

The FBI's war on Martin Luther King

by Mary Lalevée

To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.

by Adam Fairclough

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On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Rumors spread at the time that the FBI had ordered the assassination, carried out by James Earl Ray. Nothing was ever proven conclusively, but this recently published book by Adam Fairclough, lecturer in history at St. David's University College, University of Wales, provides excellent documentation on FBI efforts to destroy King personally, and to undermine the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the main coordinating body of the civil rights movement, which followed King's ideas on the theory and practice of non-violence.

To anyone who has followed operations carried out against presidential candidate LaRouche and his supporters over the years, the FBI's methods are all too familiar. Director J. Edgar Hoover conducted a massive campaign to discredit King, whom he allegedly suspected of being a communist. Wire-taps, infiltration, investigations, all legal and illegal means were used to try to stop King.

In a press conference on Nov. 18, 1964, Hoover told journalists that King was "the most notorious liar in the country," explicitly encouraging the reporters to quote him. Off the record, Hoover alleged that King associated with communists and was "one of the lowest characters in America." Fairclough notes that although Hoover had conceded publicly that the civil rights movement "is not and never has been" controlled by communists, the FBI was churning out "evidence" of King's "communist" associations up to the week of his death. Hoover made FBI material on King—transcripts, photographs, even recordings—available to editors, reporters, religious leaders, and others. He even ordered a tape recording of King's supposed extramarital adventures in a hotel to be sent anonymously to King's wife, Coretta.

None of this stopped King.

Fairclough writes, "After the failure of its blackmail attempt and smear campaign of 1964-65, the FBI seemed more concerned with weakening SCLC as an organization than discrediting King as an individual. . . . The FBI concentrated on hampering SCLC's fundraising efforts and on influencing the press. . . . Through the Crime Records Division, it disseminated unfriendly newspaper articles, passed on bureau-inspired editorials to cooperative editors and publishers, and furnished friendly reporters with 'embarrassing questions' to ask King about his stance on Vietnam."

The FBI had a paid informant on the SCLC's executive staff, James Harrison, from whom they received a "steady flow of information" about what was happening inside the organization; and they also had a wire-tap on one of the SCLC leader's phones. In early March 1968, the Racial Intelligence Section of the FBI held a conference in Washington to discuss methods of disrupting what they called "black nationalist hate groups," which had been included in the bureau's counter-intelligence program (Cointelpro) the previous August. "In a directive to all its field offices on March 4, just one month before King's assassination, FBI headquarters ordered a concerted offensive against "the most violent and radical groups" including action to "prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify and electrify the militant black nationalist movement." King, the directive pointed out, "could be a very real contender for this position."

FBI Racial Intelligence Section chief George C. Moore instructed offices to begin a "rumor campaign" in order to undermine the SCLC's recruiting drive. "They could spread stories about disorganization and lack of funds within SCLC, circulate threats of 'violence and bodily harm' to participants; encourage a belief that demonstrators would have their names taken, 'and welfare checks from the Government discontinued' . . . The Jackson office had the idea of advertising fictitious meetings featuring King as the main speaker. Detroit suggested disrupting SCLC's transportation arrangements by promising to supply buses that it had no intention of delivering."

Earlier FBI harassment included blackmail, threats, and legal action against SCLC leaders. In 1963, following the "March on Washington," at which King made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, several SCLC leaders were indicted by a federal grand jury for obstruction of justice, two receiving jail sentences, and others fines and suspended sentences. In August 1964, "when the bureau learned that King was seeking an audience with the Pope, it 'orally briefed' Cardinal Spellman, so that such information [about King's alleged communist sympathies] could be passed on to the Pope. To the FBI's dismay, however, Pope Paul agreed to see King."

Fairclough succeeds in providing very detailed and valuable documentation on the SCLC and Martin Luther King, while maintaining the reader's interest all the way through the book's 400 pages. Fairclough's excellent book should be required reading for every student of American political life.