

# THE WHITE HOUSE WAR AGAINST MARTIN LUTHER KING

*The White House, the FBI and the Justice Department conducted a full-scale campaign to discredit and destroy the country's foremost civil rights leader.*

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*By Jeff Cohen*

The gunshot was still echoing in Memphis when Attorney General Ramsey Clark called in the FBI to investigate. And so it was on "Day 1" that the probe of the Martin Luther King assassination had veered off course.

In April 1968, however, there was little public outcry about the FBI's playing a role in the investigation. There were few calls for a special prosecutor or for an independent probe by Congress. Back then, even King's lieutenants who had caught FBI agents in their peeping-tom activities, or had confronted federal officials about the surveillance, were unaware of the massive sweep of the Bureau's anti-King campaign.

There were, of course, dozens in Washington who were fully aware. There were the numerous Justice Department officials and presidential aides—all Democrats, some liberal—who participated in the espionage. Then there were the dozens of reporters, editors and publishers who had been offered the poisonous fruit of the FBI's voyeurism—photos, tapes, transcripts: evidence that the Bureau tracked King day and night. None of these men called for an independent probe, one not dominated by the FBI. Some journalists did belatedly criticize the FBI's spying, but none had raised their voices during King's life. These men had been—in the words of Black writer John A. Williams—the FBI's "silent partners."

In 1977, the House Select Committee on Assassinations undertook the first serious probe of the King killing, concluding two years later that there was "a serious likelihood of conspiracy." The committee's report pointed to a right-wing conspiracy hatched in St. Louis. Unfortunately, the two money men behind the plot had both died in the early 1970s. The House committee could do no more than excoriate the FBI and Justice Department for their monumentally inept investigation, suggesting that even a half-hearted inquiry at the time of the murder would have unearthed the St. Louis conspirators.

While the FBI's war against King has received abundant news coverage, most press accounts have inaccurately portrayed the FBI as having acted "beyond White House control" . . . a dubious and overstated conclusion. Meanwhile, the press has virtually ignored the House committee's provocative report on the King assassination.

## **"Neutralize King"**

When Assistant FBI Director William Sullivan told Congress that Martin Luther King had received the treatment "usually afforded a Soviet agent," he was uttering an understatement. It is quite possible that no man in history received more FBI attention than Dr. King.

Beginning with a nine-hour conference at FBI headquarters on December 23, 1963, the Bureau set out to accomplish its stated goal of "neutralizing King as an effective Negro leader." To accomplish this purpose, the FBI employed a COINTEL-

PRO-style disruption and smear campaign—portraying King as an immoral, communist tool. From 1964 to '68, the Bureau:

- made thousands of recordings of King from wiretaps and room bugs.
- continually followed and photographed him.
- used anonymous phone calls and "poison pen" letters to create dissension among King's staff and associates in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).
- provided smear "briefings" on King to religious leaders (including Chicago's Archbishop Cody and Dr. Edwin Espy of the National Council of Churches), to competing civil rights leaders such as the NAACP's Roy Wilkins, to Congress and federal officials, U.S. ambassadors in Europe and foreign leaders.
- tried to kill articles written by King, while instigating red-baiting articles about King in dozens of publications.
- disrupted his fundraising efforts (leaking the lie that King was stashing money in a Swiss bank account; discouraging donations from the Ford Foundation and Nelson Rockefeller; breaking up a fundraising meeting scheduled with Jimmy Hoffa).
- tried to prevent King from receiving awards and honorary university degrees (succeeding at Marquette University).
- recruited the SCLC bookkeeper as an informant, paying him thousands of dollars per year even after the FBI learned the informant was embezzling SCLC funds.
- disrupted King's emotional stability (one ploy was to call in a false fire alarm, sending firetrucks speeding to a residence at which the Bureau knew King was recuperating from stress and overwork).
- tried to split up his marriage (on one occasion, the Bureau anonymously sent the Kings a tape from a bugged hotel room—along with a blackmail note threatening to expose King's "filthy fraudulent self" unless he committed suicide).

The campaign against King enlisted everyone from journalists to college administrators to Cardinal Spellman, who tried unsuccessfully to break up King's meeting with the Pope.

One of the FBI's most ambitious schemes was to replace King with a moderate, Black leader handpicked by the Bureau. This was to be accomplished through its "media assets" who would put the FBI's man in the limelight as soon as "King has been completely discredited." Although it is not known if the FBI did anything to promote the man it called "the right kind of national Negro leader," the man's identity is now known. He is Samuel R. Pierce, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the only Black in Reagan's cabinet. At the time, Pierce was an up-and-coming corporate attorney.

