
The FBI Marches on the Dreamer

After the March on Washington, the FBI launched a vicious campaign to utterly discredit Martin Luther King Jr.

by Richard Gid Powers

A nation that could rarely agree on anything found itself in rare agreement about the March on Washington. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of racial harmony represented a noble goal for America, and King himself was the moral embodiment of that dream. Everyone, it seemed, could agree on that.

Well—almost everyone.

The March on Washington touched off an explosion at the FBI. When the dust had settled and discipline had been re-established, the Bureau embarked on a campaign to utterly discredit King, to destroy him personally and as a public figure. It was a war that the Bureau would continue to wage against King as long as he lived. It would continue, obsessively, almost maniacally, even after King was dead.

Right after the March, William C. Sullivan, head of the Bureau's powerful Division Five, its Domestic Intelligence Division, set down his reflections on the March in an August 30 memo:

Personally, I believe in the light of King's powerful demagogic speech yesterday he stands head and shoulders over all other Negro leaders put together when it comes to influencing great masses of Negroes. We must mark him now, if we have not done so before, as the most dangerous Negro of the future in this nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro, and national security.... [I]t may be unrealistic to limit ourselves as we have been doing to legalistic proofs or definitely conclusive evidence that would stand up in testimony in court or before Congressional Committees that the Communist party, USA, does wield substantial influence over Negroes which one day could become decisive.

The March produced a radical change in the Bureau's tactics toward King. For the past two years the FBI had been watching King with mounting hostility. After the March the Bureau shifted from a hostile—but relatively passive—surveillance of King to an aggressive—at times violently aggressive—campaign to destroy him.

King's biographer, David J. Garrow, has demonstrated rather conclusively that the origin of the Bureau's suspicion of King was its discovery in January 1962 that a wealthy New York businessman named Stanley Levison had emerged as King's closest adviser. And Levison, according to the Bureau's most trusted informants in the American Communist Party, code-named "Solo" (Jack and Morris Childs), had been until about 1954 the American Communist Party's most important financier. Then he had apparently dropped out of the party. Now the Bureau learned that it had been shortly after Levison's supposed separation from the party when he had befriended King. The Bureau's conclusion—based on circumstantial logic rather than hard evidence—was that Levison represented an ambitious and apparently successful Communist plan to gain control over the Civil Rights Movement and its most prominent spokesman, Martin Luther King.

The Bureau's hostility toward King had been exacerbated by King's criticism of the FBI's performance in the field of civil rights. When the Bureau's overtures to King were ignored—perhaps due to staff incompetence in his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) office—King's failure to respond was interpreted by the Bureau as evidence of his insincerity and proof that he held a deep-seated hostility toward the Bureau, sentiments the FBI habitually regarded as evidence of even more deep-seated subversive tendencies.

When the Bureau installed wiretaps in King's office, these taps provided absolutely no evidence that Levison's interest in King was other than a shared commitment to the civil rights movement. They did, however, provide the FBI with its first inkling of King's promiscuous sexual activities, which would later be amply augmented by surveillance bugs installed in his hotel rooms.

Given the Bureau's concerns over King's association with Levison and Jack O'Dell, another SCLC staff member with a Communist history, Sullivan had Division Five pro-

duce a report on Communist infiltration of the Civil Rights Movement, with particular attention to its likely role in the upcoming March. Sullivan's August 23 report concluded that "there has been an obvious failure of the Communist Party of the United States to appreciably infiltrate, influence, or control large numbers of American Negroes in this country." Although the report played it safe by saying "time alone will tell" whether future efforts by the party to exploit blacks would be as unsuccessful as those in the past, Sullivan's conclusion was that Communist infiltration of the Civil Rights Movement was negligible and need be of no further concern to the Bureau or the country.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was baffled. Sullivan's latest report contradicted the steady stream of information he had been sending Hoover about Communist influences on King. Hoover fired the report back at Sullivan with the handwritten comment that "this memo reminds me vividly of those I received when Castro took over Cuba. You contended then that Castro and his cohorts were not communists and not influenced by communists. Time alone proved you wrong. I for one can't ignore the memos re [deletion, presumably Levison and O'Dell] as having only an infinitesimal effect on the efforts to exploit the American Negro by the Communists."

