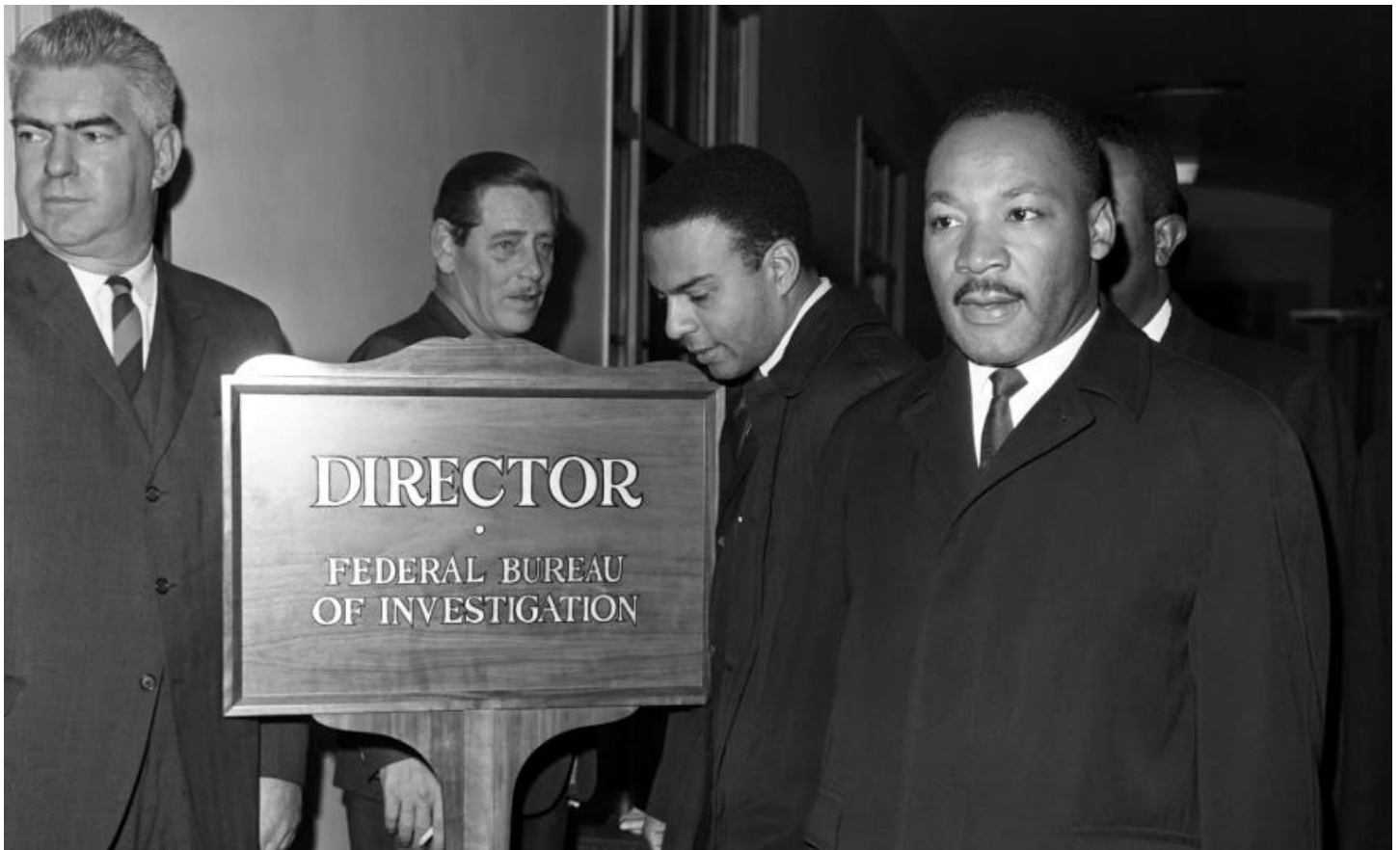


STANDPOINT.

The troubling legacy of Martin Luther King

Newly-revealed FBI documents portray the great civil rights leader as a sexual libertine who ‘laughed’ as a forcible rape took place

David J. Garrow – May 30, 2019



Martin Luther King arrives at the FBI to speak with J. Edgar Hoover on December 1, 1964. Their meeting was highly publicised, but evasive and dishonest on Hoover's part (©BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES)

Newly-released documents reveal the full extent of the FBI's surveillance of the civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King in the mid-1960s. They expose in graphic detail the FBI's intense focus on King's extensive extramarital sexual relationships with dozens of women, and also his presence in a Washington hotel room when a friend, a Baptist minister, allegedly raped one of his "parishioners", while King "looked on, laughed and offered advice". The FBI's tape recording of that criminal assault still exists today, resting under court seal in a National Archives vault.

The FBI documents also reveal how its Director, J. Edgar Hoover, authorised top Bureau officials to send Dr King a tape-recording of his sexual activities along with an anonymous message encouraging him to take his own life.

The complete transcripts and surviving recordings are not due to be released until 2027 but when they are made fully available a painful historical reckoning concerning King's personal conduct seems inevitable.

On January 31, 1977, US District Judge John Lewis Smith signed an extraordinary court order requiring the Federal Bureau of Investigation to surrender all the fruits of its extensive electronic surveillance of Martin Luther King, Jr to the National Archives. "Said tapes and documents," Smith instructed, shall be "maintained by the Archivist of the United States under seal for a period of fifty years," or until January 31, 2027.

However, in recent months, hundreds of never-before-seen FBI reports and surveillance summaries concerning King have silently slipped into public view on the Archives' lightly-annotated and difficult-to-explore web site. This has occurred thanks to the provisions of The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act, which mandated the public release of tens of thousands of government documents, many of which got swept up into congressional investigations of US intelligence agencies predating Judge Smith's order. Winnowing the new King items from amidst the Archive's 54,602 web-links, many of which lead to multi-document PDFs that are hundreds of pages long, entailed weeks of painstaking work.