#### The Kennedys

The major misconception about the anti-King campaign holds that the FBI was op-

erating totally "out-of-control." The truth is that the original surveillance of King was authorized by the Kennedy administration, and that the FBI's disruptive activities were encouraged by the Johnson administration.

Although several Kennedy lieutenants have offered unconvincing rationalizations for Attorney General Robert Kennedy's decision to authorize wiretaps on King and his associates, the electronic surveillance amounted to blatant political spying on the civil rights movement. The Kennedy administration was concerned that the pace of civil rights insurgency in the South was too fast. The information gained from electronically monitoring King's plans and strategies helped further the administration's contradictory goal of moderating the insurgency, while simultaneously looking good on civil rights.

In April 1963, King and SCLC launched their Birmingham campaign against Bull Connors, his snarling police dogs and high-pressure fire hoses. The whole world was

day of the protest, RFK had criticized the Birmingham campaign in the press—and in an argument with King on the phone—as "ill-timed." During these months, RFK and King conversed several times, occasionally arguing about the appropriate pace of change. King was at a distinct disadvantage here, as he was apparently unaware of the Attorney General's eavesdropping.

RFK had King's advisor, Stanley Levison, wiretapped as a result of FBI claims that Levison was a high-ranking, active Communist. RFK defenders have argued that the Kennedy administration was understandably concerned about the passage of its civil rights legislation, and not wanting the movement tainted by "Communist associations." What they have not explained is how this goal was furthered by allowing the FBI to wiretap and then use the out-of-context information to smear a movement the Bureau had always considered illegitimate.

The Kennedys must have known that



*The war on Martin Luther King started in the White House* Photo by Fred Ward/Black Star

watching and so were the Kennedys. The FBI was providing the White House with almost weekly reports of King's private phone conversations (intercepted by a wiretap on King's associate—New York attorney Stanley Levison).

The FBI's briefings provided the White House with King's privately-expressed sentiments about JFK, about the President's inadequate response to the events in Birmingham, and about King's specific plans aimed at forcing JFK into more substantial action on civil rights. On the first

the FBI was instigating numerous red-baiting articles about King—by leaking information from wiretaps the Kennedys had authorized. In June 1963, one of these appeared as a front-page headline story in the segregationist *Birmingham News*, alleging that one of King's staffers was a Communist. This FBI-inspired article appeared a month after the Birmingham campaign emerged victorious; 11 weeks later, racists bombed the movement's headquarters in Birmingham—a Black Baptist church—killing four girls.

In August 1963, the FBI wiretapping recorded evidence that indicated King was having an extra-marital affair. The information was furnished to RFK who forwarded it to his brother in the White House, along with a cover note: "I thought you would be interested in the attached memorandum." Neither Kennedy seemed disturbed by the intimate intrusion into King's life, nor by the future implications of the FBI's possession of such information.

Robert Kennedy had authorized the King wiretaps on a "trial basis" to be "evaluated at the end of 30 days." But the evaluation never really took place. Thirty days later, RFK's brother was assassinated in Dallas. Instead of being reviewed or restrained, the FBI was about to be "unleashed."

### All The Way With LBJ

It was the Johnson administration that oversaw the FBI's efforts to "neutralize King." While J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI minions played the leading roles, they were ably assisted by a supporting cast that included White House aides Walter Jenkins and Bill Moyers, plus Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach.

WALTER JENKINS, LBJ's closest aide, may be best remembered as the man who left the White House in scandal in October 1964 after being arrested for a sex act in the men's room of a Washington YMCA. Nine months earlier, it had been Jenkins to whom the FBI rushed its first recorded proof—from a bugged hotel room—of King's sexual activity. According to an FBI memo written by Assistant Director Deke DeLoach, "Jenkins was of the opinion that the FBI could perform a good service to the country if this matter could somehow be confidentially given to members of the press. I told him the Director had this in mind."

BILL MOYERS, now a CBS commentator, was another Johnson aide who worked closely with the FBI. At the 1964 Democratic convention, Moyers and Jenkins worked feverishly to deny credentials to the delegates of the integrated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which King was supporting. The two Johnson aides received hourly telephone reports from an FBI "Special Squad", which was surveilling Freedom Democrats on the convention floor while wiretapping King at his hotel—justified by RFK's original authorization. After the convention, Moyers thanked the Bureau for its help and received a note from DeLoach: "You know you have only to call on us when a similar situation arises."

