

NEGRO LEADERS SUPPORT DR. KING

Tell Johnson They Agree on Criticism of F.B.I.

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President Johnson listened in silence today as a group of civil rights leaders told him they all supported the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. against an attack by J. Edgar Hoover. In an interview yesterday, Mr. Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, told a group of women reporters, among other things, that Dr. King was "the most notorious liar in the country" in criticizing the bureau's handling of civil rights violations in the South. It was learned today that Mr. Hoover also had said during the interview that Dr. King had Communist connections. He put off the record his affirmative answer to a question on that subject.

Critical of Robert Kennedy

Mr. Hoover was also critical by implication of former Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. He said some of the difficulty in Mississippi in the last few years "was due to the rather harsh approach by the authorities here in Washington, by the Department of Justice."

In theory, Mr. Hoover and the F.B.I. are under Justice Department supervision. In fact, he has been largely independent of Attorneys General for many years.

Mr. Kennedy made a vigorous attempt to reassert direction, but his influence over Mr. Hoover waned after the assassination of his brother, President Kennedy.

Mr. Hoover's views were no great surprise to informed officials here. He is known to have spoken privately, for example, about alleged Communist connections with the civil rights movement.

What did surprise official Washington was that he would give public expression to his views. Mr. Hoover has never made a practice of giving interviews. He holds no press conferences, and most press requests for talks with him get no response.

Timing Is Questioned

Just why he decided to talk to a group of women reporters at this time was a mystery. An F.B.I. aide, declining all other comment on the interview, said Mr. Hoover had "had a few things on his mind for quite some time" and had thought this would be "as good a time as any to talk about them."

Last May 8, President Johnson signed an executive order suspending compulsory retirement provisions for Mr. Hoover "for an indefinite period of time." He called Mr. Hoover an old friend and praised him as a "quiet, humble and magnificent public servant."

The White House press secretary, George E. Reedy, said today that he knew of no change in the President's views since then.

The Hoover interview was a major topic today at a White House meeting of the President with the civil rights leaders. The meeting had been arranged before the interview was held.

Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, acting as a spokesman, said afterward that he had "expressed to the President our disagreement with Mr. Hoover's characterization of Dr. King."

The Negro community agrees with Dr. King's statement that they are not getting adequate protection from the F.B.I., Mr. Wilkins said. Mr. Hoover had charged that Dr. King erroneously attributed this to the use of Southern-born agents.

"It's not a matter of where F.B.I. men were born," Mr. Wilkins said. "The Negroes feel they are not getting adequate protection whether the agents were born in Mobile or Minneapolis."

President 'Simply Listened'

Mr. Wilkins said the President "simply listened and gave no comment and no opinion." Asked whether he had suggested Mr. Hoover's removal from office, he laughed and said no.

Others at the meeting were A. Philip Randolph of the Negro-American Labor Council, Whitney Young of the Urban League, Mrs. Dorothy Haight of the National Council of Negro Women, James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality and Jack Greenberg of the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

Dr. King had been invited but was out of the country. The Acting Attorney General, Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, and his civil rights chief, Burke Marshall, were present.

The efficacy of the bureau in civil rights matters has long been a subject of controversy. Negro leaders have charged that agents, in the course of other business, get so close to Southern police officials that they cannot effectively deal with police brutality and other civil rights violations.

Justice Department officials, defending the bureau's performance, have often said that critics tend to misunderstand its powers and responsibilities.

They point out that agents have no general police power. They could not, for example, assume the role of protecting the hundreds of Northern students who were in Mississippi last summer.

Their authority is limited to investigating specific violations of Federal law. In the civil rights area, such violations may well be subtler and more subjective and more emotional in context than a traditional crime such as bank robbery.

Juries a Problem

Even when the F.B.I. does come up with hard evidence in

a civil rights case, a local jury may refuse to convict or a grand jury refuse to indict. This is what happened in the case of the three murdered Mississippi civil rights workers last summer.

The Hoover interview yesterday was set up by Mrs. Sarah McClendon and Miss Helene C. Monberg, who represent several Western newspapers. They have held a number of briefings with news sources and arranged this one on Oct. 16.

There were 18 women present for the interview. Mr. Hoover talked to them for about an hour, first about the general accomplishments of the F.B.I. Then there were questions and answers for nearly two hours more.

The reporters made clear at the outset that everything was on the record unless Mr. Hoover specified otherwise. He put a few remarks off the record.

Criticism By CORE

In a statement yesterday, the Congress of Racial Equality charged that Mr. Hoover's criticism of Dr. King was "both intemperate and unfortunate."

The statement said that although F.B.I. activity in the civil rights field had "significantly increased" in the last year, "it must be remembered that for many years prior to the present civil rights crisis the F.B.I. has been extremely lax implementing existing legislation and protecting the civil rights of Negroes and CORE workers throughout the nation."

The Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee, an organization of civil rights lawyers, sent a telegram to President Johnson expressing its "outrage at Mr. J. Edgar Hoover's slanderous attack."

The telegram urged the President to "publicly censure Mr. Hoover for his vilification of a highly respected American."