

Mysterious Tape

Report of FBI Harassment Of Dr. King

Washington

The FBI mailed what some agents considered an "unsavory" tape recording, made from an electronic room bug, to Coretta King to "frighten" her husband, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., into halting his criticism of the bureau, according to a former high official of the agency.

The mailing of the tape recording to Mrs. King was part of nearly a decade of "harassment" of the late civil rights leader by the bureau, several former agents and officials say.

One retired agent, Arthur Murtagh, who was attached to the FBI's Atlanta field office, said the moves against King were second in size "only to the way they went after Jimmy Hoffa."

Yet, there was never a criminal prosecution of King and, these former FBI men say, there was a "dubious" national security rationale for what they said were thousands of hours of electronic and physical surveillance.

These sources believe that the alleged harassment of King should be investigated by the Congressional Committees on Intelligence.

The sending to a private citizen of a tape recording obtained by a national security electronic surveillance is a violation of FBI regulations and was a potential violation of the Federal Communications Act and the Federal Criminal Code.

The surveillance of King was briefly noted last year in a report by then Attorney General William B. Saxbe and FBI Director Clarence M. Kelley on the bureau's counterintelligence program, or Cointelpro.

The report said that one Cointelpro technique was "investigating the love life of a group leader for dissemination to the press."

Justice department officials later identified the group leader as King.

The former FBI official who brought the matter to the attention of the New York Times asked to remain anonymous.

He said that in late 1964, after King had criticized the FBI for having assigned agents with southern backgrounds to handle civil rights cases, then-director J. Edgar Hoover ordered William C. Sullivan, then in charge of the bureau's counterintelligence operations, to arrange to send a copy of a tape recording secretly to Mrs. King in such a manner that it could not be traced to the FBI.

Another source, attached to the bureau at that time, said that he believed the recording was of a party held by King and officials of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which Dr. King headed, in the fall of 1963.

The source said the party had been picked up by an FBI electronic bug in the room and put on tape.

Bureau officials, according to the source, felt at the time that the content of the tape was detrimental to King and some of his associates because it recounted activities at the party they thought did not conform with the rights leader's position as a religious leader.

The source said that Hoover believed the sending of the tape to Mrs. King would stop King's criticism of the bureau and break up his marriage as well.

Mrs. King said in a telephone interview that she recalled receiving a tape recording in January, 1965.

"I received a tape that was rather curious, unlabeled," she said. "As a matter of fact, Martin and I listened to the tape and we found much of it unintelligible. We concluded there was nothing in the tape to discredit him."

Mrs. King said that she and her husband immediately realized that the tape had been made covertly and "presumed" it had been made by the FBI.

Murtagh, 53, who now lives in Constable, N.Y., said the trick of sending the tape to Mrs. King to discredit her husband was well known "among senior agents in the Atlanta Bureau and some of them bragged about it as a smart stunt."

The following incidents of harassment were either confirmed in earlier press accounts or uncovered in interviews with high bureau officials:

- Murtagh and a former senior bureau official confirmed the bureau tried to disrupt plans for a banquet in Atlanta in 1964 by business leaders to laud King's winning of the Nobel Prize. It included covert contacts with community leaders with charges about King's personal life.

- Two former bureau officials said that a "monograph" on King's personal life was circulated among government officials by the bureau during the Kennedy administration. President Kennedy became aware of what was going on and ordered Hoover to retrieve every copy of the monograph.

- Murtagh said efforts at harassment of SCLC leaders continued after King's assassination in 1968. He said he was ordered by bureau officials to obtain handwriting samples of Andrew Young, now a Democratic representative from Georgia, and Hosea Williams to permit bureau experts to forge letters over the Young and Williams signatures that would harm their careers. Murtagh said he refused the assignment.

- Two former senior FBI officials said the bureau "routinely" sought to prevent King from receiving honorary degrees from colleges and universities by planting stories about his personal life.

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