The FBI began wiretapping King's home and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) office in Atlanta on November 8, 1963, pursuant to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy's written approval. For the previous 18 months, the FBI had insistently told Kennedy that King's closest and most influential adviser, New York attorney Stanley D. Levison, was a "secret member" of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). Kennedy's aides, and finally his brother—the President of the United States—warned King to cease contact with Levison, but King's promised compliance was dissembling: he and Levison communicated indirectly through another attorney, Clarence Jones, who, like Levison, was himself already being wiretapped by the FBI. Presented with evidence of King's duplicity, plus FBI claims that King had told Levison that he was a Marxist, a reluctant Attorney General approved the FBI's request to place King under direct surveillance too.

Unbeknownst to Kennedy, part of the FBI's motivation in seeking to tap King stemmed from something it had learned just prior to the August 28 March on Washington, when King had stayed at Jones's wiretapped Bronx home to work on his soon-to-be-famous "I Have a Dream" speech. As one internal FBI memo reported, "[King, who is married, maintains intimate relationships with at least three women, one in Atlanta, one in Mt Vernon, New York, and one in Washington, DC . . . King's extramarital affairs while posing as a minister of the gospel leave him highly susceptible to coercion and possible blackmail,](#)" presumably by knowledgeable communists.

Within weeks, the FBI's wiretap on King's Atlanta home confirmed the Bureau's expectations. On December 15 King "[contacted a girlfriend by the name of Lizzie Bell,](#)" and the FBI mobilised to "determine more background information regarding this girl". Six days later, "King was in contact with a girlfriend in Los Angeles", Dolores Evans, the wife of a black dentist. California agents were tasked to investigate Evans "in connection with counter-intelligence program", i.e. the Bureau's subsequently notorious COINTELPRO dirty tricks playbook. That same day King was "[in contact with another girlfriend, Barbara Meredith,](#)" a member of his Ebenezer Baptist Church congregation, and "a file was opened on Barbara Meredith in order to determine more information regarding her background and activities in connection with counter-intelligence".

Wiretap summaries like these were supposed to be sealed pursuant to Judge Smith's 1977 order, but by then the Department of Justice had forced the FBI to share many of its King records with the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, often called the Church Committee after the name of its chairman, Idaho Democrat Frank Church. In turn, all of the FBI's documents relating to the Church Committee and the subsequent House Select Committee on Assassinations came to be covered by the 1992 Kennedy assassination records act.

In December 1963, the information from the Atlanta wiretaps about King's expansive private life whetted the FBI's appetite for recordings more intrusive and graphic than could be obtained via telephone lines. Knowing how frequently King travelled to major US cities, the FBI resolved to plant microphone bugs in his hotel rooms. In this endeavour the prime decision-maker was not long-time FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover but Assistant Director William C. Sullivan, head of the Domestic Intelligence Division. With Supreme Court oral arguments in a case from Alabama, *New York Times Co v. Sullivan*—in which four black clergy supporters of King, plus the newspaper, had been socked with a \$500,000 state court judgment—scheduled for January 6 and 7, 1964, King and a variety of ministerial friends were scheduled to be in Washington, DC, for a three-night stay. Immediately after the new year, FBI Washington Field Office security supervisor Ludwig Oberndorf summoned the office's senior "sound man", Special Agent Wilfred L. Bergeron, as well as Special Agent William Welch, the office's "hotel contact man". Waiting in Oberndorf's office was Assistant Director Sullivan, who told the assembled agents that "FBI interest in King was a national security matter" on account of his "communist contacts", Bergeron told Church Committee interviewers in another newly-available document.

Welch had ascertained that King and his party would be staying at the historic Willard Hotel, on Pennsylvania Avenue just east of the White House, and Welch introduced Bergeron to a Willard manager who arranged for Bergeron to "survey" the rooms in question. Bergeron then ["placed a transmitter in each of two lamps and then through the hotel contact, it was arranged to have the housekeeper change the lamps in two rooms which had been set aside for King and his party"](#). In two other nearby rooms Bergeron and fellow Special Agent William D. Campbell set up "radio receivers and tape recorders" prior to when King and his friends first checked in on January 5. Staying in one of the two targeted rooms was King's friend Logan Kearsce, the pastor of Baltimore's Cornerstone Baptist Church and, like King, the holder of a PhD from the Boston University School of Theology. Kearsce "had brought to Washington several women 'parishioners' of his church", a newly-released summary document from Sullivan's personal file on King relates, and Kearsce invited King and his friends to come and meet the women. ["The group met in his room and discussed which women among the parishioners would be suitable for natural or unnatural sex acts. When one of the women protested that she did not approve of this, the Baptist minister immediately and forcibly raped her,"](#) the typed summary states, parenthetically citing a specific FBI document (100-3-116-762) as its source. ["King looked on, laughed and offered advice,"](#) Sullivan or one of his deputies then added in handwriting.

While that claim appears only as an annotation, other similar marginalia, e.g. "more on this" one page prior, suggest that Sullivan was seeking an expanded, more detailed indictment of King's behaviour. The document's recently-released final pages, narrating events until March 30, 1968, suggest that the unfinished revision was abandoned following King's assassination on April 4. Without question Sullivan and his aides had both the microphone-transmitted tape-recording, and a subsequent full transcript at hand while they were annotating their existing typescript; in 1977 Justice Department investigators would publicly attest to how their own review of both the tapes and the transcripts showed them to be genuine and accurate. Throughout the 1960s, when no precedent for the public release of FBI documents existed or was even anticipated, Sullivan could not have imagined that his and his aides' jottings would ever see the light of day. Similarly, they would not have had any apparent motive for their annotations to inaccurately embellish upon the actual recording and its full

transcript, both of which remain under court seal and one day will confirm or disprove the FBI's summary allegation.

At the Willard Hotel, King and his friends' activities resumed the following evening as approximately 12 individuals "participated in a sex orgy" which the prudish Sullivan felt included "acts of degeneracy and depravity . . . When one of the women shied away from engaging in an unnatural act, King and several of the men discussed how she was to be taught and initiated in this respect. King told her that to perform such an act would 'help your soul'." Sometime later, in language that would reflect just how narrow Sullivan's mindset was, "[King announced that he preferred to perform unnatural acts on women and that he had started the 'International Association for the Advancement of Pussy Eaters'.](#)" Anyone familiar with King's often-bawdy sense of humour would not doubt that quotation.

