

# ‘You are done’: A secret letter to Martin Luther King Jr. sheds light on FBI’s malice

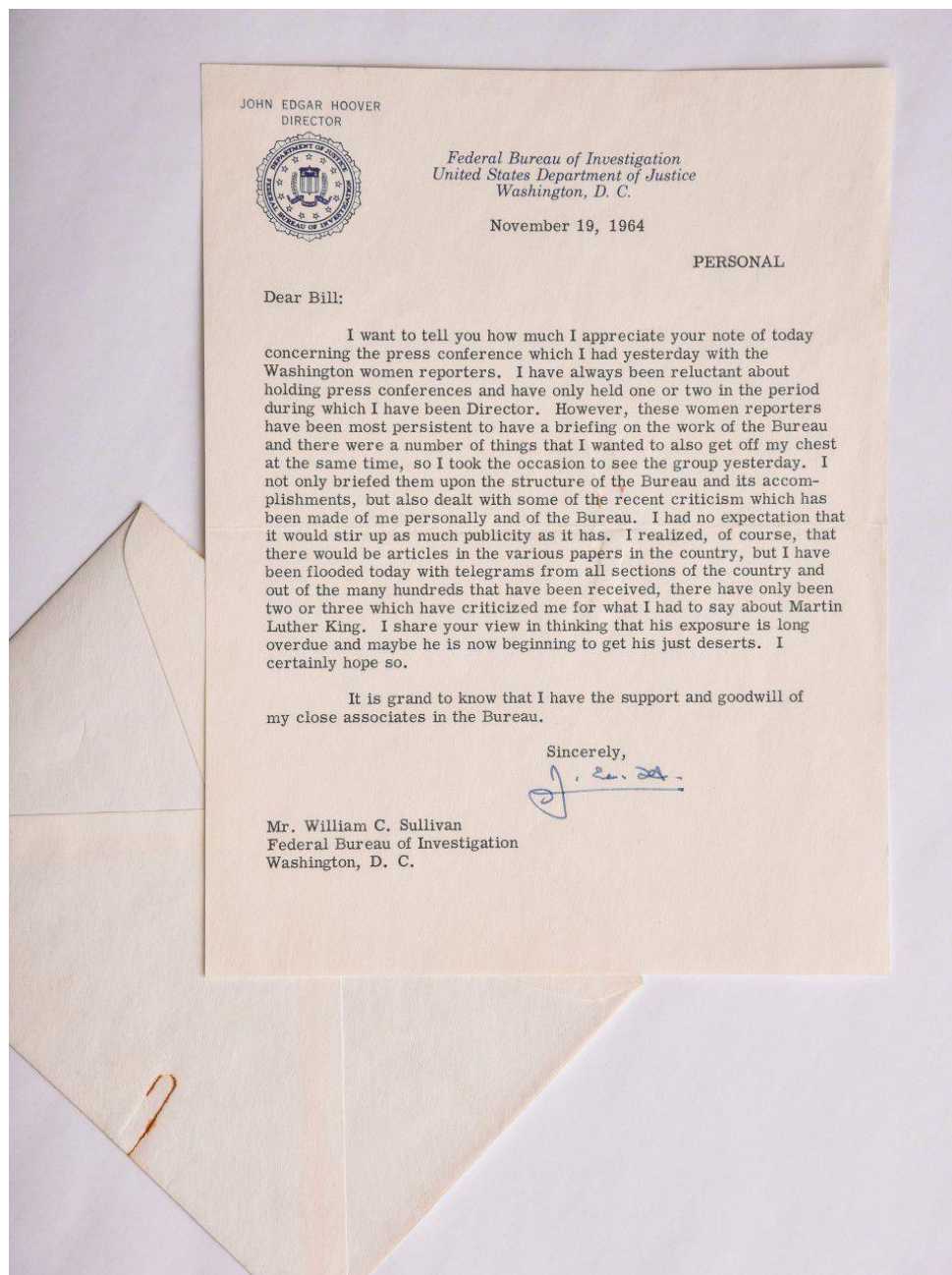
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An unpublished letter written by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, condemning Martin Luther King Jr., was found tucked inside the pages of an old book. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

The secret letter was tucked inside the pages of an old book. It had been written by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to a top lieutenant, condemning civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

It was Nov. 19, 1964, and Hoover the previous day had assailed King at a news conference as “the most notorious liar in the country.” Now he was writing a colleague privately to say he hoped King was getting his “just deserts.”

