

The assassination of Martin Luther King: the paper trail to Memphis

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It has already been proven in court that the 1968 assassination of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. was the result of a conspiracy involving elements of the US Federal Government.¹ This essay is not going to re-hash the work that went into reaching that historic verdict. What has not been shown before is how that 1968 conspiracy came together. I can now demonstrate at least part of that process.

I have been aided by the 2018 publication of David Margolick's *The Promise and the Dream*,² a 'double biography' about the evolving relationship between Dr King and Robert F Kennedy. Mr Margolick's work is significant in its own right; but even though it does not explore the assassination of either man, it is invaluable as a conceptual framework for understanding the evolution of the 'MLK plot'.

Surprisingly, there appears to be a bureaucratic paper-trail to the whole affair. It is not covered in Mr Margolick's book and has been overlooked until now, despite a minor outbreak of media attention to one of the more interesting documents in the series.³ And more surprisingly still, this paper-trail starts in 1963. That is five years before Dr King was murdered, and while President Kennedy and his brother Robert were still in office.

October 15, 1963

On this date, FBI Intelligence Operations chief William C Sullivan disseminated a memo. In it, he announced the completion and imminent circulation of a dossier entitled 'Communism and the Negro Movement - A Current Analysis'. The contents were described in rather general terms. At first glance, you might think it was just another of those alarmist memos that periodically did the rounds in Washington DC during the Cold War. But this one is worth a closer look. Sullivan was evidently so pleased with what he had created that he planned to circulate it to a pretty exclusive circle of the powerful.

¹ <<http://www.thekingcenter.org/assassination-conspiracy-trial>>

² New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018.

³ <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41871956>>

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The enclosed article is a factual, documented analysis of the over-all current situation. We believe that it would be of interest not only to the Attorney General but also to Mr. O'Donnell, at the White House; Mr. McCone, at the Central Intelligence Agency; Mr. Rusk, at the Department of State; as well as to Mr. McNamara and the three Armed Forces intelligence agencies of the Defense Department. Accordingly, if the article as prepared is approved, we propose to disseminate it to the afore-mentioned individuals and agencies.

RECOMMENDATION:

ENCLOSURE

That the enclosed article be approved. If approved, it should be returned to the Domestic Intelligence Division for preparation of appropriate letters of transmittal.

You might be wondering about Sullivan's private attitudes toward Dr King. Later, in 1964, W C Sullivan was one those who executed the infamous blackmail-suicide exercise against MLK,⁴ in which tapes of (married) Dr King with other women were sent to the Kings' address with poison pen letters telling MLK to kill himself or be exposed.

October 17, 1963

Assistant FBI director Alan Belmont⁵ wrote to FBI associate-director Clyde Tolson (Hoover's lifelong companion, and alleged lover). Belmont was apparently concerned by Sullivan's memo and the accompanying dossier on communism and 'Negroes'. Rather indiscreetly, Belmont blew Sullivan's cover-story for the dossier. What Sullivan had actually created was a 'dirt sheet', intended to paint Dr King as a communist subversive intent on undermining the USA. In the extract below you can see that Belmont also remarked that Attorney-General Robert F Kennedy was going to be pretty startled. Belmont would soon be proved correct – but not in the way he expected.

We must do our duty. ✕
This memorandum may startle the Attorney General, particularly in view of his past association with King, and the fact that we are disseminating this outside the Department. He may resent this. Nevertheless, the memorandum is a powerful warning against Communist influence in the Negro movement, and we will be carrying out our responsibility by disseminating it to the people indicated in the attached memorandum.
I am glad to have this at hand for the file.
A. H. Belmont
AHB:CSH
Belmont

⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/ybjfb5vb>> <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/magazine/what-an-uncensored-letter-to-mlk-reveals.html>>

⁵ <<https://tinyurl.com/ya5xhshe>> or <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1977/08/02/alan-h-belmont-retired-from-no-3-position-in-fbi/a9604b34-fc33-4274-a15b-b03b0013b10d/>>

It is hard to understand why Belmont (the FBI's number 3) put this in writing, and even harder to understand why he sent it to Tolson (the FBI's number 2). It looks like Belmont was using Tolson as a go-between, trusting him to break it to Hoover with the right degree of sensitivity. Sullivan's dossier was circulated, as intended, and everything went quiet for a week or so.