At FBI headquarters, an aide to the Bureau's number three official, Alan H. Belmont, prepared a comprehensive summary of the Willard recordings: "We do not contemplate dissemination of this information at this time but will utilise it, together with results of additional future coverage, in our plan to expose King for what he is." Hoover disagreed, instructing in his distinctive scrawl that White House liaison Cartha "Deke" DeLoach should show the summary memo to Walter Jenkins, President Lyndon Johnson's top aide.

Within 24 hours of King's return to Atlanta from the Willard, his wiretapped home phone gave the Bureau more raw material. King used a modest apartment at 3006 Delmar Lane NW, rented in the name of aide Fred Bennette, as a hideaway, and there on January 8 King met alone with the woman to whom he had become closest, SCLC citizenship education staffer Dorothy Cotton. Four days later "King was in contact with another girlfriend in New York by the name of Effie", whom the FBI quickly identified. In early February agents listened in as "[King's wife became upset and berated King for not spending enough time at home with her. This happened at a time when King was at Fred Bennette's apartment](#)" and the wiretap indicated "he had Dorothy Cotton . . . in the apartment alone with him".

[Stanley Levison, a "secret" member of the Communist Party, gave King \\$10,000 in cash in two years, the equivalent of \\$87,000 today, which was only discovered by an IRS probe.](#)

The Atlanta wiretaps kept the FBI fully apprised of King's upcoming travels, and in mid-February King, SCLC aide Wyatt Walker and Baltimore's Reverend Kearsse all flew to Honolulu to rendezvous with Dolores Evans and at least one other woman. A sound squad from the Bureau's San Francisco office, with microphones already in place, awaited them at the Hilton Hawaiian Village. But King's party tired of Honolulu within 72 hours and flew to Los Angeles, where they spent one night at the Ambassador Hotel before moving to the Hyatt House near Los Angeles airport, where another squad of FBI agents quickly deployed in-room microphones while standing by to carry out photographic surveillance in public areas as well. On February 23 they snapped pictures of "Wyatt Walker, Dolores Sheffey, Dorothy Boswell and Martin Luther King, Jr and Dolores Evans"; the following day they filmed movie footage of King and Evans at the Hyatt House. Assistant Director Sullivan himself telephoned the Los Angeles office for updates, with the Special Agent in Charge (SAC) explaining that television noise plus jet planes made for less-than-ideal audio recordings. Los Angeles also notified Sullivan that Evans and her husband Theodore "[are both scheduled to appear in court on March 4, 1964, concerning the granting of the interlocutory decree of divorce](#)".

Back in Atlanta, the SCLC office wiretap memorialised King's friend Barbara Meredith recounting how at a small party "[King got very drunk and made uncomplimentary remarks about some of the SCLC personnel](#)". At FBI headquarters, desire for comprehensive scrutiny of King led to a tardy discovery that would have received far more attention had not executives become so preoccupied with King's personal life. Supervisor Seymor Fred Phillips, who had direct charge of the King case, recommended to Sullivan that they obtain King's tax returns from the Internal Revenue Service, and when King's IRS file arrived in mid-March, it contained a previously unreported bombshell: in 1957 and 1958, Stanley Levison, who had first met King only at the very end of 1956, had arranged for King to receive a total of \$10,000 in cash gifts—the equivalent of \$87,000 in 2019 dollars—from himself and a close friend, 70-year-old Alice Rosenstein Loewi. In early 1961, the IRS had subjected King's late 1950s' returns to "investigative scrutiny" and determined that he owed an additional \$1,556.02 but had had no fraudulent intent.

In April, 1961, King, Levison, and Chicago attorney Chauncey Eskridge, himself a former IRS agent, had met with an IRS investigator, but only in response to subsequent questions regarding "adjustments in King's income" did King say that he had received \$5,000 in each of those two calendar years. "This sounded like a complete fabrication," the investigator opined in a December 12, 1961 memo, and seeing this information for the first time more than two years later, J. Edgar Hoover asked: "[Doesn't IRS intend to take some action?](#)" No, a liaison agent reported, but "[King's current income tax return will be scrutinised very carefully to determine whether any violations appear.](#)" Hoover responded: "[What a farce!](#)"

Phillips prepared an unremarkable memo to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy reporting the new IRS information, but only in the fifth paragraph, on page two, was Levison's responsibility for the \$10,000 in gift income to King finally cited. In retrospect, the FBI's failure to highlight Levison's remarkable munificence towards his new friend is almost as startling as its failure to similarly emphasise to Kennedy how those gifts had taken place simultaneously with Levison's ongoing contributions to the Communist Party. Levison's substantial involvement in CPUSA fundraising through 1956, along with that of his twin brother Roy Bennett, has long been known, but FBI documents emphasised how "as of January, 1957, Stanley Levison and Roy Bennett were to become inactive in CP financial operations". Although it previously has been known that Levison and Bennett continued making personal contributions to the CP until an explicit break in March, 1963, not until now have internal Bureau documents revealed the astonishing amounts involved: \$25,000 in 1957, \$12,000 in 1958, \$13,000 in 1959, \$12,000 in 1960, \$12,000 in 1961 and at least \$2,500 in early 1962. That total of \$76,500 in 1960 dollars is the equivalent of more than \$650,000 today.

The FBI's failure ever to cite those figures in its warning memos to Kennedy, coupled in March 1964 with its failure to emphasise Levison's simultaneous large gifts to King, inexplicably rendered its "secret member" allegation against Levison far less powerful than could have been the case. To have a reported "secret member" writing some of King's speeches, as the FBI highlighted to Kennedy, was one thing, but the remarkable dollar amounts Levison was bandying about could have made for a much more striking portrayal than the FBI ever painted.

By March, 1964, when the FBI received the IRS information about King, it appears obvious in retrospect that Sullivan's and Phillips's intense fixation on King's personal conduct had totally eclipsed their once-central concern over whether Levison was exerting subversive influence on King. The extent of that preoccupation was underscored in mid-May 1964, when the FBI's Las Vegas office furnished headquarters with a detailed memo a Nevada Gaming Control Board agent had prepared after learning what had transpired when King, Wyatt Walker, and a Los Angeles minister friend had visited Las Vegas three weeks earlier.



