killed he would become a martyr and money would be flowing in."

The reporting agents said the tip came from an unidentified informant who got his information from a man who allegedly showed him a rifle two weeks before the Memphis killing and said, "This will be used to kill Martin Luther King."

an incentive reward to you in the amount of \$250.00. Sincerely, J. Edgar Hoover."

At times Hoover tended to overestimate the power of public relations. In 1965, Joseph L. Rauh, Jr., vice-president of Americans for Democratic Action, a liberal group, made some critical remarks about Hoover in a speech he gave to a meeting of the National Students Association. Rauh accused the FBI of not enforcing the law when it came to the area of civil rights. He wanted the federal government to take steps to protect civil rights workers in the South and charged that Hoover was "the wrong man" to head civil rights investigations because of his disparaging remarks about Martin Luther King.

Faced with a real crisis, Hoover turned to his public relations machine to cover it up instead of trying to solve it. A Crime Records memo to Hoover dated 25 August 1965 stated:

Pursuant to Mr. Tolson's instructions, we are making immediate contact with Miriam Ottenberg at the Washington Star so that Rauh's charges can be answered in the press at the earliest possible time. We will prevail on her to get an article out if at all possible this weekend. Previously approved material is being furnished her for use in the article to combat Rauh's charges in accordance with the Director's instructions.

We should also utilize other sources.

By the time Crime Records wrote their next memo on the following day, the public relations operation was in full swing:

We have been working with Miss Ottenberg today and have gotten up considerable material in order that we can effectively refute Rauh's criticisms. Miss Ottenberg says that her story will run either Friday, August 27, or else on Sunday the 29th, in the *Star*.

Additionally, we have sent material today to a number of columnists including Fulton Lewis, Jr., Paul Harvey, Bob Allen of the *Hall Syndicate*, Ray Cromley of Newspaper Enterprise Association, Ed Mowry of General Features and the Newhouse chain, Ed O'Brien of the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, Warren Rogers of Hearst and Ray McHugh of the *Coply Press*, among others.

We are continuing to work on this to insure that the widest possible coverage can be given to our positive accomplishments in the civil rights field.

Louis B. Nichols, who was then assistant director of the FBI, was in charge of all public relations, press matters, and contacts with Congress for Hoover. Nichols had his own solution to the growing criticism of the FBI's role in the civil rights controversy. Like Hoover's plan, it had nothing to do with real policy change but was pure public relations.

In a misguided effort to cut off the criticism of the FBI at its source, Nichols talked Hoover into hiring Morris Ernst, who was at that time head of the American Civil Liberties Union, as the director's personal lawyer. As the American Civil Liberties Union was even more liberal than Americans for Democratic Action, Ernst and Hoover were a very unlikely combination. However, shortly after he began to represent Hoover, Ernst wrote an article for the *Reader's Digest* praising the FBI. The article was reprinted and we mailed out copies by the thousands.

After that article appeared, the Hoover-Ernst relationship faded away, just as the relationship between Hoover and Walter Winchell once did. Winchell was probably the first nationally known radio commentator developed by the FBI. We sent Winchell information regularly. He was our mouthpiece. Of course, he became so obvious after a while that he finally lost his value, and Hoover lost interest in him. Winchell once had a tremendous audience, though, and he was very valuable to Hoover then, who used him practically every time he wanted to leak a story.

When I hear people talk about a "new" FBI, I know that the changes they talk about are only paper changes. This public relations operation of Hoover's, this massive attempt to control public opinion, continues to this day, and it is at the very heart of what is wrong with the bureau. Unless it is exposed, until every editor of every little weekly newspaper who ever printed an FBI press handout realizes how he has been used, the FBI will do business in the same old way.

A massive, pervasive public relations operation is no substitute for the job of investigating crimes. The FBI should conduct its business quietly and it should earn its respect from the citizens of the United States by the results of its work, not from the results of its propaganda.

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