October 25, 1963

Out of the blue, Robert F Kennedy called FBI Director J Edgar Hoover. There was mutual animosity between Hoover and the Kennedys, so this was no friendly catchup. By 1963, wild horses would not have dragged RFK to deal with Hoover unless the subject was of the utmost importance. The extract below is from Hoover's memorandum of that conversation.

The Attorney General called and advised me there was a lot of talk at the Pentagon regarding the document, Communism and the Negro - A Current Analysis, dated 10-16-63, which had been disseminated to the military and intelligence agencies by the Bureau. The Attorney General anticipated that this information would leak out as the military didn't like the Negroes.

There was more than a touch of 'poker' to this conversation. RFK told Hoover that Sullivan's dossier was causing some debate at the Pentagon, and, now that he was aware of that debate, RFK was getting alarmed. RFK didn't show his hand to the hated Hoover, and didn't express any opinion about Sullivan's dossier. Instead RFK carefully used a cover-story of his own, claiming that he was concerned that someone at the Pentagon could leak Sullivan's memo because 'the military don't like the Negroes'.

The relationship between RFK and MLK was still in its infancy at this stage, so it would be wrong to suppose that JFK's Attorney-General was firmly on the side of the civil rights campaigner and therefore horrified by the Sullivan dossier. There was a set of complex and uneasy ties, but not much more than that. Mainly, there was mutual awareness of the other's usefulness. RFK was his brother's gatekeeper, and MLK knew he had to cultivate RFK to get the ear of the President. On the other side of the desk, RFK's calculations were slightly more cynical: King had tacitly endorsed JFK during the knife-edge presidential election of 1960. King's heavily-qualified praise had helped persuade distrustful black voters in segregated America to cast their votes for a preppy white Catholic, and black votes were going to be needed again in November 1964.⁶

⁶ On p. 70 of his book (see footnote 2) Mr Margolick records how, as Eisenhower's Vice-President, Richard Nixon had also courted the black vote in the 1950s, manoeuvres which included joining the NAACP and making ostentatious fact-finding visits to Africa. Dr King, watching Nixon's careful repositioning, presciently observed:

Continues at the foot of the next page.

It had taken a lot of effort to shift the black vote in favour of the Kennedys. RFK was especially toxic for America's blacks, having earned his political credibility by working for the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s. It was hardly a deliberate act of self-'sheepdipping', because RFK was indeed vehemently opposed to Communism. In any case Senator Joseph McCarthy was a family friend who had given RFK the role as a favour. But while this moment on the political centre-stage of the anxious 1950s helped establish RFK as a safe pair of hands for the establishment, it left a near-indelible stain on his reputation for others. As Harry Belafonte told David Margolick (p. 75):

'The black cause was the main article of debate for the Communist Party [. . . Robert Kennedy] came from the anti-black, anti-communist side of the equation.'

This suspicion about RFK's underlying motivations can only have been deepened by the Kennedy administration's painfully slow progress on civil rights. JFK's rash promise to abolish housing segregation 'with a stroke of the pen' had prompted a steady trickle of sardonic mail to the White House, consisting of parcels that contained biros, inkwells, and the like. RFK's apparent eagerness to prosecute Mafiosi – another of his scene-stealing performances from the 1950s, when he clashed with Jimmy Hoffa – had also dissipated as soon as he became Attorney-General. The cracks between the promise of a transformative presidency and its failure to deliver were threatening to widen in the run-up to JFK's longed-for second term.⁷ Hoover's memo continued:

The Attorney General felt we should get back all copies of the document. I told him we had a tally of all copies and we would get them from all agencies to which they were disseminated. The reason to be given for recalling would be revisions. I also told him if any newspapers asked about this, no comment would be made and no mention would be made that such a document existed.

During their 25 October telephone call, RFK demanded that Hoover issue a recall notice for the Sullivan dossier, to get back *every single copy* that had been disseminated. RFK wasn't concerned about just the Pentagon.

Putting oneself in RFK's shoes, it is easy to imagine the panic that a

Footnote 6 continued:

'Nixon has a genius for convincing one that he is sincere. He almost disarms you with his apparent sincerity. If Richard Nixon is not sincere, he is the most dangerous man in America.'

