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'WALLS' FELL ON BOTH KING, ABERNATHY

CRITICS OF ABERNATHY'S MEMOIRS UNWITTINGLY BRING PUBLIC ATTENTION TO KING'S INFIDELITIES

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The past 10 days have witnessed vastly excessive newspaper and television coverage of the private life of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., following the publication of the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy's autobiographical memoir, "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down."

The news media excesses, including a front page New York Daily News feature and a lengthy segment on NBC's "Today" show, have been tremendously unfair not only to King's legacy but also to Abernathy and his book as well.

News stories concerning King's private life have been a recurrent staple in the American press ever since the FBI's extensive electronic surveillance of King and several associates from 1962 through 1968 was first revealed by Washington columnist Drew Pearson in May 1968, hardly six weeks after King's assassination.

King biographies as early as 1970 included references to how the slain leader had known "the temptations of physical pleasure," but more extensive analysis of the FBI's scurrilous interest in King's private affairs was postponed until 1975, when the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities carried out the first meaningful investigation into the excesses of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Two successive Justice Department investigations in 1976 further probed the FBI's conduct toward King, and early in 1977 a federal district court order removed many of the products of such electronic surveillance from the FBI's custody and placed them under court seal for a period of at least 50 years.

One year later the House Assassinations Committee, chaired by Ohio Democrat Louis Stokes, carried out another intensive review of the FBI-King relationship under the immediate direction of D.C. delegate Walter Fauntroy, a former King aide, and considerably advanced public understanding of the story.

Then, in 1980, pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act, copies of extensive excerpts from the full FBI files on King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began to be released to King scholars and civil rights archives.

Two points require special emphasis. First, what was unique with reference to King's private life were not his multiple relationships, which paralleled those of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Ben Franklin and scores of other significant political figures in American history, but the fact

that the U.S. government, through the FBI, spent days and days surreptitiously recording them and then distributed accounts of them to dozens of federal officials.

Well before King's death second- and thirdhand stories about the FBI's materials were common in political and journalistic circles. The FBI's anonymous mailing of a "highlights" tape to King himself, along with a foul and unsubtle threatening letter that King had better remove himself from the scene in order to avoid public exposure, was only the most ominous and notorious of the bureau's many misdeeds.

Second, Abernathy's two relatively brief discussions of King and women in "Walls" do not significantly diverge from what already was well-known in the investigatory and biographical literature.

True, Abernathy's detailed account of the night of April 3, 1968, in Memphis and the morning of April 4 is wholly original, but whether or not King actually went to bed with one woman or another, or both, is of relatively little importance.

Far more important is Abernathy's memory of King's forceful shoving of a close woman friend from Atlanta during an angry morning argument. While other firsthand witnesses remember that argument, any such shove done in anger would have been uniquely out of character for King, a man who on more than one occasion had accepted assailants' punches without doing more than literally turning the other cheek.

Abernathy's three-page account of that night in Memphis, in the context of a 636-page book, would not have become more than a one-day news story had not Jesse Hill, an Atlanta businessman and King Center board chairman, with the support of many others, decided to call an Oct. 12 press conference at King's crypt to denounce Abernathy and his memoir. If their desire was to chastise Abernathy publicly for recounting memories that some thought embarrassed King's widow, they no doubt succeeded, but at the same time their blunderbuss attack on Abernathy had the effect of drawing extensive national press attention to precisely those sections of Abernathy's book that Hill and company most wished had been omitted.

From any carefully thought-out public relations standpoint, Hill and company's decision seems to have become supremely self-defeating, for they may well have played the crucial role in creating a national best-seller out of what otherwise would have been a widely reviewed but rather quickly forgotten autobiography.

News media outlets such as the Daily News and "Today" were all too eager to focus almost exclusively on those brief sections of the book that concerned sex. Perhaps their editorial choices can be explained as simply catering to tabloid readers and television viewers who take a voyeuristic pleasure in such emphases, but they not only adopted a tremendously misleading perspective on King, they also presented a severely unbalanced picture of Abernathy's memoir.

Most anyone who reads the book in full will come away with renewed appreciation for King's achievements, courage and dedication to the cause, and many readers will probably best

remember the book's first 130 pages, a winsome and beautifully written account of Abernathy's childhood and young adult life, rather than the three-page description of one night in Memphis.

Some of Abernathy's Atlanta critics are former colleagues with whom he has had recurrent political differences in the years since King's death, differences that no doubt explain some of the intensity that has marked their attacks on his memoir. But the Hill group's broadside also manifested a more troubling -- and again potentially self-defeating -- theme by seeming to argue that King's historical greatness can be acknowledged and ensured only if King is consistently portrayed as having been suprahumanly perfect. To openly admit that King had extramarital relationships would supposedly undercut King's greatness and significantly threaten the record of his achievements.

Such a stance is totally wrong-headed. Not only does such an attitude reflect a strange insecurity about the impact and durability of King's historic contributions, but it also unintentionally plays into the hands of longtime King enemies, such as North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms, who are all too eager to endorse the point that modest personal or political foibles -- a woman here, a "leftist adviser" there -- significantly vitiate the tremendous civil rights achievements and social analyses that King authored between 1955 and 1968.

King's historical stature has long been secure, even well before the federal enactment of his birthday as a national holiday. Honest acknowledgment of his multiple relationships will not alter his place in American history, just as similar and more significant accounts have not effected the historical stature of American presidents such as Kennedy.

Ralph Abernathy seems far more certain of King's unshakeable historical greatness than do some of Abernathy's critics, and Abernathy clearly made his editorial choice with far more of an eye toward the long-term historical record than toward short-term public relations.

Despite the unfair treatment of both King and Abernathy that has marked much of the recent news coverage of "Walls," both King's undeniable greatness and Abernathy's own significant place in civil rights history will endure long after this overheated controversy has passed.

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