

# He Spied On Martin Luther

By Paul Good  
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For six years, the informant worked alongside Martin Luther King Jr. while he spied on the black leader for FBI dollars. Their offices in the Atlanta headquarters of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were only steps away from each other. The informant's identity — known to a few people in government — has never been made public, and today he lives in fear that he will be killed if his deeds become known.

The informant is both a collaborator in and victim of J. Edgar Hoover's compulsion to destroy King. He is a black man who lives with an uneasy conscience and the knowledge that his betrayal was part of the Bureau's decade-long campaign to destroy King and the civil rights movement.

I came upon him by a circuitous route over a long period. A series of contacts led me to Al Sentinella, the retired FBI agent who recruited the informant in 1964. Eventually I reached the man himself.

The King chapter of his life is still a secret, even to his closest relatives.

"If I had known in 1964 what I know now, I wouldn't have done it," he told me. "I have never talked to anybody about this, except the investigators from a Congressional committee who protected my identity. Not to a friend, my wife or anyone from SCLC. I don't want their lives shamed because I made a mistake. If my name comes out, I know somebody will want to kill me."

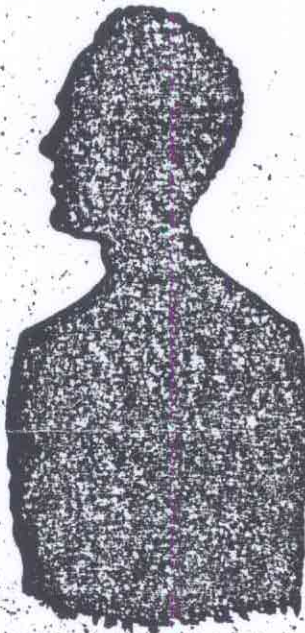
The informant, a trim, soft-spoken man in his 40s, holds a middle-class job in Georgia and lives a quiet, middle-class life. Most people hearing his name today would not recognize it.

Some months ago, he agreed to talk briefly to me about his experiences as an informant in exchange for anonymity.

The money, ranging from between \$450 and \$600 a month for six years, totalled something over \$30,000, in addition to the \$9,000 he was already earning as an SCLC staffer. What did it buy for the FBI?

The bureau bought "whatever he had," Sentinella said. "It could be movement plans, financial conditions, where King was travelling and personal stuff about him that the informant picked up second-hand. I never forced him to stay. I don't know if it bothered him psychologically. Certainly not so much that he had trouble taking the money."

Sentinella said all information gathered in Atlanta showed "no indication that SCLC tried to foment violence in any way ... nothing to suggest King or



SCLC was controlled out of Moscow." Bureau dirty tricks such as the 1964 tape on King's alleged sexual affairs were "not done in the best of taste," he admitted, "but were done anyway."

Still, he refused to give me the informant's name. He checked a phone directory to see if the man was still living at his old address. As if by chance, I reached across his desk for an ashtray and read the page number upside down. Later, I checked the page for name groupings and then called SCLC contacts.

The correct name emerged. One contact, unaware of the reason for my interest, described him as a fine person and gave me his phone number. The informant was apprehensive when I called him at work and said I wanted to interview him for a story on the movement. Reluctantly, he agreed to meet on a busy street corner near his office.

He turned out to be so shaken when I told him what I knew about him that he instantly turned back toward his building as if you could simply walk away from the past. I told him he could do things the hard way, which was to refuse to talk — in which case I would reveal what I knew about him. Or he could take the easy way — talk with me with the promise that his identity would be protected.

He agreed to talk. We sat on a sidewalk bench while noontime crowds surged by. I turned to adjust my recorder and when I looked back his eyes were closed, lips moving in prayer.

"I don't pray a lot in front of people,"

he said. "But I had to pray in public then that I'm doing the right thing."

"Did you pray before deciding to spy on King to the FBI?"

"I don't really remember that," he replied.

Why did he start cooperating with the Bureau?

"My rationale had mostly to do with whether the Communist Party was manipulating the movement," he said. "I can say now I found absolutely no evidence of that."

"Did it take six years to come to that conclusion?"

"No," the informant replied. "I came to that about the first year. The reason I stayed was I wondered what would happen if I stopped. Nobody ever threatened me. If you quit we're gonna do this and that kind of stuff. But the question came in my mind and I wondered. So I said, I'm gonna quit when I get out of SCLC and get me another job."

"How did you handle the fact that even if you thought you were doing this for a good reason, you were taking pretty fair amounts of money from them?"

"Oh, I could never handle that in my mind. I'll tell you one thing though. I was given (money) but I never asked for any certain amount."

"According to Sentinella, it was \$450 a month for a few years and went up."

"I don't recall," he said.

"But you've got a guilty conscience anyway?"

"And that's probably why I don't know," he said, and laughed for the first time.

Most people rationalize their guilts and the informant was no exception. He claimed to have known nothing about FBI efforts to discredit King with the notorious tape and other activities. He claimed he didn't remember being "conscious of dealing with smut all the time." He didn't think that "anything was being done with what I gave them." Overall, he "admired" King.

But gradually, he began "remembering" less innocent details that he had reported about the man SCLC staffers called "Doc." There was "one time that sticks in my mind when a staff member supposedly walked in on Doc and a woman in a hotel. I remember passing that along to Al while we were talking." The informant also said he attended strategy meetings.

"I'd report what we talked about, what our general intentions were. I'd mention it. But if I wasn't at a meeting, then I wouldn't know. So far as I can remember, I never made up a big story to tell them. I never said lies."

"So they were getting their money's worth?"

# King Jr.

"That's right...It bothered me that I was working for them. The whole thing bothered the hell out of me. I can look back now and say, Yeah, I can see how they took this and tried to do something with that."

During the '60s, it was common knowledge in the civil rights movement that the FBI worked closely with police departments that were anti-movement. The FBI's own records show, for example, that the bureau knew that Klansmen worked with the Birmingham police while FBI information was fed to them. The informant told me that he sometimes complained to Sentinella that "our people were being beaten and agents aren't protecting them."

But he said he made no connections between the information he provided as to when SCLC would be in certain areas and subsequent attacks on King supporters in those areas. He was in Memphis with King in April, 1968. James Earl Ray or whoever killed King was also there, apparently armed with knowledge of King's comings and goings. It has never been established who supplied it. The informant told me he left Memphis a week before the assassination. Sentinella says the informant left "just before the killing." Congressional investigators report "there is no indication that (the informant) influenced events there." "When accusations were made that the Bureau might have had something to do with it," the informant said, "I wondered if I perhaps did have or was being set up to help do that or something. But there was nothing I did...As far as trying to harm anybody, I can't feel guilty about that because I never tried to. I just couldn't be the man if they did do it."

He said he had to get back to work. He left with the promise that he would talk gain. But the next week when I called, he said he would not discuss his spying again no matter what I planned to do as far as revealing his identity.

"I had a lot of sleepless nights," he said. "I prayed and said, 'Well, Lord, Thy will be done.' You know, my life has changed in the movement, too."

The other day, after many months, I tried again. He was not so contrite, insisting that he had not harmed the movement but that he might still be killed by "black or white kooks. You don't handle a color line when you've got kooks."

"I don't think what happened to King and to me could ever happen again," the informant said. "I don't think the American people would stand for it. Now lemme go."

*Paul Good is the author of the book "The Trouble I've Seen: White Correspondent, Black Movement" and covered the civil rights movement through the '60s and '70s.*