⁷ It is popularly (and cynically) believed that the reason for the JFK administration's hands-off approach to the Mafia was the JFK's affair with Judith Exner, who was bed-hopping between the president and Sam Giancana. But given what we now know about the contemporary CIA's engagement with the Mafia, it's equally plausible that National Security concerns were involved.

potential leak of the Sullivan dossier might inspire in him with the 1964 presidential election looming. If it came to light that RFK himself had been among the recipients and had said nothing, this would wreck his viability as a pro-civil rights Attorney-General and damage his brother's chances of re-election.

The brothers were playing a complex game with MLK. On the one hand, by mid-1963 RFK found himself under constant pressure to tap Dr King's phone lines – pressure exerted by Hoover himself, who had correctly identified two of Dr King's close associates, Stanley Levison and Jack O'Dell, as ex-members of the Communist Party. On the other hand, during a conversation that took place in the White House's Rose Garden during the balmy June of 1963 – where they were safely out of reach of eavesdroppers – JFK let Dr King know that he (King) was being monitored. During this conversation, President Kennedy explained how the three men's political destinies were by now inextricably linked: 'If they shoot you down, they'll shoot us down too.' It is unclear whether this remark was intended as a metaphor.

The following month, RFK suddenly changed tack and authorised the tapping of MLK's home and office phone lines – behaving so aggressively about the issue that the startled FBI found themselves trying to cool him down. So Hoover got his regular wiretap transcripts, and MLK knew not to let any cats out of their bags for Hoover to see. The Kennedys had pulled off an elaborate Washingtonian double-cross of a sort that now seems almost quaint.⁸

Copies have been recovered from all the above except, O'Donnell of the White House, the Attorney General, Deputy Attorney General, Assistant Attorneys General Yeagley and Marshall.

After RFK called Hoover, Sullivan's dossier on MLK was snatched back from most of its recipients, and everything went quiet again. Most of its recipients, but not all of them.

As you can see from the above excerpt, it was noted at the time that President Kennedy didn't return the copy intended for him (which had been sent to his advisor Ken O'Donnell); most conspicuously, given his ostensible concerns, nor did Robert Kennedy. What were the Kennedys up to? Were they hanging on to their copies of the dossier as potential ammunition in their ongoing private war with Hoover?

⁸ Rather less gentlemanly was the double-cross they pulled off against racist Dixiecrat George Wallace, who had endorsed JFK's candidacy for Vice-President in 1956, and had donated heavily to his presidential campaign in 1960, only to end up with desegregation forced on him for his pains. Mr Margolick's book contains (pp. 132-135) an uncomfortable account of the 1962 'courtesy visit' by RFK to the Alabama Governor's office in Montgomery. During this, Wallace glowered from beneath the Confederate flag on the wall behind his desk, an experience that RFK later described as 'like negotiating with a foreign government'.

While he had entered his brother's administration as a Cold War 'hawk', RFK's view of Hoover had evolved significantly over the course of three years. Initially, he had viewed Hoover as the unquestionable master of the FBI's terrain, to be deferred to and respected on all points. Toward the end of his time as Attorney-General, RFK was privately referring to Hoover as a 'maniac' and a 'psycho'. Mr Margolick's book does not identify the impetus for this remarkable U-turn, an event that is all the more significant considering RFK's position as the federal government's chief legal counsel. The suspicion has to be that events described in this essay were critical in flipping RFK's admiration for Hoover into loathing and distrust.

November 7, 1963

It would be equally reasonable to infer that Hoover's awareness of the Kennedys' scheming was behind what happened next. RFK and Hoover were both clearly stewing over their telephone conversation because on 7 November, more than a week after calling him, RFK turned up in person at Hoover's office and there was an ice-cold argument.

Afterwards, Hoover sat and drafted a memorandum of RFK's visit. It looks as though this memo was for Hoover's own records as much as it was for the memo's stated recipients (who included W C Sullivan). We have to treat it with a little scepticism, because of the Hoover-Kennedy hatred. But there's nothing in it that rings immediately false, and quite a lot that sounds very plausible. That certainly includes the following passage, in which Hoover recorded how RFK tried to deny even having seen the dossier.

The Attorney General then mentioned the recent monograph on Communism in the racial situation. He stated that the Defense Department had advised him of it. I told him that he had also been furnished a copy at the same time that we had made distribution to the Defense Department, the White House, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the State Department. He stated that he was quite concerned about the contents because while it did not state that King was a Communist, nevertheless, one could quickly draw that conclusion. I told him that every statement made in the document was accurate and supported by facts.

