

Did FBI Story Incite Assassination of King?

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Three years before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was slain, an FBI agent walked into a Louisville, Ky., police station and told one or more officers there were people willing to pay an enormous amount of money for a "hit" on the civil rights leader.

The "contract" was for either \$500,000 or \$250,000, and those who wanted King dead were either the Communist Party or the Ku Klux Klan.

That was the story told to the House Assassinations Committee during three days of closed hearings this week by at least two men who were members of the Louisville police force in 1965. One of the policemen was so concerned, he even secretly tape recorded another officer's account of how the FBI man passed on word of the "contract."

The committee also took testimony from several FBI officials, including the agent who passed along the story to the police. The agent, whose name was not disclosed, is still a member of the FBI stationed somewhere in the Midwest.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL Robert Blakey refused any comment on what transpired at the hearings or what conclusions the committee reached.

However, it was learned that members of the committee, headed by Rep. Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, emerged with mixed feelings about the incident in Louisville. One source said there was no evidence of any connection between the FBI-police conversations about a "hit" on King.

"But what makes it sinister," said one person knowledgeable about what happened at the hearings, "is that it might have led to what happened in Memphis in 1968."

King was fatally wounded by a rifleman at a Memphis motel, and James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to the shooting. Ray now says he did not kill King and is trying for a new trial.

"Some people might say it was only a joke, but if it was, where's the punchline?" said one investigator.

"Look at the possibilities. One, maybe it was intended to be a joke, but it was a sick one, and maybe it spread word-of-mouth to the Missouri jail where Ray was doing time. And

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maybe Ray really believed somebody was ready to pay \$250,000 or \$500,000 to the man who killed King. We know he spoke about it while he was in the Missouri jail.

"TWO, MAYBE IT was not a joke but part of Cointelpro, the FBI's campaign for disrupting some of the movements that were growing in the

"Or, three, maybe that kind of

money really was being offered for King's death in 1965.

"Depending on what really happened, it was at best a bad, sick joke and at worst an incitement to homicide."

Committee sources referred all queries to the FBI, but they indicated the agent who allegedly told the policemen about the supposed "contract" on King has denied ever saying what the policemen alleged was said. The FBI acknowledged that the agent appeared before the committee but declined any comment on whether the agent had been disciplined because the case is still under review.

The FBI-police incident was brought to the attention of the committee eight months ago by Rep. Gene Snyder, D-Ky. Snyder received a letter from a former policeman recounting the incident and asking to be put in touch with the assassinations panel.

AT THAT TIME Snyder met with the former policeman and characterized him as a rational, logical sort of man. The impression this policeman made on the committee was that he was a "straight arrow" who even tape recorded another policeman's account of the blood money story the FBI man allegedly was peddling.

After receiving the letter and listening to the tape, Snyder turned everything over to the Stokes committee.

One committee source said it would have been better if the FBI

agent had acknowledged making an ill-advised joke or maliciously and recklessly passing along a false story because, at least then the matter could be put to rest. But now the incident must remain open for further investigation as long as the policemen tell it one way and the FBI denies it.

The panel could not prove a connection between the Louisville incident and King's death, but it was not disproved either. Sources said the matter would be reopened any time additional information is received.