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Hoover and the Late Dr. King

DESPITE SEVERAL YEARS of book and news story criticism of J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the material did not seem worthy of serious column interpretation.

Though the FBI agency has occasionally been arbitrary and even arrogant in pursuit of its business, it has in general acknowledged the limitations put on the bureau by law. In this it has been several marks ahead of the run of local and state police authorities, and if this be true, Mr. Hoover deserves what credit accrues.



But now comes news antipathetic to Hoover which is in a new dimension. Because it is news it is not perforce factual; it remains an allegation, but Hoover's personal and ethical relation to it requires an answer from him.

It is based on a book written about the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Time magazine's treatment of that book.

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THE STORY GOES that the FBI put wiretaps on Dr. King in the mid-Sixties. That the bureau does wiretapping in some investigations it considers vital, is common knowledge, but the practice is still in a twilight zone, and requires a court order if it is to be legal.

Wire tapping of King remains an allegation, though it is known Hoover considered him subversive, and publicly criticized his conduct in the racial controversy. Yet this is not the gravamen of the whole story now alleged by Time.

That is, that the supposed wiretaps in motel rooms revealed Dr. King engaged in extramarital activity. The news story says the surveillance "uncovered no subversion," though this was the only legitimate concern of Hoover and FBI agents.

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TIME SAYS THE BOOK about King has the "correct outline of the FBI tape story." But it does not contain, according to Time, matter involving a reported meeting between King and Hoover.

As quoted by Associated Press, "Hoover, Time learned, explained to King just what damaging private detail he had on the tapes, and lectured him that his morals should be those befitting a Nobel Prize winner. He also suggested that King should tone down his criticism of the FBI. King took the advice," resulting in a "decline of black esteem" (for King).

If this meeting occurred, and if it followed the course indicated, then Mr. Hoover should fill us in. Neither he, nor any citizen, can define the "morals" of a Nobel Prize winner, which hardly fit into the FBI code of community behavior, nor justify pious exhortation in any circumstance.

But still more must Mr. Hoover explain the charge that he used official information obtained in an FBI investigation to coerce Dr. King to moderate his criticism of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. No court in the land would permit use of such irrelevant evidence against anyone accused of a federal offense.

This is one of the most disturbing news stories of our time. Neither Mr. Hoover nor the people who employ him can afford to let it stand unresolved, as it now stands.

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