Sullivan later explained to a Senate committee that the August 23 report precipitated a crisis between him and Hoover: "This [memorandum] set me at odds with Hoover.... A few months went by before he would speak to me. Everything was conducted by exchange of written communications. It was evident that we had to change our ways or we would all be out on the street."

Following the August 23 report, whenever Domestic Intelligence sent Hoover anything on King and Levison (or for that manner, anything on Communist activities), Hoover would ridicule it with comments like "just infinitesimal!" (on a report on Communist plans for participating in the March) or "I assume CP functionary claims are all frivolous" (on a report on Communist plans to hold follow-up rallies after the March to advance "the cause of socialism in the United States").

At this point Sullivan evidently panicked. Instead of holding to what he felt was an accurate assessment of the declining fortunes of the American Communists, his memo to Hoover after the March retracted everything he had said on August 23: "The Director is correct. We were completely wrong about believing the evidence was not sufficient to determine some years ago that Fidel Castro was not a communist or under communist influence. On investigating and writing about communism and the American Negro, we had better remember this and profit by the lesson it should teach us."

Then he issued his denunciation of King as "the most dangerous Negro of the future" and concluded that "we

greatly regret that the memorandum did not measure up to what the director has a right to expect from our analysis."

Sullivan followed this memo with a recommendation on September 16, 1963, calling for "increased coverage of communist influence on the Negro." And he now proposed something new: "We are stressing the urgent need for imaginative and aggressive tactics to be utilized through our Counterintelligence Program—these designed to neutralize or disrupt the Party's activities in the Negro field."

Stripped of euphemisms, Sullivan was proposing unleashing on Martin Luther King the aggressive and disruptive techniques the Bureau had been using against foreign intelligence agents and Communists.

After he retracted his August 23 memorandum Sullivan tried to prove the strength of his latest set of convictions by becoming the most aggressive advocate of the Bureau's new campaign to discredit King within the government, to disrupt and neutralize his movement and to destroy him professionally and personally.

When Hoover finally adopted Sullivan's revised conclusion as Bureau policy, he pointed to the March on Washington as the most graphic illustration of the Communist Party's influence over King and his movement. In a letter to the Special Agents in Charge in the field, Hoover wrote:

The history of the Communist Party, USA (CPUSA) is replete with its attempts to exploit, influence and recruit the Negro. The March on Washington, August 28, 1963, was a striking example as party leaders early put into motion efforts to accrue gains for the CPUSA from the March. The presence at the March of around 200 Party members, ranging from several national functionaries headed by CPUSA General Secretary Gus Hall to many rank-and-file members, is clear indication of the party's favorite target (the Negro) today. All indications are that the March was not the "end of the line:" and that the party will step up its efforts to exploit racial unrest and in every possible way claim credit for itself relating to any "gains" achieved by the Negro.

On December 23, FBI executives, including Sullivan, F.S. Baumgardner, three other headquarters officials and two agents from Atlanta, met to draw up plans against King. During the nine-hour session at FBI headquarters, they considered 21 proposals, including one that focused on ways of turning King's wife against him. The conclusion of the meeting was that the Bureau would gather information about King to use "at an opportune time in a counterintelligence move to discredit him.... We will, at the proper time when it can be done without embarrassment to the Bureau, expose King as an opportunist who is not a sincere person but is exploiting the racial situation for personal gain."

Two weeks later Sullivan was even contemplating what the post-Martin Luther King world would be like if the Bureau's plans succeeded:

It should be clear to all of us that Martin Luther King must, at some propitious point in the future, be revealed to the

people of this country and to his Negro followers as being what he actually is—a fraud, demagogue and scoundrel. When the true facts concerning his activities are presented, such should be enough, if handled properly, to take him off his pedestal and to reduce him completely in influence. When this is done, and it can be and will be done, obviously much confusion will reign, particularly among the Negro people.... The Negroes will be left without a national leader of sufficiently compelling personality to steer them in the proper direction. This is what could happen, but need not happen if the right kind of national Negro leader could at this time be gradually developed so as to overshadow Dr. King and be in the position to assume the role of the leadership of the Negro people when King has been completely discredited.

