

Hoover vs King: new evidence

NEW, HAUNTING questions have emerged about the killing of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Minimally they provoke new doubts about the FBI's role as investigator of the crime and the convenient "solution" provided by the confession of James Earl Ray.

The hitherto unpublished documents, released by the FBI in response to a Freedom of Information suit by the Center for National Security Studies (a project of the Fund for Peace and the ACLU Foundation), offer further grim evidence of the mindless intensity of J. Edgar Hoover's five-year vendetta against King that preceded the murder in Memphis.

They reveal — among other things — that under Hoover the FBI actively negotiated with a black leader (name still suppressed) about a plan to engineer "the removal of King from the national scene."

In the light of what finally happened, the words assume a retroactively menacing tone. Nothing in the material suggests a conspiracy of violence. But they convey more clearly than ever Hoover's resolve to discredit and destroy him as a leader of the civil rights movement.

How can that record be reconciled with the FBI's eventual posture as investigator of the crime? How can any of its reports essentially sustaining the claim that the



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murder was a solo act by Ray be taken seriously?

In the latest disclosures, a major exhibit is a memo dated Dec. 1, 1964, to then assistant director William C. Sullivan (who died not long ago in what was described as a hunting accident) from one J. A. Sizzio describing a meeting that Cartha (Deke) DeLoach, one of Hoover's closest confidantes, had with the black leader whose identity is still unrevealed. In it Sizzio wrote:

"(Blank) stated to DeLoach that he was faced with the difficult problem of taking steps to remove King from the national picture. He indicates in his comments a lack of confidence that he, alone, could be successful."

Sizzio urged DeLoach to confer personally again with the anonymous personage and "offer to be helpful in connection with the removal of King from the national scene."

The memo further advised DeLoach to propose that the nameless figure summon a meeting of "Negro leaders in the country" —

among those mentioned were A. Philip Randolph and James Farmer — to brief them on "the security background of King." It concluded with this remarkable paragraph:

"The inclusion of U.S. Government officials, such as Carl Rowen (sic) or Ralph Bunche is not suggested as they might feel a duty to advise the White House of such a contemplated meeting."

The occupant of the White House was then Lyndon Johnson. Whether such a meeting was ever held remains undisclosed. Conceivably too many of those approached, rebuffed the overture. Perhaps the sequel is contained in files still suppressed.

In any case the surveillance of King and some of his associates — begun in 1963 after Hoover obtained authorization for it from then Attorney General Robert Kennedy — was relentlessly pursued.

In January of 1966, Attorney General Katzenbach sent a memo to Hoover about the King Group surveillance saying:

"Obviously these are particularly delicate surveillances and we should be very cautious in terms (of) the non-FBI people who may from time to time necessarily be involved in some aspect of installation."

It is hardly news that Hoover had an obsessive preoccupation with King's private life and resorted to the infamous circulation of

tapes concerned with sex rather than subversion.

But the FBI's involvement in the politics of the civil rights movement — and its apparently active abortive partnership with one of King's rivals in a plan to ruin him — takes us a step beyond the realm of clandestine character assassination.

It must also fortify all the doubts so long-aheld not only about the nature of the FBI's post-mortem inquiry but about the quality of "protection" it afforded him when he was under fire.

There will be those tempted to say that the Hoover legend has been tarnished enough — both before and since his death — and that no purpose is served by additional exploration of his transgressions.

But it is not primarily Hoover's place in history that is at issue. It is the gnawing sense that too many aspects of the King murder are still enveloped in mystery, and that too many prefer to call the case "closed" — including some Memphis police officials and local FBI agents — who were serving there when the murder occurred.

Those who valued King's life have a right and an obligation to press for better answers than they have received. Conceivably a new trial for James Earl Ray would provide at least fresh clues. Certainly the latest material at hand bolsters the case for skepticism and persistence.