

One Time the Bureau Did Too Much

THE FBI AND MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

From "Solo" to Memphis.

By David J. Garrow.

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By LESLIE MAITLAND

THE F.B.I. is damned for doing too much and damned for doing too little," Assistant Deputy Director James B. Adams told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in 1975, regarding the Bureau's covert surveillance of supposed subversives, including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Many of the Bureau's counterintelligence projects were started, he said, by men who "felt they had a responsibility to act, and having felt this responsibility, did act." Cities were burning, and "we didn't know what the end would be."

In "The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.," David J. Garrow, who teaches at the University of North Carolina, attempts to examine that question of responsibility. Why did the Bureau feel it was necessary to spy on the civil rights leader? And why did its inquiry turn into an obsession for Director J. Edgar Hoover, leading him to mount a concerted campaign to discredit King — a campaign that did not stop short of urging King to consider suicide? ("There is only one thing left for you to do," King was warned, Mr. Garrow tells us,

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in an anonymous letter sent by the Bureau in 1964, along with a potentially embarrassing tape recording obtained by agents who bugged his hotel rooms. "You are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal, fraudulent self is bared to the nation.")

The F.B.I.'s attempts to vilify King in the eyes of the public and to plant doubts about him in the minds of his closest advisers, including his wife, were aired years ago in hearings by the Senate Intelligence Committee. But Mr. Garrow deserves commendation for shedding new light on what lay behind the Bureau's efforts, as well as for providing new detail on events already known, though still capable of shocking.

The author's careful search of F.B.I. files obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests and his interviews — with associates of the assassinated civil

rights leader and with former agents involved in the counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) — reveal the origin of the Bureau's suspicion that King was being influenced by Communists subtly working to destroy the nation. From the early 1950's until the publication of his book, Mr. Garrow says, the Bureau utilized as double-agents two brothers, Jack and Morris Childs, who rose to trusted positions in the American Communist Party. They were, he says, "the crucial link by which Soviet funds approximating one million dollars a year were channeled secretly to the American Communist Party. As such the brothers not only came to know the most confidential details of the Soviet-CP connection, details of course passed on to the F.B.I., but also to have substantial entrée with those

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in Moscow who supplied this cash."

The Childs brothers, operating under the code name "Solo," provided the Bureau with information identifying a New York lawyer, Stanley D. Levison, as an important figure in American Communist circles. And when the Bureau learned in 1962 that Levison and King were close friends, it went into action. "The origins of the investigation lay in an honestly held F.B.I. belief that Stanley Levison was a conscious and active agent of the Soviet Union," Mr. Garrow explains, "and that Levison's friendship with King was motivated by something other than a desire to advance the cause of civil rights in America."

The F.B.I.'s "six years of non-stop electronic surveillance of Levison," however, failed to uncover any of these other motives, Mr. Garrow says. And Levison — who was one of King's most important advisers