Hoover noted how he politely but firmly squelched RFK's 'alibi' by pointing out that RFK had received a copy at the same time as all the other recipients. It seems RFK didn't have a good answer to that one.

If this sounds like an exaggerated reading of the RFK-Hoover stand-off, chapter four of Mr Margolick's book shows that Hoover's files on RFK were more voluminous than those he kept on MLK. Hoover believed that 'Negroes' brains are 20 per cent smaller than white peoples' and consequently that Dr King was more of an irritant than a threat, a view he had cause to revise as time went by. RFK on the other hand had power, and Hoover viewed him as a

'sneaky little son of a bitch'. Hoover even assigned a Special Agent to watch the Attorney-General's television appearances.⁹

The anti-MLK 'cabal'

The Autumn 1963 dossier episode had allowed the dossier's author (key FBI man William Sullivan) to create a cabal *outside of the FBI* who were now aware of the FBI's reasons for believing Dr King to be a communist. This was a case of 'light the blue touchpaper and stand well back'. The fact that RFK was alarmed by rumblings from the Pentagon shows that Sullivan had succeeded. What Sullivan had really done was to provide a list of reasons for getting rid of Dr King but left the decisions to people with the capacity to carry it out. In a word, it was incitement.

The panicking RFK was keen to distance himself from the document, giving a flimsy excuse for ordering the recall ('leak prevention') and then attempting to deny that he had even seen it. But the fact that neither of the Kennedy brothers returned their copies shows that they had read the dossier and had determined its potential for use against Hoover (rather than against the *originally intended* target, King), and were therefore keeping their ammunition dry. For the moment, it must have seemed like the Kennedys had won this particular battle. The Sullivan dossier on Dr King disappeared from the official record for another three and a half years, but it would reappear in the spring of 1967.

Robert Kennedy had demanded that Hoover recall the Sullivan dossier from everyone who had received a copy. On the face of it, this was carried out. But there was a Hitchcockian touch to the final stand-off between Robert Kennedy and Hoover on 7 November 1963.

Hoover would have been keenly aware of the fact that neither of the Kennedy brothers had returned their copy of the dossier. The implication was that the Kennedys intended to use this information against Hoover, who they wished to force into retirement. But Hoover did not lose his advantage. By not stating the fact that all the other copies had been retrieved and were already under lock and key, Hoover allowed RFK to remain uncertain about who still had a copy of the dossier

This dramatically weakened the perceived strategic value of the copies that the Kennedys had kept. Hoover described how he had pulled the wool over RFK's eyes, without spelling out the implications, as follows.

⁹ After one such slot (on ABC's *The Tennessee Ernie Ford Show*, in August 1962) the unfortunate agent eventually noted: 'No discussion whatever of the FBI or the Director'. Since Tennessee Ernie Ford was principally a country and western recording artist, best known for his catchphrase 'Bless your pea-pickin' heart!', it's hard to imagine why Hoover thought his good name might be mentioned at all, never mind besmirched.

I told him that every statement made in the document was accurate and supported by facts.

He stated he of course realized this but felt that it would be desirable to recall all of the documents because he did not know who else might see it other than those to whom we had distributed the document. I told the Attorney General that his request would be immediately acted upon, and after the Attorney General left my office I communicated with Mr. Belmont and asked him to see that all copies of the document had been obtained and kept in security.

The Collapse of Camelot

Fifteen days after Hoover's memo, President Kennedy was murdered and Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as President. Robert Kennedy lingered on as LBJ's Attorney-General for another 10 months, suffering abuse and belittlement as Johnson extracted personal revenge for years of humiliation. Eventually, in September 1964 RFK quit. He then stood for election as a New York Senator – and won. Over the next few years, he would consolidate his power-base in the Democratic Party and gather his energies for an eventual bid for the presidency.

Famously, Dr King carried on with his civil rights activism, undaunted. To pour cold water upon any romantic interpretations of the ad-hoc Kennedy-King coalition, it should be noted that Dr King's spontaneous reaction to news of JFK's death was: 'This is what's going to happen to me. This is such a sick society.' After a moment or two of thought Dr King added that, since Kennedy's progress on civil rights had been so slow, he would be more use as a martyr than he had been as a president. Dr King went so far as to call Kennedy's death 'a blessing'. This unguarded mixture of visceral reaction and cynical calculation encapsulates Dr King's priorities: himself first; the struggle second; and everyone else a very poor third.

