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Aggravator 8/18/78

FBI's possible role in King death resurfaces in Abernathy testimony

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WASHINGTON — The FBI's possible involvement in the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came under question yesterday as the House Select Committee on Assassinations opened public hearings into the slaying.

Testimony by Dr. King's closest friend and adviser, the Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, and questions by committee members indicated suspicion that the FBI, directly or indirectly, might somehow have contributed to Dr. King's death.

Committee members heard no solid evidence to support such suspicions, which have been put forth by assassination buffs and others in the years since Dr. King's death 10 years ago. James Earl Ray, who is scheduled to testify before the committee tomorrow, was convicted of the killing and is currently serving a 99-year term at a Tennessee prison.

The ranking Republican on the committee, Samuel Devine of Ohio, a former FBI agent, said: "I hope this doesn't turn into a trial of the FBI." In his testimony, Mr. Abernathy said Dr. King had had a premonition

that he might be killed in the days before he was shot on a motel balcony in Memphis Tenn., on April 5, 1968.

"I think he had received some word from some sources that he was going to be assassinated," Mr. Abernathy said.

The committee, which has said that it intends to ask other witnesses in November about the possibility of FBI involvement, did not ask Mr. Abernathy who those "sources" might have been.

Later, outside the hearing room, Mr. Abernathy told reporters that he thought the FBI was involved in the assassination, but conceded that he had no evidence to support his belief.

"I think when Dr. King started to bring poor people together, someone in a very high place in our country . . . decided we must eliminate this young black leader and cut him down," Mr. Abernathy said.

In his testimony, Mr. Abernathy recounted Dr. King's distrust of the FBI and the FBI's long surveillance of Dr. King, including bugging, surveillance and a campaign to discredit him, when J. Edgar Hoover was the bureau's director.

Mr. Abernathy said he suspected that the Lorraine Motel room in which he and Dr. King almost always stayed when they were in Memphis had been bugged by the FBI or the Memphis police. Dr. King was standing on a balcony just outside that room when he was shot.

The police, an ambulance and the FBI were there moments after the shooting, Mr. Abernathy said, although no one at the motel had called them. He also noted that Ray, who supposedly killed Dr. King with a high-powered rifle from a window nearly a block away, knew exactly where he and Dr. King were and was able to escape from Memphis.

Ray was captured two months later, at a London airport, after an escape route that had taken him through the United States, Canada and Portugal.

Mr. Abernathy said he felt it would have been "impossible" for Ray to escape, travel and sustain himself "without help." He added that although he was exceptionally close to Dr. King and was with the civil rights leader when he was killed, neither the Memphis police nor the FBI ever questioned him about the murder.

Speaking quietly in his deep preacher's voice, Mr. Abernathy said he returned from a trip abroad in January 1968 and found Dr. King "a different . . . man . . . depressed . . . nervous . . . worried . . . very, very jittery . . . frightened. He did what he had never done. He passed on information to me he thought I should have. He talked about his funeral."

That depression, Mr. Abernathy said, made Dr. King reluctant to return to Memphis, where his Southern Christian Leadership Conference was helping in the strike of mostly black Memphis garbage workers.

He said Dr. King's belief that he was about to die led him to make the famous speech in Memphis the night before he was killed, in which he said: "I have been to the mountaintop and I have viewed the promised land. But if I don't get there with my people . . . mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The following evening, Mr. Abernathy said, Dr. King was standing on the balcony outside his room, waiting for Mr. Abernathy, who was inside.

Mr. Abernathy said he heard "what sounded like a firecracker" and saw Dr. King sprawled on the balcony floor, dying.