Three months after the convention, DeLoach offered a "sex tape" or transcript on King to *Newsweek's* Ben Bradlee, now the executive editor of the *Washington Post*. Bradlee turned the FBI away. When new Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach heard about the offer, he sought to end the leaking by informing LBJ. The President said he would do something about it. What he did was send Moyers to warn the Bu-

reau that Bradlee is a blabbermouth. (LBJ enjoyed listening to the FBI's sex tapes—according to one historian—"delighting in the squeak of the bedsprings.")

On December 4, 1974, Martin Luther King headed off to Europe to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. That week in Washington, Bill Moyers gave the Bureau permission to disseminate its scurrilous monograph on King, "Communism and the Negro Movement," throughout the federal government. The monograph (described by a Justice Department official as a "diatribe without evidentiary support") was dispatched to the department heads at Justice, State, Defense, CIA, Carl Rowan at the U.S. Information Agency, three military intelligence offices and IRS.

NICHOLAS KATZENBACH was the first attorney general to demand approval (in March 1965) on all FBI bugs. That's the good news. The bad news is that Katzenbach continued to approve the bugging of King—on "anti-subversive" grounds—even though it was obvious the Bureau had been using hotel room bugs primarily to expose (and exaggerate) information on King's private life. Break-ins were often required to install the bugs, and Katzenbach later warned Hoover in a note that "we should be very cautious of the non-FBI people who may from time to time be involved in installation."

By the time of Katzenbach's warning to Hoover in late 1965, the government's tactics against King were beginning to shift from sexpionage to a political surveillance that was truly Nixonesque. Dr. King was edging to the top of President Johnson's "enemies list" due to his early criticism of the Vietnam War. The attorney general was authorizing break-ins. The FBI was monitoring the future protest strategies of the President's anti-war opponents. And damaging information was being leaked to the media.

### The Suspects Investigate

As soon as word of King's murder reached Atlanta, an FBI supervisor there began jumping up and down in glee, repeating: "They finally got the son-of-a-bitch." While it is not known how widely this sentiment was shared in the Bureau, one thing is clear; in a serious murder probe, numerous FBI personnel would have been suspects. Instead, they were the investigators.

The House Assassinations Committee dissected the FBI's investigation and found it riddled with holes. Almost as soon as the FBI succeeded in tracking down accused gunman James Earl Ray two months after the killing, the FBI's probe began to wind down. The Justice Department and the FBI—in the understated conclusion of the committee—"failed to investigate adequately the possibility of conspiracy." Actually, the committee found a virtual indifference as to whether a conspiracy lay behind Ray.

The committee criticized the Bureau for its failure to investigate the possible in-

volvement of Ray's two brothers, both ex-cons. When James Earl Ray purchased his rifle days before the assassination, he told several witnesses at the gunshop that he was "going hunting" with his brother. Unlike James Earl, both of his brothers were avowed racists.

Weeks after the King assassination, brother Jerry Ray indicated that he knew about a \$100,000 payoff for the murder. Yet the FBI never undertook an investigation of the claim, in spite of the fact that sometime in 1968, Jerry Ray had befriended one of America's most violent racists, J. B. Stoner, head of the National States Rights Party. Stoner was recently jailed for the 1958 bombing of a Black church in Birmingham.

Besides critiquing the FBI, the Congressional investigation succeeded in stripping away the fiction James Earl Ray had woven about himself as an unwitting, innocent patsy—framed by the mysterious "Raoul." (Ray's attorney, Mark Lane, had gone so far as to call his client a "political prisoner.") The committee brought forward convincing evidence that Ray was stalking Dr. King in the days leading up to Memphis, that "Raoul" was no more than a figment of his imagination and that Ray was in all probability the triggerman.

### The St. Louis Conspiracy

The major breakthrough of the House Assassinations Committee was the exposure of a St. Louis conspiracy, which in 1967 was actively offering \$50,000 for the King assassination. This kind of payoff intrigued the committee, since it had rejected racism or psychopathology as plausible motives for the killing. The committee concluded that James Earl Ray's "predominant motive lay in an expectation of monetary gain."

The St. Louis conspiracy was headed by two men who had met through local American Independent Party activities in 1967, businessman John Kauffmann and patent lawyer John Sutherland (both now deceased). It was Kauffmann, an underworld figure, who actively tried to broker the assassination. The \$50,000 offer was well known at a motel Kauffmann operated as a base for his various criminal activities.

Sutherland, who had founded the St. Louis (White) Citizens Council and had once expressed interest in joining Stoner's States Rights party, was the money man behind the offer. One committee witness described a meeting Kauffmann had escorted him to at Sutherland's house, where Sutherland—clad in a Confederate colonel's hat—offered \$50,000 for the killing on behalf of a wealthy, "secret Southern organization." Sutherland was a leader of the Southern States Industrial Council, a low profile but far-right group opposed to unions, civil rights and the peace movement.