With John Kennedy's death, RFK's usefulness to MLK diminished dramatically, even if Dr King didn't realise it immediately. However, as a close friend of the incoming President Johnson, FBI Director Hoover knew the wind had changed decisively in favour of his anti-King vendetta. Mr Margolick relates (p. 199) how 'neutralizing King as an effective Negro leader' was the sole topic of a 23 December 1964 meeting.

'Participants bashed out twenty-one separate proposals, featuring ministers, "disgruntled" acquaintances, "aggressive" newsmen, [King's] housekeeper, his wife, or a "good-looking female plant" to be placed in his office. The focus had evolved from King's Communist ties to his character, the objective was to "take him off his pedestal" and expose him for the "rogue, demagogue and scoundrel" that he really was.'

Intent on sabotaging the RFK-MLK relationship beyond hope of repair, Hoover made sure to pass along tapes of MLK making disparaging remarks about RFK's murdered brother, including one in which MLK was heard cracking

obscene jokes about which part of John's anatomy the grieving Jacqueline Kennedy was secretly thinking of kissing while she paid her respects at his casket.¹⁰

April 10, 1967

Suddenly, the FBI's dossier on Dr King reappeared on the desks of officialdom, after a three and a half-year absence. In the meantime it had been dusted down and brought up-to-date to reflect developments in Dr King's career. But the only thing that had been toned down about it was the use of the word 'Negro'.

1 - Liaison
1 - Mr. Shackelford
1 - Mr. D. M. Wells

COMMUNIST INFLUENCE IN RACIAL
MATTERS - A CURRENT ANALYSIS

ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED
DATE 10/11/00 BY SP2/MLK

PURPOSE:

To obtain authorization for high level dissemination
of a document captioned as above which shows the degree of
communist influence on Martin Luther King.

5-1-67
C.A.B.
DL

And this time, the dossier was going straight to the top. In the Bureau's view, not only was Dr King a communist, but he was agitating against America's involvement in Vietnam in order to subvert the nation.

King's strong criticism and condemnation of the Administration's policy on Vietnam in a speech he made at New York on 4/4/67 shows how much he has been influenced by communist advisors. His speech was a direct parallel of the communist position on Vietnam.

It is felt that the President would be interested in a summary on King which shows the degree of communist influence on him. The attached paper constitutes a complete picture and strong indictment of King in that regard.

This was a personal matter for President Johnson himself, who had staked his political future on winning the war. The Attorney-General would be copied in,

¹⁰ Interestingly, Mr Margolick (p. 200) observes that the 1976 Church Committee did not exempt RFK from blame when it came to the failure of successive administrations to curtail Hoover's anti-King crusade. This is a valid criticism, and a real dent in RFK's historical reputation that might be hard to hammer out. I hope that this essay goes some way to demonstrating that RFK did in fact act to thwart Hoover's schemes. Further, that Hoover's furtiveness prevented RFK from being alerted when those same schemes were dusted off, later in the 1960s. In any event, by the stage in RFK's career criticised by the Church Committee, RFK was more or less frozen out by Lyndon Johnson, who was also seizing JFK's legacy from his brother by enacting JFK's long-stalled civil rights agenda and accelerating US progress toward the first manned lunar landing (achieved, per JFK's promise, before the end of the decade). RFK had been robbed of his brother, and now he was being robbed of their shared visions, too. If he had thoughts about building on his brother's presidency with one of his own, that prospect was now apparently ebbing away for good.

which indicates that Johnson might be seeking confidential legal advice once he had read the dossier.

This was nothing spontaneous about the dossier's resurrection. Dr King had been a latecomer to the Vietnam issue, but, when he took it to his heart, he did so decisively. Mr Margolick's book (p. 280) pinpoints this moment as having occurred in January 1967 while Dr King was on holiday in Jamaica.

'At the airport newsstand, King picked up the latest issue of *Ramparts*. In it, he found a long spread entitled "The Children of Vietnam." It consisted principally of horrific pictures of young burn victims, flayed and disfigured by American bombs and napalm. Leafing through it, he lost his appetite and pushed aside the food he had just ordered. "Nothing will ever taste good until I do everything that I can to end that war," he told his travelling companion Bernard Lee.'

Here (extract below) is the Bureau's rationale for resurrecting the MLK dossier. As you can see, there is the familiar mixture of paranoia about communist influence, and 'moral degeneracy'. It is that last accusation that demonstrates how the FBI's concerns had not essentially changed since the same charge was levelled at Dr King in the Bureau's blackmail-suicide letter.