William C. Sullivan: As head of the FBI's Domestic Intelligence Division he had an intense fixation on King's conduct (©BETTMANN / GETTY IMAGES)

Agent William H. Been had heard rumours that King had patronised a local prostitute and decided that given King's "position as a God-fearing man of the cloth . . . perhaps a casual inquiry made to the prostitute in question might shed an interesting side light to King's extra-curricular activities". At 3 a.m. on May 16 Been met Gail LaRue, a married 28-year-old who had left four children from a prior marriage in Sheridan, Wyoming. Gail explained that at 2 a.m. on April 27, a hotel bellman had asked her to go to the New Frontier Hotel and see the well-known black gospel musician Clara Ward, whose Clara Ward Singers were performing there. In the lobby, Ward handed Gail \$100 and told her: "I have a couple of friends in town that would like to meet you and have you take care of them." Ward said "she was paying Gail . . . because these two men did not believe in paying a girl for her service and for Gail to keep quiet about receiving any money."

Clara took Gail to the bar at the Sands Hotel and made a call on the house phone. Martin Luther King then appeared in the bar and took both women to his room, where all three began drinking. King phoned one of his colleagues and told him to “get your damned ass down here because I have a beautiful white broad here”. Then “both the Rev King and Clara Ward stripped naked and told Gail to do the same.” With Gail seated in a chair, “King went down on his knees and started nibbling on her right breast, while Clara Ward did the same with her left breast. Gail then stated, ‘I guess the Reverend got tired of that and put his head down between my legs and started nibbling on “that”.’ After a while he got up and told Clara Ward to try some of it, so Clara went down on Gail for a while. Gail stated, ‘I think Clara Ward is queer’.”

Then King had intercourse with Gail while Clara watched. “After what Gail stated seemed like hours, King rolled off and had another drink, then climbed back on for a second go around.” After King paused again, his friend showed up, had a drink, and had intercourse with Gail “while both Clara Ward and the Rev King watched the action from a close-by position”, with Clara sometimes stroking Gail as well. “Gail then stated that she was getting scared as they were pretty drunk and all using filthy language and at last she told Clara Ward she would have to go.” Clara informed King, who “then whispered in Gail’s ear, ‘I would like to try you sometime again if I could get you away from Clara’.”

Been wrote that “Gail stated to this investigator that ‘that was the worst orgy I’ve ever gone through,’” and added that she had declined a subsequent request from Clara Ward to get together again. Been’s three-page memo made its way to the FBI’s Las Vegas SAC, who had it retyped and labelled “Secret” for direct transmission to J. Edgar Hoover. On May 23, Been conducted a follow-up interview with Gail, and passed the additional information to Bureau agents two days later. Gail volunteered that both King and his friend had each asked her to perform oral sex on them with the words “Here—eat this,” which she claimed not to have done, but Been was dubious, telling the FBI that Gail “was not too emphatic in her denial”. In yet another direct report to Hoover, this one labelled “Top Secret”, Las Vegas agents reported that “a paramour of King’s from Los Angeles, Dolores Castillo”, was “known to have spent some time in King’s suite around midnight, April 26”, prior to King’s early-morning assignation with Gail LaRue and Clara Ward.

Unsurprisingly, in late May the wiretap on King’s home telephone overheard a conversation in which “King and his wife had an argument and information was brought out concerning King’s extra-marital activities”. At headquarters, Supervisor Phillips expressed displeasure that Atlanta agents had waited 48 hours before reporting what they had heard and instructed them to “furnish the Bureau, by communication marked for the personal attention of Assistant Director William C. Sullivan, any tape available concerning the reported conversation” or “the most detailed transcript available”. Atlanta case agent Bob Nichols quickly sent the tape, explaining that “the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ used by both parties” made it “impossible to know the identities of the individuals to whom they are making reference”. Sullivan himself later wrote that Coretta King had told her husband that he was “not fulfilling his marital ‘responsibilities’” and “that if he spent ten hours a month at home, this would be an exaggeration”. Sullivan added that King “told her she should go out and have some sexual affairs of her own”.

Three weeks later King called Dolores Evans and they agreed to meet in Los Angeles on July 8. Soon after King returned to Atlanta, a Ms Ruby Hubert of Los Angeles called him on SCLC’s wiretapped lines “and berated him for not seeing her or calling her when he was in Los Angeles, Calif., recently. King gave the excuse that he was in a conference and could not talk to her.” That very same day King “contacted his ‘hideout’ and told Fred Bennette . . . that he was bringing Dorothy Cotton . . . out to the hideout in a few minutes”. The following month, shortly before leaving for the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, “King told Dorothy Cotton that he had contacted Fred Bennette and everything was OK for the night of 8/19/64.”



Dorothy Cotton in October 1963: The most important woman in King's life never explicitly discussed her relationship with him (© Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images)

The “special squad” coverage that the FBI’s Deke DeLoach deployed against civil rights advocates during the Democratic convention at the behest of President Johnson has long been a well-known story in the annals of FBI abuses, but the newly-released documents add memorable details to this infamous tale. Special Agent Ben Hale was able to pose as NBC correspondent “Bill Peters” thanks to how Robert ‘Shad’ Northshield, a much-heralded television news executive from the 1950s until the 1990s [“and a long-time, well-established contact of my office, furnished us NBC credentials”](#), DeLoach boasted to Bureau superiors. The Bureau also deployed two of its few black agents, John M. Cary and William P. Crawford, to Atlantic City in “undercover assignment roles”. One of the men “successfully

established contact with Dick Gregory”, the entertainer and activist, “and maintained this relationship throughout the course of the entire convention. By midweek, he had become one of Gregory’s confidants.” The Johnson White House was highly impressed, and every agent involved received a financial reward.

That same month, in another newly-available document, Assistant Director Sullivan told his boss, Alan Belmont, that the Domestic Intelligence Division would “develop highly placed, quality informants in certain legitimate organisations whose activities generally relate to racial matters”, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and King’s SCLC.

