

David J. Garrow, “The Intel Chiefs Did to Trump What Hoover Did to MLK,” *Washington Post*, 18 January 2017. Once he’s inaugurated, the new president should dismiss them all.

U.S. intelligence chiefs James R. Clapper Jr., John Brennan, James B. Comey and Adm. Michael Rogers (with an assist from BuzzFeed) all deserve an award: the J. Edgar Hoover memorial award, if you will. By giving official cognizance to, and personally presenting President-elect Donald Trump with the salacious fruits of sleuth-for-hire Christopher Steele’s anonymously sourced and poorly written opposition research memos intended to smear Trump’s character, the United States’ intelligence officials have reprised what then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and deputies William Sullivan and Cartha “Deke” DeLoach did to Martin Luther King Jr. in 1964.

President Lyndon B. Johnson should have fired Hoover and his minions for their opprobrious conduct. Clapper and Brennan are already on their way out, but Comey’s and Rogers’s resignations should be the first things Trump requests after taking the oath of office.

To anyone who knows memo-by-memo the documentary record of both the FBI and the CIA’s pursuit of King, Steele’s 35-page dossier of memos dating from June 20 through Dec. 13 of last year is replete with echoes. Steele begins his assault on Trump with an anonymous accusation of “perverted sexual acts,” and his insistent obsession with “sexual perversion” mirror the characterizations Hoover and Sullivan flung at their subordinates in marshaling the FBI’s workforce to seek King’s personal destruction, repeatedly using phrases like “moral degenerate” in internal bureau communications about King. Akin to Steele’s fanciful report of sexual exploits, Hoover’s FBI entertained a made-up account of King involving a Las Vegas prostitute.

While the FBI leadership’s animus toward MLK fixated on his reported sexual appetites, the CIA entertained and memorialized accounts that described the crucial secret conflict within the civil rights movement as one between Soviet-controlled agents and Communist China’s sympathizers. Top CIA officials relied upon an informant who explained in meeting after meeting how a battle for subversive control over King was being waged between New York lawyer Stanley Levison and activist/entertainer Harry Belafonte. In the CIA’s version of civil rights history, Levison, a onetime Communist Party financial functionary, was actively representing Moscow as he advised King, whereas Belafonte supposedly favored Beijing.

In a similar tone, Steele’s memos detail Trump attorney Michael Cohen supposedly engaged in secret meetings with “Kremlin representatives” in Prague, notwithstanding how Cohen appears never to have traveled there.

The CIA’s source on King turned out to be novelist and television host Jay Richard Kennedy, who had long-standing friendships with civil rights leaders A. Philip Randolph and James Farmer, and who moderated a nationwide August 1963 telecast featuring the leaders of the March on Washington. But Kennedy (born Samuel Richard Solomonick) and Levison, his longtime business partner, had fallen out years earlier. Indeed, by the 1950s, Levison’s

first wife, psychotherapist Janet Alterman, was married to Kennedy, who by then was Belafonte's business manager. Kennedy and Belafonte then had a falling out of their own, and Kennedy subsequently published a roman à clef about Belafonte, "Favor the Runner."

The Kennedy-Levison-Belafonte story may sound better than fiction but, more importantly, it is a case study in the ways anonymous intelligence sources may have multiple agendas when they tattle on, and smear, people for whom they have preexisting antipathy. Kennedy was not an opposition research contractor like Steele, but when — as in the Steele case, and in the case of the FBI's most important informant close to King, accountant James A. Harrison — a source is compensated for the information they provide, their incentive to spin a narrative that the payer wants to hear is that much greater.

American history teaches us again and again — from the early Bureau of Investigation's pursuit of World War I pacifists and black nationalist entrepreneur Marcus Garvey, through Pearl Harbor, the Bay of Pigs and, yes, weapons of mass destruction — that U.S. intelligence agencies are often far less competent than both their most avid supporters and their most hostile critics mutually presume. That all four top leaders of the intelligence community were naively willing to give official credence to Steele's unsupported "oppo" is an indelible blot upon their records and reputations. Liberals and progressives who know better than to worshipfully respect American intelligence agencies should enthusiastically support President Trump in seeking entirely new leadership for the intelligence community come the afternoon of Jan. 20.

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