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F.B.I. Says Kennedy Approved Wiretap On Dr. King's Phone

WASHINGTON, June 17 (AP) —The Federal Bureau of Investigation attacked as "scurrilous" today a report that its director, J. Edgar Hoover, had acted on his own in wiretapping the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The wiretap "was specifically approved in advance in writing" by the Attorney General, the late Robert F. Kennedy, the F.B.I. said.

The bureau released the text of a letter written by Clyde A. Tolson, associate director, to Carl T. Rowan, the columnist, who denounced Mr. Hoover on Sunday and called for the director's resignation.

The letter said:

"My attention has been called to the malicious article which you wrote in The Washington Sunday Star on June 15, 1969, concerning Mr. J. Edgar Hoover, director of the F.B.I.

"For your information, the

wiretap on Martin Luther King Jr. was specifically approved in advance in writing by the late Attorney General of the United States, Mr. Robert F. Kennedy. This device was strictly in the field of internal security and, therefore, was within the provisions laid down by the then President of the United States.

"It is to be hoped that you will give the same publicity to this letter as was given to your scurrilous editorial."

The fact that the Government wiretapped the assassinated civil rights leader's phone was confirmed two weeks ago during hearings in Houston, on whether the conviction of Cassius Clay, the former heavyweight boxing champion, was tainted by illegally obtained evidence. Clay is appealing a sentence for refusing induction into the armed forces.

The Justice Department, at that time, said that Clay at no time had been the target of a Government wiretap. But a spokesman said some of his conversations were overheard during other wiretapping operations.