Whether pursuant to that plan, or simply by happenstance, late in the summer of 1964 a young black man with an accounting background who [had already worked as an FBI informant in both San Francisco and Little Rock moved to Atlanta](#) and began “spending a lot of his spare time working on the books of the SCLC”, Atlanta Special Agent Donald P. Burgess wrote. James A. Harrison’s role as the FBI’s sole human informant inside SCLC’s Atlanta headquarters was first revealed by this author in 1981, but only now do new documents, available on the web following a Freedom of Information Act request, reveal Harrison’s pre-existing role as an FBI informant. On October 2 Agent Burgess recounted how “Harrison has completely ingratiated himself in the SCLC and is considered a staff member at present . . . Harrison has met and been in the home of Martin Luther King, Jr, and apparently meets with the approval of King.” At least weekly, Harrison informed Atlanta agents what was happening at SCLC, but his early reports featured only mundane office gossip.

On Wednesday, November 18, J. Edgar Hoover told a group of women reporters that King was “the most notorious liar” in the US, ostensibly because of how King had criticised southern FBI agents two years earlier. Hoover added “off the record” that King “is one of the lowest characters in the country”, but the “notorious liar” characterisation generated widespread headlines. King responded with a telegram telling Hoover that he was “appalled and surprised at your reported statement maligning my integrity” and with a public statement asserting that the 69-year-old Hoover “has apparently faltered under the awesome burden, complexities and responsibilities of his office”.

King professed “nothing but sympathy for this man who has served his country so well,” but in wiretapped phone conversations that were quickly passed to FBI headquarters, King instructed aides to ask civil rights allies to speak out so that Hoover would be “hit from all sides.” Hoover complained to his own aides that “I can’t understand why we are unable to get the true facts before the public” and that “we are never taking the aggressive.”

Now, more newly-available documents offer a far more detailed account of what then transpired on Saturday November 21 in what would become the most notorious episode in the FBI’s pursuit of King. At the Domestic Intelligence Division’s offices on the eighth floor of the Riddell Building at 1730 K Street, Washington, Supervisor Seymour Phillips had possession of all the reel-to-reel tapes from the hotel room microphone surveillances on King. Early that morning Assistant Director Sullivan instructed FBI Laboratory supervisor John M. Matter to prepare multiple composite copies containing what Matter called “highlights” from the Willard Hotel and Los Angeles Hyatt House recordings. Soon thereafter, as Phillips recalled in a lengthy, never before cited recollection of that day’s events, Sullivan, whose office “was directly across the hall” from his, “came into my office and asked me for some unwatermarked stationery”. Then, “later that morning”, Sullivan “telephoned me for the address of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference headquarters in Atlanta”. Phillips jotted it down and took it to Sullivan, who was busy typing and again sought assurance that the stationery Phillips had given him was unwatermarked.

Phillips went on: “Around noon, Sullivan called me into his office and handed me a sealed manila envelope which appeared to contain something other than written matter as it was a solid package. He gave me a sum of money and asked that I have one of the men working with me immediately take the package by cab to the Justice Building and hand it over to Al Belmont,” whose office was at “Main Justice” on Pennsylvania Avenue.

From there, the day’s events shift to a second narrator, whose April 1975 interview with Church Committee investigators is also among the newly-disclosed documents. [Supervisor Lish Whitson, one of the Domestic Intelligence Division’s most senior agents, recounted how on that Saturday Sullivan had called him at home and told him that Hoover wanted him to take a package to Miami, one that only Sullivan, Deputy Director Clyde Tolson, Hoover, and Assistant to the Director Belmont knew about.](#) Sullivan told him to go to National Airport, and “Whitson said that when he arrived at the North terminal of National Airport, following Sullivan’s telephonic instructions, a young man who was unknown to Whitson but who addressed him as ‘Mr Whitson’ turned a package over to him which was wrapped in brown paper and sealed with sealing tape” and approximately eight inches by eight inches and one inch thick.

Upon landing in Miami, Whitson telephoned Sullivan for further instructions and was told to address it to Martin Luther King in Atlanta, with no return address. At a post office, Whitson had it weighed and affixed stamps. On Sunday Whitson flew back to Washington, and upon reporting in on Monday morning, Sullivan remarked, “Someday I will tell you about that.” About a week later, “Sullivan commented to Whitson that the package had not yet been received by Martin Luther King,” and only come January 5, 1965, more than six weeks later, did agents listening in on the Atlanta wiretaps hear King and his aides discussing a troubling and embarrassing tape-recording he had received. At FBI headquarters, Seymor Phillips mentioned that news to John Matter, who said nothing in response “but rather smiled ‘knowingly,’” Phillips later wrote.

As history has long known, at SCLC headquarters the package containing the tape was presumed to be of one of King’s speeches and was put aside for delivery to his wife. When King learned of the contents, he became distraught, telling one aide over the wiretapped phone lines that the FBI was “out to get me, harass me, break my spirit”. [King went to the apartment of an SCLC secretary, Edwina Smith, to try to rest and get some sleep, only to be awakened by firemen responding to a false fire alarm instigated by Atlanta FBI agents.](#) Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young, two of King’s closest aides, sought a meeting with the FBI’s Deke DeLoach to ask whether the Bureau was investigating King’s personal life, but the duplicitous DeLoach denied any such thing.

In reality, throughout late November and early December, even following a highly-publicised but completely banal face-to-face meeting between King and Hoover, FBI officials followed Hoover’s instructions to have all of the hotel room recordings transcribed in full and prepared new summary reports for agents to use in privately spreading the word about King’s personal conduct. “THIS MEMORANDUM IS NOT TO BE DISSEMINATED OUTSIDE THE BUREAU AND IS TO BE USED ONLY FOR ORAL BRIEFING PURPOSES,” one newly-available document describing King as “a moral degenerate” forcefully warns.

