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Contempt of Law

Why did the Federal Bureau of Investigation tap the telephone of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.? The tapping was disclosed, beyond any contradiction, in testimony given on Wednesday in a Federal District Court. It violated an Act of Congress, the Federal Communications Act. It violated the repeated assertion by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that his agency tapped telephones only in national security cases.

John S. Martin, an attorney in the U.S. Solicitor General's office, acknowledged in court that the civil rights leader had been under FBI electronic surveillance in 1964 and 1965 and that the four FBI wiretaps made of telephone conversations in which he participated were illegal. There can be no doubt whatever as to the illegality of these wiretaps. In point of fact, the Government did not choose to contest their illegality.

Mr. Hoover has said many times that his agency taps no telephones without express authorization from the Attorney General. Did Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, a distinguished champion of civil rights, authorize surveillance, in clear violation of

law, of the country's most respected civil rights leader?

Mr. Hoover has said many times, in congressional hearings and in public statements, that his agency taps no telephones except in cases affecting the country's security. Will he assert that he believed the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King presented a peril to national security? He has indicated on past occasions that he takes an elastic, and sometimes a very confused, view of national security. But Martin Luther King?

It is no light matter to have the law flouted by the country's foremost investigating agency. Contempt for the law by public agencies and public officials breeds contempt for the law by the public itself. Worse still, a contemptuous disregard for the privacy and the essential freedom of American citizens strikes dangerously at the foundations of American life. The American people cannot afford to let J. Edgar Hoover be a law unto himself, no matter how valuable his past public service. A people careless of fundamental rights can hardly be said to deserve those rights at all.