Enclosed is a document captioned as above, which depicts communist influence in the civil rights field, emphasizing the key role of Martin Luther King, Jr. This document is a current revision of the previous analysis captioned "Communism and the Negro Movement - A Current Analysis," prepared and disseminated in November, 1964. In updating it, we have emphasized these areas: (1) continued reliance of King upon former Communist Party, USA, members, particularly Stanley David Levison; (2) facts relating to King's moral degeneracy; and (3) communist goal of uniting the peace and civil rights movements and King's adherence to this communist long-range objective.

Perhaps in frustration due to his cherished wire-taps coming up empty (thanks to JFK's Rose Garden tip-off to MLK), Hoover had latched onto MLK's sex life with a vengeance. Mr Margolick states (p. 177) that Hoover's new obsession 'also provided a wedge for Hoover to drive between his two greatest enemies'.

'Like Hoover, Robert Kennedy was a bit of a prude - the type who never cursed, or laughed at off-color jokes, or felt comfortable around gay people [. . .] Already uncomfortable around King - 'rather formal' was how [Stanley] Levison described their relationship - any revelations about King's racy personal life would only disconcert him further.'

This is surely overstating the situation. RFK could not help but be aware of his older brother's compulsive philandering, and that didn't appear to give RFK any qualms about providing his unstinting support. Perhaps Dr King's aura as a preacher provided a decisive splash of the profane and hypocritical to RFK's perception of him, feeding that uneasiness in ways that were hard to dispel.

Knowledge of Dr King's extra-marital activities does not appear to have diminished JFK's admiration. In fact, Dr King's shamelessness may have actually added to the appeal for John Kennedy. Mr Margolick presents us (p. 180) with a fascinating glimpse of JFK at the White House on 28 August 1963, captivated by the live TV coverage of Dr King's 'I Have A Dream' speech. While Deputy Attorney-General Nicholas Katzenbach was bending RFK's ear about the March on Washington descending into an insurrectionary riot, JFK was listening to King's oratory with a speechmaker's ear, and murmuring: 'That guy is really good.'

In Spring of 1964, a few months after JFK's murder, Hoover shared with the shattered RFK selected recordings from bugs planted in MLK's hotel rooms, which had at last captured decisive proof of King's adulterous abandon. On the tape, King could be heard exulting 'I'm not a Negro tonight!' and 'I'm fucking for God!'. Hoover gloated 'This will destroy the burr-head' but his satisfaction was premature. When the Sullivan blackmail-suicide exercise was launched later in 1964, the Director's prized evidence had no effect. Perhaps it would fare better, three years later, now that Dr King was preparing to agitate against the Vietnam War?

Dr King's new-found interest in Vietnam had also caught President Johnson's attention. He asked Hoover to send him a transcript of a speech delivered by King on 4 April 1967. Dr King had denounced US attempts to bring 'freedom' to Vietnam while deploying black soldiers who didn't even have true freedom in America. Dr King also drew comparisons between America and Nazi Germany – an incendiary proposal and perhaps an unwise one, since it can only have deepened suspicion that Dr King was a crypto-communist. The transcript received by Johnson was accompanied by a report from Hoover entitled 'Racial Violence Potential in the United States this Summer', described on p. 285 of Mr Margolick's book.

'King, it said, had embraced "the communist tactic" of linking the antiwar and civil rights movements, and his encouragement to draft resisters "could eventually lead to dangerous displays of civil disobedience and near-seditious activities by Negroes and whites alike".'

The revived 1967 MLK dossier dates from precisely one week after that anti-Vietnam speech.

If you look closely, you'll notice that there's something odd going on in that last extract on the previous page. The Bureau was now claiming that the original MLK dossier was circulated in November 1964. But as we have already seen, that is not true. The dossier was circulated in October 1963. This was absolutely not an FBI typographical error: the date of the dossier's creation was recorded in W C Sullivan's original memo that year, and Sullivan was among those who revised it in 1967. For some reason, the FBI has obscured the dossier's history.

The purpose of this subterfuge is unclear. However, according to the FBI's falsified timeline, the creation of the dossier is supposed to have occurred after the departures of the two most important recipients of the original version. President Kennedy had been killed in November 1963 and his brother Robert had quit as Attorney-General in September 1964. There is clearly an element of misdirection in the Bureau's claims from 1967, and a reasonable inference has to be that it was the revised dossier's recipients who were being misled.