[The FBI’s anonymous letter sent with the tape warned King that “you will find on the record for all time” audio evidence of “your adulterous acts, your sexual orgies” involving “various evil playmates”](#)

Almost exactly one decade later, when the FBI had chosen none other than Seymor Fred Phillips to be its principal liaison with the Church Committee, a committee request that the Bureau survey the personal files that William Sullivan had left behind when Hoover forced him into sudden retirement in 1971 led Phillips to make an historic discovery. On Sunday morning January 26, 1975, Phillips was asked to “inventory a drawer full of folders pertaining to King” among Sullivan’s papers. [Therein he found “a document which I considered at the time of extreme significance”](#), the original of an anonymous, unsigned letter ostensibly written by one of “us Negroes” and addressed simply “King”. A heavily-redacted version of that letter was later publicly released, and in time a fully unredacted copy would become available too. But writing in early 1975, soon after discovering the original of that missive, Phillips explained in his newly-released memo how he had realised that back on November 21, 1964, Sullivan had no doubt employed carbon paper when typing on that unwatermarked stationery Phillips had given him, thereby creating an untraceable carbon copy with “that copy used as the cover communication” in the package that then made its way first to Al Belmont and then to Lish Whitson. Phillips insisted that in November 1964, “I didn’t at that time conceive of any communication being sent with the tape” that he knew Sullivan had had dispatched, and only upon studying the text of the letter did Sullivan’s intent become clear.

After telling King to “lend your sexually psychotic ear to the enclosure”, the letter warned that “you will find on the record for all time” audio evidence of “your adulterous acts, your sexual orgies” involving “various evil playmates” including “Dolores Evans”. Calling him “an evil, abnormal beast”, [the letter instructed: “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 . . . There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal fraudulent self is bared to the nation.”](#) As Phillips realised in 1975 after seeing the text, 34 days from November 21 was December 25, Christmas Day—with Sullivan’s clear but unspoken implication being that King had better take his own life by that date.

Notwithstanding how privately distraught King was upon realising the extent of the FBI’s efforts to destroy him, no word of what was taking place in Washington and Atlanta broke into public view in 1965 or in the years immediately following. When King’s family moved from the house they had rented since 1960 to a newly-purchased home in April 1965, Atlanta agents sought headquarters’ approval to continue wiretapping King’s phone at the new address. In the three months leading up to the move, the home tap had revealed “18 contacts of King by individuals having CP connections”, such as Clarence Jones and singer Harry Belafonte, that were all decades old, [“and 11 contacts by King of females relating to extra-marital activity on his part”](#). With Hoover seeking to minimise the FBI’s overall number of active wiretaps, Atlanta’s request was denied.

At SCLC headquarters, Jim Harrison continued filing regular informant reports, but when he told Atlanta agents that he had met Stanley Levison at SCLC’s August convention in Birmingham, their lack of interest revealed once again how “communist influence” was now a very small figleaf indeed in the Bureau’s ongoing surveillance of King. They evinced more interest in second-hand gossip that some Atlanta radio station employee supposedly possessed “blackmail type of information on King”. Similarly, several months later Phillips and Sullivan eagerly welcomed Atlanta news—whether from the office wiretap or Harrison is unclear—[“that King is reported to have gone to the apartment of one of his female employees on 11/4/65 and to have torn her clothes off of her in an apparent attempt to attack her”](#). Whatever the truth of that rumour, throughout early 1966 King became closer and closer to his [“constant paramour”](#) Dorothy Cotton, ostensibly running up more than \$600 in international telephone charges to call Cotton in Atlanta during a spring speaking trip to France.

In June 1966, Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach instructed the FBI to end its wiretapping of SCLC’s office phones because the Justice Department was considering charging one of King’s aides in

an interstate car theft case, but Jim Harrison remained in place. When a meeting that included Stanley Levison and Clarence Jones discussed how SCLC's payroll might be trimmed, Harrison told Atlanta agents that the possibility of firing receptionist Xernona Clayton, the wife of SCLC's former public relations director, had foundered in part because of the fact that Clayton "has engaged in promiscuous relations with Martin Luther King, Jr". Atlanta's suggestion that COINTELPRO possibilities involving Clayton be considered was turned down by FBI headquarters.

Not to be outdone, the Chicago FBI office energetically followed up on a lead that an additional King girlfriend was 33-year-old Barbara Moore, a secretary at Sears-Roebuck & Co headquarters who had been introduced to King two or three years earlier by his attorney friend Chauncey Eskridge, who was himself involved with Moore's sister Judy. Chicago agents had a criminal informant, CG 6732-C, who "has been intimately acquainted for a number of years" with Moore and who claimed that "King sees Barbara Moore every time he comes to Chicago," which in 1965-66 was quite often. Moore was reportedly competing for King's Chicago affections with another woman, Rosemary Mitchell, who owned Rosemary Mitchell Interiors in Hyde Park and was formerly the common-law partner of a South Side crime figure. The informant told the agents that according to Moore, on one occasion King "became involved in a fist fight" over Moore with an unknown attorney, and the agents' own investigation of Moore's background established that under several previous names she "was reportedly a prostitute" at the age of 18.

Even with no further electronic surveillance sources reporting on King's private life, information continued to flow in, whether from Jim Harrison or from other human sources. By late 1967 the Bureau was reporting King's dependence upon sleeping pills and how he "frequently flew into a rage over relatively insignificant matters", a claim later confirmed by King's aides. Then, in December 1967, the King case took its most curious turn of all when Don Newcombe, a famous African-American former major league baseball pitcher, became worried about King's newly-announced plan to mount an aggressively disruptive "Poor People's Campaign" in Washington in 1968.

Writing to President Lyndon B. Johnson just before Christmas, Newcombe explained that "I have information I consider highly classified" which "would be of great value to your Administration" but which he would furnish only to the president himself. Top Johnson aides Harry McPherson, Clifford Alexander, and Marvin Watson puzzled with great seriousness over Newcombe's curious missive before Watson wrote back to say that the president was very busy but that Watson himself would welcome receiving Newcombe's information. In early January Newcombe reached Watson by phone, and while Newcombe made clear that his information concerned Martin Luther King, he declined Watson's request that he submit a fully detailed letter: "There are so many people involved and so many people that could possibly be hurt by this information that I find myself unable to put it down in writing."

