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The Washington Merry-go-round

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Frederick researcher-writer finds FBI locked files on Dr. M.L. King



WASHINGTON — Civil rights leaders are planning to commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s epochal 1963 march on Washington with another march on the nation's capitol Aug. 27.

Undeserving of emulation — but not easy to forget — was the FBI's march on the march on Washington. The late J. Edgar Hoover's agents dogged the footsteps of King and his associates, bugged them and tapped their telephones, squandering millions of the taxpayers' dollars on this disgraceful surveillance operation.

Now, 20 years later, tens of thousands of documents — perhaps hundreds of thousands — relating to the King family and other civil rights leaders, as well as to the historic march itself, are still locked tight in the FBI's files, unavailable to researchers, historians and the public.

The existence of the FBI's voluminous files on King was discovered by Harold Weisberg of Frederick, Md., an indefatigable researcher on American political assassinations. He obtained a 404-page partial inventory of documents that are stored in 59 FBI field offices across the country. A single entry in the inventory could refer to one page or a thousand pages of hidden material.

The inventory for the New York City field office is instructive. It gives an indication of the staggering amount of material on King that sits under lock and key in FBI files.

The inventory takes up 15 pages of index, and mentions "100 volumes" of unreleased documents. The general estimate of a "volume" is 200 pages, though it could run anywhere from six pages to several hundred pages.

The New York listing has 2,610 entries on a single King aide. The material includes formal and informal FBI memos, logs and reports of physical surveillance, teletypes, informants' reports, old newspaper clippings and copies of documents in the files of other field offices.

Much of the FBI material is classified and is still withheld because of "national security." This was a favorite Nixon-era device used to hide information that might embarrass the federal government, often when there wasn't the faintest connection to the nation's security.

Other data is being withheld by the FBI, even in the face of litigation, on grounds that it was supplied by confidential informants whose identities must still be protected. But after 20 years, the informants who are still alive could be protected easily by simply deleting their names or other identifying hints.

A bureau spokesman laid the responsibility on Watt, noting that he has "given talks ... recounting the accomplishments of his administration and encouraged employees to do the same." McAvoy "responded to that and

Oddly enough, there's a whole raft of King material that would be freely available at FBI field offices — but only if someone knew specifically what to ask for. And thousands of documents are already open to inspection in the FBI reading room.

In fairness to the FBI, employees spent hours trying to sort out the facts on the unreleased material for my associate Les Whitten. But they admitted that they have no idea — even to the nearest hundred thousand — how many documents remain hidden on the most influential black leader of our time.

Footnote: At the very time that Hoover was pursuing his vendetta against Dr. King at enormous cost to the taxpayers, the Mafia was spreading its malignant tentacles throughout American society. If the money spent harassing King had been used to fight the mob, the true security of the nation would have been better served.