One possibility is that the Bureau was concerned the document's history might be discovered if LBJ's Attorney-General Ramsey Clark decided to check back among his predecessor's files to see what the original dossier said. Clearly, he wouldn't be able to locate it with the FBI's falsified date as a reference point. In April 1967 Ramsey Clark had only been Attorney-General for a month, having taken up the post in March of that year. When he received the FBI's memo he would still have been settling into his new role. This falsification would also forestall any attempt to look up the original dossier among the papers of the Kennedy administration.

Another – simpler – possibility is that, by falsifying the date of the document's creation, its new recipients would not think to contact Robert Kennedy to discuss it with him. Since the document apparently dated from after RFK's unhappy tenure as Attorney-General, such an approach would be totally pointless as well as procedurally improper. The falsified date, then, would be a form of bureaucratic insulation, keeping RFK in the dark about the resurrection of a plan he believed to have been quashed. This accords well with Mr Margolick's observations about Hoover's determination to drive a wedge between Kennedy and King.¹¹

However, there is no trace in the FBI's files of an April 1967 letter of transmittal accompanying the dossier to the White House. Which means that after all this time, effort, and plotting the FBI didn't actually send it. But this wasn't a case of Hoover getting 'cold feet' (as though that is conceivable!). It was a case of waiting for the right moment to act. And within 12 months, that moment arrived.

March 14, 1968

Finally, with Dr King making public plans to march on Washington, the FBI delivered its dossier to President Johnson. It was accompanied by a letter of

¹¹ This issue is complicated by the fact that a few months earlier, in late 1966, FBI eavesdropping had been exposed during a lobbyist's conviction for tax evasion. Embarrassingly, for Hoover, this improper wiretapping led to the conviction being overturned. Hoover then passed the buck, and leaked to his favourite newspapermen that RFK was to blame for authorising the wiretaps. By mid-December, the *New York Times* had somehow got wind of the fact that Dr King was among those wiretapped with RFK's blessing. Contacted for comment, Dr King was philosophical about the whole matter, and tellingly chose not to draw public scorn upon RFK.

transmittal addressed to LBJ's White House assistant Mildred Stegall. As you can see from the extract below, in the year since the dossier was first resurrected, it had been revised again. And it had been given a new title: the pretence of general concern about the 'Negro movement' had been dropped and the dossier was now explicitly about Dr King himself.

Dr King would be shot to death in Memphis just 11 days after President Johnson received the Bureau's dossier. There is no record of Johnson ever replying to Hoover's letter of transmittal. According to Mr Margolick (p. 334) the man who informed RFK that Dr King had been shot, recalled that Kennedy 'seemed stunned and dropped his head'. RFK himself had just two months left to live.

Dear Mrs. Stegall:

I thought the President would be interested in the enclosed current study entitled "Martin Luther King, Jr., - A Current Analysis," particularly in view of King's announced plans for massive civil disobedience in the Nation's Capital this coming April.

Copies of this document are being furnished the Attorney General and other interested Government agencies.

The MLK 'Cabal' redux

The 1968 version of the dossier only went to President Johnson, because there was no need to send it to any of the bodies who had already received a copy of the first draft in October 1963. The panicking Robert F Kennedy might have successfully ordered that draft to be recalled from all recipients, but by then the cat was already well and truly out of the bag. From the day on which the various recipients received and read the 1963 draft, to the day Dr King died, those bodies were keeping a careful eye on MLK the supposed 'communist subversive'.

We don't know if President Johnson played an active role in the ensuing plot to murder Dr King. Simply by making LBJ aware of the dossier, perhaps the FBI used LBJ to set the plot in motion. President Johnson could have asked for information from the various agencies that had already received the 1963 dossier, and they would have reported back with their own versions of the FBI's smears. Another explanation, with some potentially sinister implications, could be that LBJ was well-aware of the dossier's existence due to President Kennedy discussing it with him in 1963, and that the 1968 transmittal was a 'red herring' laid down by Hoover and LBJ, who were coordinating their actions for the historical record. In any event, the FBI's letter of transmittal on 14 March 1968, is a smoking gun – in the form of a starter's pistol.

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David Margolick was contacted for comment on this essay. No response was received.