

Will accusation haunt him the rest of his life?

Bibb's afraid of guilt

WASHINGTON — What's it like when an ordinary citizen gets caught up in an extraordinary national event?

"It's embarrassing, really," says James W. Bibb.

Bibb, a former Louisville alderman and retired Louisville police officer, apparently was among a gaggle of former FBI agents and Louisville policemen — ranging in rank from chief of detectives to patrolman — named in a tale about an alleged plot to murder the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Louisville a decade ago.

"Apparently" and "alleged plot" — in a situation where few facts are available — don't seem strong enough disclaimers for this story.

Here's what's been reported: A retired Louisville policeman named Clifton E. Baird sent U.S. Rep. Gene Snyder, Republican whose 4th District includes much of suburban Jefferson County, a letter last winter. In it, Baird charged he was offered \$500,000 to kill King, whose brother lived in Louisville. Baird reportedly said others were involved in the alleged plot.

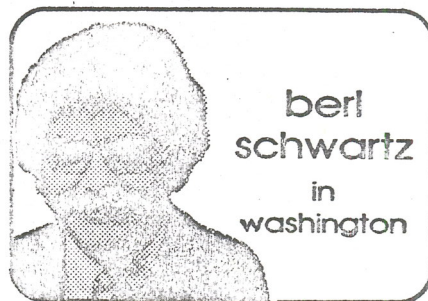
Snyder turned the letter over to the ranking Republican on the House Select Committee on Assassinations. The committee was created in 1976 to look into the murder of President Kennedy. Almost as an afterthought, the committee decided it would look into the 1968 killing of King in Memphis, Tenn., for which James Earl Ray has been convicted and is imprisoned.

Committee investigators went to Louisville and interviewed at least 21 people last winter. Bibb was one of them. Eight of them won a free trip to Washington last week to testify before the committee's King subcommittee.

At first, Bibb didn't want to talk about what was going on. He'd seen his name in the paper enough, at least in connection with the alleged plot. Besides, he and the other witnesses were under some vague instructions not to talk to reporters.

Then Bibb decided perhaps he should tell his story. So far nobody else had bothered to give his version — that he was just an innocent bystander.

Bibb's concern was understandable. The hearing was closed to the public. Committee officials were saying nothing



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but "no comment" to reporters. News accounts said there was an alleged plot and Bibb was a witness, and readers were left to draw their own conclusions. Bibb didn't like the idea that somebody might conclude he wanted to kill King.

"It came out of the blue," Bibb said about how he got involved in the investigation. The first he knew he was involved in it was when a reporter from Scripps-Howard newspapers' Washington bureau paid him a visit in Louisville last winter and began asking questions.

Bibb doesn't know how the reporter got his name. He guesses someone on the committee leaked it. Next, committee investigators were in Louisville asking him and others questions.

Bibb said he told the investigators he didn't know anything more than that Baird, who was reportedly charging the alleged plot, had served under him for a short time. "I tried to be cooperative," he said. "Most of the old-time policeman are. They're trained to help out all government agencies."

As Bibb related sketchy details about the investigations, he talked a good bit about himself. He talked about how small his police disability pension is, how he'd suffered a number of injuries on the job, how little money he's making selling real estate and insurance, how he struggled financially during his four years as an alderman. "That was a loss," he said. "There was no money to make in that, at least for me."

In short, he portrayed himself as a 61-year-old man facing old age without financial security, as a man who's still fighting to make ends meet. And in the middle of his life comes a plot to kill Martin Luther King.

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"I didn't know what they were doing to whom," he said about the investigation. "It's an unknown quantity you're dealing with. You read about it in the paper, but you don't know which ones are being accused and which ones aren't. I'd search my brain but I didn't know anything. All they'd tell us is they were investigating to see if there was anything to turn over to the committee."

Bibb is convinced there never was an assassination plot. "You can go into any barroom in the country and pick up stories like these," he said. "While I've been in Washington I think I've put this thing all together. In my opinion, it was nothing but a prank. Cruel, but a prank."

Bibb feels wronged. "If we had any court in the land that operated like that committee. . . ." he said, trailing off. "I never could have operated in the Police Department like this."

Referring to the witnesses, he said, "Several of us were brought up here (to Washington) on something we know nothing about. We sat up there for eight hours without a break, except for lunch, and then they didn't provide anything. All they ever told us was to come back tomorrow."

"I had to close up my office and come up here and keep some deals pending that I'll probably lose that I needed to keep my head above water," he said.

But Bibb is worried about more than that. He was hoping for a place in the new City Hall administration; he is afraid the bad publicity has hurt his chances. He thinks that if he ever runs again for alderman, black voters will distrust him because he was linked with the alleged plot, however bogus it turns out to be. And he's worried about the crank calls he expects he'll get in the middle of the night.

Bibb is in a defenseless position. He cannot defend himself because he has not been accused of any crime. He is a victim of a story about an alleged plot that nobody is saying much about in public.

The committee's chief counsel won't say if there's anything to this "plot." The committee's rules preclude public statements until a full report is issued, next fall.

Until then, Bibb will have to live with it. He'll have to live with the frustration of being an unwilling participant in a sordid little sidebar to history.

And when the report comes out next fall — and it probably will clear Bibb of any wrongdoing — you can be sure that there still will be people who'll say, when James W. Bibb's name comes up, "Oh, him? Wasn't he the guy who was mixed up in that plot to kill Martin Luther King?"

Bert Schwartz's column appears on the second Thursday of each month.