

# Civil War: The FBI and J. Edgar Hoover vs. Martin Luther King

by GERDA GALLOP  
Staff Writer

"I have a dream . . .", immortal words spoken by a remarkable man, Martin Luther King, Jr., conveyed his promise for the future of the United States. In his speech, King spoke of all men being created equal and a nation of oppression and injustice being changed into one of freedom and justice. However, the same prejudice and injustice that King spoke of found their way into the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the United States' major police agency. For when the FBI launched an intense investigation into the private and political dealings of King, its unproductive and vindictive nature revealed that it was only out to discredit and destroy one of the most charismatic and courageous leaders of the 1960's.

The investigation of King followed his pronouncement of the ineffective white racist agents in the South, to which J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, reacted in flagrant opposition.

Overwhelming evidence showed that the FBI in the South did little to protect the civil rights of blacks. On Sunday, November 18, 1962, King told a *New York Times* reporter that blacks could not be helped in the South because agents were white Southerners who, in order to keep their positions, had to "be friendly with local police and promoters of segregation." Heading the office in Albany, Georgia was white Southerner Marion Cheeks, whom most Albany blacks, and even some Bureau agents, agreed that he hated blacks with a passion. Arthur L. Murtagh, who worked out of the Albany office, described Cheeks as a racist who made his sentiments known to everyone. Cheeks advised his agents to ignore black people's complaints of local law enforcement officers' misconduct and edited all investigatory reports sent to Washington headquarters so that allegations against local officers were heavily watered down. Earlier in February of 1961, King had caught the attention of high-level officials in the FBI when he made a passing reference to the FBI, calling for the elimination of racial discrimination in federal police agencies in an article written in *Nation* magazine. In fact, the Civil Rights Commission found that only 48 of 13,649 FBI employees were black and none was an agent with responsibility. King may have aroused high-level officials with his article, but it was his statement about Albany, Georgia agents that woke the chief officer in charge, J. Edgar Hoover. King's failure to return phone calls placed by Bureau executives in an effort to clear up what they felt was his "erroneous statement" only added fuel to the enraging fire he had already started.

Intolerant of criticism, the FBI treated all of its critics as enemies who became targets for "special and unpleasant attention." The creation of the "enemies list" of the FBI is attributed to J. Edgar Hoover, whose own inability to admit error or exhibit tolerance toward opinions different from his own reflected the entire image of the FBI itself. In November 1964, Hoover described King as "the most notorious liar" in the country in a delayed response to his statements about Albany, Georgia agents. Hoover detested criticism, blacks and movements for change, and thus took a special disliking to King, who epitomized all that threatened his power. Moreover, combined with hostility toward public critics, the FBI issued warnings to its own employees

against taking actions that might embarrass the FBI publicly. That the FBI would go to such lengths to protect its credibility indicated the fear and dread it had of seeing any Bureau mistake or wrongdoing written up in public print. It seemed the FBI was preoccupied with its public image and those who threatened to jeopardize this image. To Hoover and his associates, any criticism of the FBI was proof that a critic was a Communist.

The FBI suspected that pro-Communist supporters were influencing King and investigated Stanley Levison and Jack O'Dell, two staff members of King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Through reports of a key informant in the Communist Party hierarchy, the FBI had amassed con-

vincing evidence that Levison had been a secret benefactor of the Communist Party between 1952 and 1955. The FBI lost interest in Levison until it found that he was a close associate of King and assumed that he was still with the Communist Party although he had severed connections with the Party. The FBI regarded Levison as a high official of the Party, even a top spy, but never offered proof of its accusations. In 1957, Levison, whom Hoover believed was the link King had to the Communists, was under telephone surveillance. Yet intensive electronic surveillances of Levison showed no evidence that he was a Communist Party official or spy. Furthermore, William

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Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of Mrs. King and daughter Bernice at Dr. King's funeral in 1968.