

NYTimes
Of Kennedys and Kings

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By William Safire

WASHINGTON—The diehard loyalty of the old Kennedy mythmakers is glorious to behold.

Those who have been assuring us for years that the Kennedys secretly battled J. Edgar Hoover gulped silently when Ben Bradlee recently broke ranks to reveal how President Kennedy invited the F.B.I. director to the White House to pore over dossiers and chortle over the peccadilloes of public men.

Those same Kennedy mythmakers helped fashion an article of impeachment when it was revealed that President Nixon ordered the F.B.I. wiretapping of newsmen. They now stand mute as the Rockefeller Commission report states that a newsman had been wiretapped by the C.I.A. in 1962—with no authority in law—"apparently with the knowledge and consent of Attorney General Kennedy." (We'll soon see if Franch Church follows that up.)

However, several old Kennedy hands have taken vociferous umbrage, in public and private, to a point made in this space about the double standard used in judging past Presidents: "Nixon never ordered the extended wiretapping of a civil rights leader for the purpose of leaking derogatory information about him to the press."

This referred to the wiretap that Attorney General Kennedy directed the F.B.I. to place on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on Oct. 10, 1963, and which remained in place for more than eighteen months until removed on April 30, 1965, by Robert Kennedy's successor, Nicholas Katzenbach.

During this time, in an attempt to besmear and discredit Dr. King, F.B.I. agents—in violation of the law—played recordings of bugged conversations and sounds from Dr. King's hotel rooms to newsmen, and even mailed one such salacious recording to Dr. King's wife. The Department of Justice has never sunk lower, before or since.

Nobody disputes those facts. The question is: Did the Kennedys have good reason to suspect that the purpose of the tap was not national security, and that the F.B.I. would leak whatever it found to smear its most outspoken critic?

Mr. Katzenbach tells me no. He writes: "A telephone tap on a phone used by Dr. King was authorized by Attorney General Kennedy in 1961 or 1962 [sic]. That tap was requested by Mr. Hoover on national security grounds by a written memorandum, which stated in the strongest terms that Dr. King was closely associated with a person known by the Bureau to be a high official of the Communist party in close contact with the U.S.S.R."

"The purpose of the tap was stated to be to assist the F.B.I. in determining whether Dr. King and his movement were being manipulated by this person in the interests of the Soviet Union."

I am informed by Mr. Katzenbach that in December 1964, (while the F.B.I. wiretap on Dr. King was still in operation) he was told by reporters that the F.B.I. possessed recordings of "buggings" of Dr. King which they were playing to newsmen. "I immediately inquired of the Bureau if this improper activity was in fact taking place and it was flatly denied. . . . I believe the activity did, however, cease immediately."

Mr. Katzenbach carefully differentiates between the warrantless wiretap approved by Mr. Kennedy and the "buggings" that he then thought were made by state law-enforcement officials. He believes there is a difference; I believe one reinforced the other.

He is correct, however, in denouncing as "utterly false" my assertion that the Justice Department had recently admitted that the purpose of the King wiretap was "investigating the love life of a group leader for disseminating to the press." The department did use those words to describe the F.B.I.'s counterintelligence program and the leader referred to was Dr. King, but Mr. Katzenbach had left the Justice Department by that time and I regret the error.

I cannot accept, however, the mythmakers' line that Robert Kennedy was the innocent dupe of J. Edgar Hoover in this tawdry episode. He knew Mr. Hoover was out to "get" Dr. King's reputation; he knew how the director used raw material gathered in dossiers to titillate confidants, even Presidents. I believe Mr. Kennedy's purpose in authorizing the wiretaps was primarily to appease the powerful F.B.I. director, even if it meant letting him destroy the reputation of Martin Luther King.

Mr. Katzenbach insists that his own motive was purely national security, and I am satisfied that he believes that this is true. Yet, as he points out, he learned of the F.B.I.'s smear campaign in December 1964; with very good reason to know the real purpose of the F.B.I. tap, and with the power to terminate it with a single command, Mr. Katzenbach permitted the King wiretaps to continue for an additional five months. He had reason to suspect the commission of crimes by lawmen and—aside from asking the newsmen who alerted him to reveal their sources—the nation's chief law officer did nothing.

Privately, Kennedy mythmakers have been saying that the appeasement of Hoover on the King wiretap made it possible to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act. How's that for irony? Shades of Daniel Ellsberg and Gordon Liddy, men who thought it was right to break a few rules because they saw a higher cause. The Kennedys were willing to subvert the personal civil rights of the nation's leading fighter for civil rights—and do it in the name of civil rights.

See also Safire, NYT 5 Jun 75; Mankiewicz, WXP 9 Jun; letters, NYT 12 Jun; Safire, WXP 16 Jun.