

Why the Hate?



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THE POSTHUMOUS ATTACK on J. Edgar Hoover has centered on his supposed persecution of Martin Luther King Jr. A carbon copy of an anonymous letter to King, arguably urging him to commit suicide, has turned up in the files of William Sullivan, a former Assistant Director of the FBI. Sullivan says he knows nothing about the letter, so — on exactly no evidence whatever, so far as I can tell — everybody has leaped to the conclusion that Hoover wrote it.

Exactly why Hoover detested King so much has, however, received curiously little attention. The general assumption seems to be that Hoover was, in addition to everything else, a racist bigot who just naturally detested black leaders.

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BUT WHAT about Martin Luther King Jr.? The man is dead now, and one hesitates to tamper with his memory.

But it was with King the man, not King the canonized memory, that Hoover had to concern himself; and it is therefore necessary to pay a certain attention to the facts. And one of the key facts is that King was amazingly indifferent to the presence of a dedicated Communist in the high command of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Late in 1962 the St. Louis "Globe-Democrat" reported that the Southeastern Director of the SCLC was one Hunter Pitts O'Dell. What made this fact of more than casual interest was

the further fact that O'Dell was a long-time Communist Party activist.

I happened to have come across O'Dell's spoor in 1956, during an investigation by the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (of which I was then Associate Counsel) into a white-collar cell of the Communist party in New Orleans. Its members would foregather regularly to study Communist doctrine under the tutelage of O'Dell, who at that time was a student at (black) Southern University.

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WHEN U.S. marshals went to O'Dell's rented room to serve the Subcommittee's subpoena, the bird had flown (not to reappear for weeks, at which point he took the Fifth Amendment). But in the room were no less than 175 Communist-related documents later received in evidence by the Subcommittee.

This was the man chosen by King as his SCLC Director for the Southeastern United States. Moreover, when the "Globe-Democrat" republished the truth about O'Dell, King dawdled for six months before announcing, under heavy pressure, that O'Dell had left the SCLC "by mutual agreement."

Because of his Communist record? Not at all; merely, said King, because of concern that his affiliation with the integration movement would be used by "segregationists and race-baiters."