The committee suggested that James Earl Ray learned of the offer from his brother John, who picked up such illicit information at his St. Louis bar—the Grape-

vine Tavern—a hotbed for American Independent Party activity. Sutherland financed much of the party's operation in Missouri during the Wallace campaign.

The committee received its first lead on the St. Louis conspiracy in 1978 from an FBI report which had been "mistakenly" buried for four years by the Bureau. The report alleged that Kauffmann "was actually the individual who made the payoff of James Earl Ray after the killing." Two years before the committee learned of the St. Louis lead, one of Ray's former lawyers told this writer that Ray himself had once admitted he received money from a "St. Louis industrialist" after the murder. If Ray did receive money for his flight to Europe, it was far less than \$50,000—for he ran out of funds in London eight weeks after the killing. The committee speculated that the payoff to Ray was botched as a result of "his panicky, unplanned flight abroad."

Assuming that elements within Sutherland's Industrial Council were behind the money offer that induced James Earl Ray's action, it raises questions about the FBI. The best way to describe the relationship between the Nashville-based Industrial Council and the FBI was that of a mutual admiration society. For its part, the council often reprinted the quotations of Chairman Hoover, believing explicitly in the FBI smear that King, as well as the civil rights and peace movements, were "Communist controlled."

Just 11 days after the assassination, council president Thurman Sensing, a close associate of Sutherland, addressed a Daughters of the American Revolution luncheon in Washington D.C., proclaiming: "It is not too much to say, in fact, that Martin Luther King Jr. brought this crime [the assassination] on himself." Ridiculing King's philosophy of disobedience to unjust laws, Sensing went on to suggest: "His assassin may very well have said to himself, 'I think Martin Luther King should be killed. I realize there is a law against murder, but in this case, I think the law is unjust.'" The speech, titled "A Call to Law and Order," blamed urban riots on Communism, liberals and Martin Luther King.

Despite its provocative words about King, the content of the speech was less remarkable than the FBI's reaction to it. While a curious, homicide investigator may have taken note of the speech as evidence that Sensing and Company were the type of people to look at as possible suspects, the reaction of the Washington FBI office was quite the contrary. The FBI supervisor was apparently so favorably impressed by the speech, he furnished a copy to Hoover "in order that the Bureau have the benefit of Mr. Thurman Sensing's thinking on one of our major national problems."

Needless to say, the FBI failed to investigate the leads that would have uncovered the St. Louis plot. In 1968 (when all conspirators were still alive), even a superficial probe could have exposed the \$50,000

standing offer at Kauffmann's motel and perhaps at John Ray's St. Louis tavern. In 1974, when evidence of the plot fell into the FBI's lap, two St. Louis agents inexplicably decided to ignore the lead which came to them in an informant's report. Kauffmann, at the time, was still alive.

#### Reckless Homicide?

While no proof has ever developed of active FBI involvement in the King assassination, it does not take a great imagination to wonder about passive involvement. Did FBI agents—perhaps ideological friends of Sutherland—know about the plot or know of Ray's stalking King, and simply look the other way? This kind of question is easy to ask and nearly impossible to answer.

Perhaps Congressman Louis Stokes, the chairman of the House Assassinations Committee, framed the best question when he asked if the FBI had committed a reckless homicide in the King assassination. Stokes questioned whether conspirators may have been "inflamed by the FBI's unlawful propaganda." He suggested the Bureau may have helped created a climate

nation, and bearing fruit two days later in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. That day's paper contained an editorial diatribe accusing King of being "one of the most menacing men in America." The editorial blamed King for violence that had broken out in Memphis during his march in support of striking garbagemen, and it warned that "Memphis could be only the prelude to a massive bloodbath" at King's upcoming Poor People's Campaign in Washington.

If the FBI's inflammatory role is grounds for a reckless homicide charge as Congressman Stokes intimates, then what about the role of those White House officials who actively collaborated with the FBI in stimulating the anti-King climate? What responsibility do they share for King's demise?

Through the years, Martin Luther King was bombed, beaten and stabbed; over 50 different death threats were recorded. He was always unarmed, without bodyguards, marching on public streets in hot situations, taking on first the Southern power structure and then the North, feared and



*Martin Luther King on the Memphis balcony where he was later shot Photo by Wide World*

in which King's murder "was not only thinkable, but could be thought of as justifiable."

It seems obvious that the FBI intended its propaganda effort against King to be inflammatory. A particularly graphic example was a media ploy initiated by the Bureau exactly a week before the assassi-

despised by men large and small.

One wonders how these officials could have been so blind to King's extreme vulnerability. □

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