Over the next four years, that is, for the rest of King's life, there would be about 25 separate illegal attempts by the FBI to discredit King. These ranged from efforts to keep universities from awarding him honorary degrees, interfering with the publication of his writings, to attempting to disrupt his relationships with religious leaders, to leaking the tapes of some 16 microphone recordings of King's private activities in hotel and motel rooms to congressional figures and the media.

During 1964, Hoover's hatred of King broke out into the open. King complained about the FBI's performance in civil rights cases, and Hoover responded with increasing fury, questioning King's facts and sincerity. Finally, at a press conference with the Washington women's press corps on November 18, Hoover called King "the most notorious liar in the country," rebuffing efforts by FBI publicity chief Cartha "Deke" DeLoach to have the phrase taken off the record. King responded with a press release that in effect called Hoover senile.

Two days later, on November 20, 1964, Hoover lashed out in an internal memo to the Bureau's number three man, Deputy Associate Director Alan Belmont: "I can't understand why we are unable to get the true facts before the public. We can't even get our accomplishments published. We are never taking the aggressive, but above lies [i.e., King's charges against the Bureau and Hoover] remain unanswered."

Later that same day—and it would be reasonable to surmise it was in response to Hoover's outburst—Sullivan slipped a piece of untraceable unwatermarked paper into an old, also untraceable, typewriter, and composed and crudely typed a letter to King:

King, look into your heart. You know, you are a complete fraud and a greater liability to all of us Negroes. White people in this country have enough frauds of their own but I am sure they don't have one at this time that is anywhere near your equal. You are no clergyman and

you know it. I repeat that you are a colossal fraud and an evil, vicious one at that....

King, like all frauds your end is approaching. You could have been our greatest leader.... But you are done. Your honorary degrees, your Nobel Prize (what a grim farce) and other awards will not save you. King, I repeat you are done....

The American public, the church organizations that have been helping—Protestants, Catholics and Jews will know you for what you are—an evil beast. So will others who have backed you. You are done.

King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what it is. You have just 34 days in which to do (this exact number has been selected for a specific reason, it has definite practical significance). You are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy fraudulent self is bared to the nation.

When he had finished typing, Sullivan placed the note in a package containing a reel of tape. Earlier that day, Sullivan had had the FBI labs prepare a composite tape of the most salacious episodes recorded by microphones hidden in King's hotel. The tape contained bawdy conversations between King and his friends, sexual conversations between King and several different female sexual partners, and sounds—mattress creaking, groans and cries—associated with sexual intercourse. The next morning Sullivan handed the package to an agent, told him to fly to Miami, and mail the package to King at his Atlanta SCLC office.

The package was opened, as it happened, by King's wife Coretta. She often received recordings of King's speeches, and assumed that this was another. She listened to part of it, quickly recognizing that this was something different, and then she read the threatening note. She called King. Then she, King, Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young and Joseph Lowery listened to it all. They immediately realized that the source had to be the FBI. Some of King's friends thought the purpose had been to blackmail King into declining the Nobel Prize. Others thought the tapes were intended to goad Coretta into divorcing King. A third theory, and the most plausible, was that Sullivan was trying to put the thought of suicide in King's mind. "They are out to break me," King said. "They are out to get me, harass me, break my spirit."

He was right. The FBI was trying to destroy him, cruelly using "the content of his character" against him. And even after King's death, the Bureau continued its assault on his name and memory. Whenever there were calls to honor the fallen civil rights leader, Hoover was sure to counter with an unsolicited missive alluding to King's character flaws and his associations with Communists.

The March on Washington had set the FBI marching, too—marching against the dreamer and his dream.