The FBI reported that an intoxicated King had threatened to jump out of a New York hotel window if Dolores Evans would not say she loved him, and that they believed he had fathered a baby girl born to her.

Newcombe soon found his way to the FBI, and by February 20 an FBI report went to the White House detailing Newcombe's information. Newcombe was an in-law of Dolores Evans, King's long-time Los Angeles girlfriend, whom Newcombe said had been involved with King since 1962. Once when Evans

was with King in a New York hotel room, Newcombe related, an intoxicated King had threatened to jump out a window if Evans would not say she loved him. The FBI quickly updated its existing summary report, “Martin Luther King, Jr, A Current Analysis,” to incorporate all of Newcombe’s information. Most shockingly, Newcombe “believes King fathered a baby girl born to this woman inasmuch as her husband is allegedly sterile. The child resembles King to a great degree and King contributes to the support of this child. He calls this woman every Wednesday and frequently meets her in various cities throughout the country.”

Following King’s death, a White House aide shared the Newcombe information with syndicated columnist Jack Anderson, who travelled to Los Angeles for what he described as “an emotional interview” with Dolores Evans, who insisted that her relationship with King had been “merely a friendship”. She told Anderson, “I didn’t call him. He called me,” and steadfastly “denied any intimacies”. When Evans’s daughter Chrystal, who had been born on October 30, 1964, married in 2003, her *New York Times* wedding announcement listed “the late Dr Theodore L. Evans, Jr,” as her father. The ceremony itself was performed by Martin Luther King’s closest surviving associate, Reverend Andrew J. Young. In a brief 2007 essay about fathers and daughters, Dr Chrystal Evans-Bowman, an only child, wrote that her parents separated in 1976-77 and reported that her father died in 1994. Dr Evans-Bowman, with whom the now 82-year-old Dolores Evans lives, has not responded to multiple requests for an interview with her mother.

Don Newcombe’s involvement in the FBI’s pursuit of King exemplifies the single most important truth about J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI: its domestic intelligence investigations relied far more on human informants than on costly and time-consuming electronic surveillance. Typical of the FBI’s late 1960s’ onslaught against a wide range of political groups was the Bureau’s early 1968 recruitment of a second SCLC staff member, Chicago-based Ralph Henry, as a paid informant, the new documents reveal. A significant if little-known SCLC organiser, Henry not only attended a February 12 conference with King and all his top aides in Atlanta, but when Fred Bennette, King’s “hideaway” facilitator, was “assigned to be in charge of security for Martin Luther King”, Chicago agents reported, “Ralph Henry was assigned to be Reverend Bennette’s assistant.” More than three years later, Henry was still on SCLC’s payroll, and also still on the FBI’s. John Furfey, a Chicago-based CIA agent, conducted a long November 18, 1971 interview with Henry. “Subject earns about \$600 clear from the SCLC each month and this is supplemented by money from the FBI,” Furfey reported to his CIA superiors.

But Ralph Henry was far from alone. Jim Harrison left SCLC in February 1970 [yet remained an FBI informant until 1974, the newly-released documents reveal](#). In addition, the Bureau also deployed an important, heretofore unknown informant from Cincinnati, known only as CI 652-R, to cover Martin Luther King’s funeral. In a long, newly-available written report, [CI 652-R detailed](#) how he and his family [flew to Atlanta on April 9, 1968, and drove fellow Hilton Hotel guests Myrlie and Charles Evers to the funeral service at Ebenezer Baptist Church](#). The following morning CI 652-R had a long face-to-face conversation at SCLC headquarters with Andrew Young before SCLC leaders held a press conference. “My wife and I left after the press conference and went to visit Coretta King and later Rev M. L. King, Sr.,” CI 652-R wrote to Special Agent John T. Pryor. (The likelihood is that the informant was Reverend L. V. Booth, a longtime friend of the King family and the pastor of Cincinnati’s Zion Baptist Church from 1952. He died in 2002 aged 83.)

But Martin Luther King and his aides and family were far from alone in drawing the attention of multiple FBI informants. In 1963, the Communist Party USA had a grand total of 4,453 members, new Bureau documents reveal, and as of two years later no fewer than 336 of them were FBI informants. Even in 1971, the Bureau was boasting privately of how [11 of its informants were members of the CPUSA’s National Committee](#), and early that year [the FBI dispatched WF \(as in Washington](#)

Field) 1777-S to a Soviet-backed World Council for Peace conference in Stockholm where “she” proved to be “of exceptional value”.

Yet the scale of the FBI’s penetration of the CPUSA paled next to its success against a far more iconic political group. By 1971 the Black Panther Party was weaker than it had been several years earlier, but its membership decline had not attenuated the FBI’s presence in its ranks. “[The present membership is 710](#),” a newly-available August 1971 Domestic Intelligence Division document reports, “and we have 156 informants . . . which represents 21.7 percent of the membership.” [The Division eagerly boasted that all told “we are operating 7,477 extremist informants”](#), more than 6,500 of whom were low-import “ghetto informants who provide general information”, but the Bureau’s targeting was not limited solely to leftists and African-Americans. Nationwide, “[353 informants report on white extremist organisations](#)”, and when in late 1967 the United Klans of America, by far the largest Ku Klux Klan group in the United States, elected an Imperial Board at its National Klonvocation, “[four of the ten newly-elected members of this Board are FBI informants](#),” the Division crowed. What’s more, “[in the early stages of Klan growth in the State of Tennessee, we were able to develop as a Bureau informant the Grand Dragon of the United Klans of America, Realm of Tennessee. Through this high-level source we were able to control the expansion of the Klan” and “discourage violence throughout the state”](#). Across Tennessee, the Klan’s “lack of success can be attributed to our highly-placed informant”, ME 313-E (as in Extremist), who was handled by Special Agent M. E. McCloughan. (The evidence points to ME 313-E being former UKA Grand Dragon V. Doyle Ellington, now aged 80, who lives in Brownsville and is on Facebook.)

