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Senators Probe King Wiretapping

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

The Senate intelligence committee is investigating allegations that the FBI tried to smear the late Martin Luther King Jr. by spreading stories about his sex life.

Some senators regard this as a classic abuse of police power. It will get special attention, therefore, from the committee.

King won the Nobel peace prize for his nonviolent crusade to gain equal rights for black Americans. He faced the police dogs and fire hoses of southern sheriffs without flinching. His cry, "We shall overcome," stirred his people.

King's rhetoric, however, led him into a collision with the late, powerful FBI chief, J. Edgar Hoover. This became one of the famous feuds of the 1960s.

Senate investigators are now trying to determine whether Hoover used the FBI to carry on his vendetta against King. They want to know who ordered the snooping and who leaked the

sex stories to the press. They are also searching for FBI agents who participated in the surveillance of the civil rights leader.

We were the first to reveal on May 24, 1968, that FBI had tapped King's telephones. We reported that the wiretaps had divulged information about his alleged love affairs, a subject that was none of the FBI's business.

Now, more than seven years later, we have dug deeper into the story for the answers the senators are seeking.

There is bitter disagreement over who first suggested that the FBI eavesdrop on King. But in October, 1963, Hoover obtained—some say wangled—a memorandum from then-Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy authorizing the controversial wiretaps.

The official justification was to determine whether King had any secret ties with Communists. But the only secret dealings the wiretaps revealed were with women. His dynamism and courage had made him attractive to many women.

As part of its continuing surveillance, the FBI bugged King's hotel suite in Atlantic City during the 1964 Democratic National Convention. But apparently nothing of significance was picked up.

The FBI continued its electronic surveillance of King, according to our sources, until he was slain in April, 1968. The latest secret sex report we saw was dated Feb. 20, 1968.

In other words, the FBI continued listening to King's private conversations for nearly five years. Yet during all this time, the FBI picked up no evidence that he had committed a crime or was likely to commit one.

J. Edgar Hoover's boys just kept filling up folders with titillating tidbits, idle gossip and vicious slander about King. His FBI dossier can only be described as a blackmail file.

Indeed, we can prove that FBI officials tried to peddle embarrassing items about King to reporters. Our FBI sources also say that Hoover's loyal sidekick, the late Clyde Tolson, anonymously

sent a tape of a Willard Hotel incident to the civil rights leader's wife, Coretta King.

But the blackmail, apparently, didn't work. King's close friend and associate, Del. Walter Fauntroy, (D-D.C.), told us King was aware of the FBI's surveillance and wasn't the least deterred by it.

He didn't even mind if newspapers published the information because he felt it would hurt the FBI more than himself, said Fauntroy.

Footnote: After King's death, the FBI continued to monitor the activities of his successor, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy. We showed him a secret FBI report, detailing a conversation he had held with his wife. He said it could only have come from a bug in his bedroom.

In fairness, it should be added that the present FBI director, Clarence M. Kelley, has taken the FBI out of the blackmail business completely. Under Kelley, the FBI is as honest and honorable a law enforcement agency as can be found anywhere in the world.

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