

Are The Smears Only Ignorant?

By **DAVID J. GARROW**
Special To The Observer

In recent days both U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms and widely read columnist James J. Kilpatrick have voiced opposition to a pending Senate bill that would establish a national holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Helms and Kilpatrick each have asserted that their opposition is based on King's supposed advocacy of "action-oriented Marxism" and the alleged fact that he was "buddy-buddy with well-identified communists from the early 1950s to the time of his death."

In truth, Helms's and Kilpatrick's charges against King are gross distortions of the historical record. These distortions are of such a magnitude and so replete with blatant factual errors that a well-informed reader is forced to wonder whether these misrepresentations are the product of conscious effort rather than innocent ignorance.

For example, Kilpatrick labels as "close associates" of King several individuals with whom King had at most a passing acquaintance, plus at least one man — former communist Paul Crouch — whom King never met. Additionally, Kilpatrick repeats the stale and baseless racist canard that Tennessee's Highlander Folk School — an interracial adult education academy which King once briefly visited — was a "communist training center."

When segregationist spokesmen leveled that same charge 20 years ago, even the FBI concluded that Highlander was not, and never had been, a communist facility.

Both Helms and Kilpatrick also have attempted through selective use of available information to argue that King's long and close relationship with onetime communist Stanley Levison, a white New York attorney, should preclude any national honoring of King's birthday.

Levison, who had in fact been intimately involved in the American Communist Party's financial affairs several years prior to his first meeting with King, was the initial reason for the intensive FBI investigation of King that began in 1962 and continued until his assassination in 1968.

Beginning with a hypothesis but no real evidence that Levison's selfless assistance to King was motivated by communist or Soviet loyalties rather than by heartfelt support for civil rights, the FBI instituted extensive electronic surveillance of Levison, and later King, in an effort to learn if Levison was taking instructions from any foreign representatives, or if his influence upon King was in any way subversive.

To the FBI's great disappointment, more than six years' worth of wiretapping never supplied any evidence that Levison was speaking for communist interests or manipulating King.



Garrow

Former high-ranking FBI officials who supervised the King investigation willingly admit the bureau's failure to acquire such data, and some agents who spent long hours overseeing the wiretaps on King or Levison became convinced over the years that Levison was nothing more than a sincere supporter of racial equality.

Nonetheless, Sen. Helms inaccurately asserted on the Senate floor that King associates such as Levison had been "taking their orders and direction from a foreign power."

What the FBI's protracted surveillance on King did produce, however, was evidence that King, like many other famous and much honored American political leaders, engaged in extramarital affairs. Though King himself would never deny being a sinner, FBI officials such as Director J. Edgar Hoover professed great shock at King's supposed moral hypocrisy and ordered their minions to gather as much first-hand confirmation of King's philandering as possible.

For the following two years, teams of FBI agents devoted hundreds of hours and thousands of taxpayer dollars to bugging and recording King's private comments and personal activities as he traveled from city to city and hotel room to hotel room.

Justice Department officials from the Ford administration, after investigating the "improper and illegal investigative activities" that the FBI undertook against King, concluded that the fruits of these electronic surveillances were "scurrilous and immaterial to any proper law enforcement function or historic purpose."

These are the materials which were removed from the FBI's custody and placed under seal in the National Archives by federal court order six years ago and which Sen. Helms now is attempting to obtain access to.

FBI documents reporting the details of hundreds of King-Levison phone conversations were not covered by this court order and have been widely released pursuant to Freedom of Information Act requests. This is precisely the material Sen. Helms professes to be interested in; the sealed items, as he may already know, are not.

All in all, none of the allegations or objections voiced by Helms or Kilpatrick supply any relevant grounds for honest opposition to the King holiday bill.

Dr. King and the indigenous movement which he symbolized made profound contributions to American life. Those contributions more than merit the designation of a day as a time for national celebration and reflection. Indeed, such a designation will represent a clear statement that our society remains committed those ideals to which Dr. King dedicated his own life.

David J. Garrow is the author of "The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr." and is completing a comprehensive study of King. He teaches political science at UNC.



Clipped By:

joneig

Sun, Jun 12, 2022