The new hoard of largely-unredacted, previously unreleased FBI documents raises more questions than can presently be answered. Irrespective of whether or not Martin Luther King actually has an additional, never-acknowledged daughter, the scores and scores of informant identities that can be pried out of the new material will primarily interest only a small handful of historians and journalists. But many other nuggets await discovery. For example “Ironclad”, a Soviet “defector-in-place” who “[has identified hundreds of SIS \[Soviet Intelligence Service\] officers and furnished information concerning approximately 250 intelligence operations](#)”, appears never before to have come into public view. “The value of information he has furnished and has a potential to furnish is beyond estimate,” the Domestic Intelligence Division wrote in August 1971.

Yet without any doubt the uppermost issue raised by the new documents concerns just how fundamental a reconsideration of Martin Luther King’s historical reputation will take place when the complete trove of still-sealed FBI tape recordings and attendant transcripts is released for public review. Until now, some voices in 2027 might have called for the physical destruction of all those historical records, notwithstanding how the FBI’s electronic surveillance of King was not, under the regrettably relaxed standards of that time, in any way illegal.

But the FBI’s allegation that King “looked on, laughed and offered advice” as a forcible rape took place right in front of him makes that stance unsupportable by anyone. Dorothy Cotton, the most important woman in King’s life, went to her grave without ever giving an interview in which she explicitly discussed their relationship, and how many of the additional 40 or more women, such as Dolores Evans, Barbara Meredith and Barbara Moore, whom the now-public documents identify as King’s more occasional partners, might have something of value to offer the historical record?

King’s far-from monogamous lifestyle, like his binge-drinking, may fit albeit uncomfortably within his existing life story, but the suggestion—actually more than one—that he either actively tolerated or personally employed violence against any woman, even while drunk, poses so fundamental a challenge to his historical stature as to require the most complete and extensive historical review possible.

In retrospect, it now seems certain that Martin Luther King knew himself better and more fully than we have over the past 50 years. As he told his Ebenezer congregation on March 3, 1968, “There is a schizophrenia, as the psychologists or the psychiatrists would call it, going on within all of us. There are times that all of us know somehow that there is a Mr Hyde and a Dr Jekyll in us.” But he nonetheless insisted that “God does not judge us by the separate incidents or the separate mistakes that we make, but by the total bent of our lives.” Some of us now-ageing King scholars “may not get there with you” come 2027, but there is no question that a profoundly painful historical reckoning and reconsideration inescapably awaits.



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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL **OPINION/COMMENTARY**

A Reckoning With Martin Luther King

Can America find grace and forbearance after shocking revelations about the civil-rights hero?

By Lance Morrow - *Published in the June 18, 2019 print edition*

How can one understand the behavior unearthed by Martin Luther King Jr. biographer David Garrow? Mr. Garrow has reported, in sometimes pornographic detail, on King's assignations with some of the more than 40 women, single and married, with whom he is said to have had affairs. In the ugliest scene—difficult to comprehend or forgive—King stands by, and even laughs and offers advice, as a fellow minister rapes a woman. King is drunk, and he brags about it.

Mr. Garrow's 7,800-word article had to be published by the British magazine *Standpoint* because American publications turned it down. Its revelations are from the mid-1960s, at the height of the civil-rights movement, the years before King was martyred and canonized, his name bestowed upon a national holiday and a thousand avenues and high schools.

Grown-ups understand—though children and ideologues do not—what F. Scott Fitzgerald meant when he said that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” We will now live with two contradictory and irreconcilable ideas of Martin Luther King Jr.



Martin Luther King Jr. at a press conference in Cambridge, Mass., April 23, 1967
PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Those close to King, including journalists covering the civil-rights movement, were aware of his womanizing and drinking—though they did not know the extent or, shall we say, the vividness of it. Some of his clerical associates, Mr. Garrow writes, joined him in group sex with women whom, using a private code, they called “parishioners.”

Reporters heard rumors at the time. They talked and sometimes joked about them. But they did not write about such things, for it was a different time, with different rules regarding the privacy of public figures. Reporters didn’t write about Franklin Roosevelt’s wheelchair, either, or about Joseph McCarthy’s drinking or John Kennedy’s sex life.

When King preached to his congregation, he often spoke of himself as a sinner. Unlike some preachers, he meant it. He knew that he was a flawed man. Maybe King's conscience should be understood with the help of the novelist Graham Greene's modernist Catholic conceit that great saints may find their path to salvation by way of egregious sins. Some psychiatric speculation suggests that the drinking and the sex were the result of manic depression.

On the exalted, public side of the ledger stands the moral leader who changed America for the better and who knew the price that he would pay for it. "I may not get there with you," he said on the night before he was shot. "But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop." That was the majestic King, the prophet. "I've looked over," he said, "and I've seen the Promised Land." He elongated the word "seen" so that it fairly quivered in the air.

Some historians and others defending King's memory have suggested that Mr. Garrow's evidence is tainted or racist. In the 1960s and later, many knew that J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation had bugged King's hotel rooms and offered the sex tapes to various media to discredit him.

Mr. Garrow's information, however, appears to be solid. He is a painstaking, widely respected historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer. The material in his article is not based on hearsay (which one often finds in raw FBI files) but on newly released, vetted summaries of the FBI's audiotapes, which are themselves sealed until 2027. A 1977 report from the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility confirmed the transcripts' accuracy.

Mr. Garrow, by the way, is a man of the left, a self-described democratic socialist. He has always been an admirer of King. Besides, skeptics will not be able to impugn his scholarship for long. Any remaining doubts should be settled eight years from now, when the public will hear King's familiar voice on the tapes. Mr. Garrow predicts that the shock will be considerable.

We are running out of paragons. I believe in Great Man theories of history—or believe, in any case, that the absence of moral leaders such as King is a catastrophe. A country without heroes becomes either savage or monstrously petty, and dull and mean. What we have today is a toxic compound of savagery and pettiness made even worse by the ruthless self-importance of identity politics. We have grown profligate in destroying heroes. I don't think we can afford to lose Dr. King.

The way out, I'd say, is grace, if anyone believes in grace anymore. It's become a rare thing in American public life. Martin Luther King was complicated, and some of his behavior was vile. Yet he gave his life—gave it knowingly—for the sake of the country, for blacks and also for whites. He deserves the grace of his country's forbearance.

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