“I certainly hope so,” Hoover wrote.

Four years later, King would be assassinated. And the letter — previously unknown to the public, a local author says — sheds yet more light on the historic malice the FBI director had toward King.

It also touches on a later, even more nefarious FBI effort to damage King.

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Washington scholar James L. Swanson said he found the letter inside an envelope clipped to a page in Hoover’s 1938 book, “Persons in Hiding,” which Swanson said he purchased in a bookstore several years ago.



*James Swanson, author of “Chasing King’s Killer: The Hunt for Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Assassin,” found the letter written by J. Edgar Hoover. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)*

The envelope was marked “PERSONAL” and “DO NOT MAIL.” Inside was a letter from Hoover to his subordinate, William C. Sullivan, then the FBI’s head of domestic intelligence and the bureau’s No. 3 officer.

(The book, which Swanson believes once belonged to Sullivan, is inscribed, “To William Sullivan, Best wishes, J. Edgar Hoover.”)

Hoover the day before had held a rare, three-hour news conference with women reporters in Washington. There, he had attacked King for saying two years earlier that FBI agents

in Albany, Ga., didn’t pursue civil rights cases because they were southerners.

Sullivan had sent the notoriously vain Hoover a note of praise, and the director had dashed off an appreciative “Dear Bill” reply.

“I share your view in thinking that [King’s] exposure is long overdue,” Hoover wrote. “It is grand to know that I have the support and goodwill of my close associates in the Bureau.”

The letter is reproduced in Swanson’s new book for young adults, “Chasing King’s Killer,” about the hunt for King’s assassin, James Earl Ray, due out in January.

“This is a hitherto unknown and unpublished letter,” Swanson said in telephone interview last week. He said he was stunned to find it.

“It’s an ominous and disturbing letter,” he said. But it “in no way indicates that the FBI or Hoover was plotting against King’s very life.”



*Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at Vermont Avenue Baptist Church in Washington in 1968. (Matthew Lewis/The Washington Post)*

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“What happened was this: It was announced [the previous month] that Dr. King had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and that provoked Hoover,” he said. King was scheduled to accept the award in Norway in December.

Hoover believed that King and his movement were threats to the social order and that King was influenced by close associates who were communists.

The FBI had begun wiretapping King’s home and office, and bugging his hotel rooms the previous year, according to Yale historian Beverly Gage.

No serious links to communism were uncovered, but hints about King’s sexual dalliances allegedly were.

In the note to Sullivan, an aggrieved Hoover wrote: “I have always been reluctant about holding press conferences . . . [but] there were a number of things I wanted to get off my chest.”

For his part, King denied that he had accused southern FBI agents of foot dragging, although he had been quoted by the New York Times in 1962 as saying, “One of the great problems we face with the FBI in the south is that the agents are white southerners who have been influenced by the mores of the community.”

In a telegram to Hoover after the director’s press conference, King said: “I have sincerely questioned the effectiveness of the FBI in racial incidents, particularly where bombings and brutalities against Negroes are at issue. But I have never attributed this merely to the presence of southerners in the FBI.”

*[The gang rape was horrific. The NAACP sent Rosa Parks to investigate.]*

In a separate statement, he said Hoover seemed to have “faltered under the awesome burden, complexities and responsibilities of his office.”

But Hoover and Sullivan were not finished with King.

Days after Hoover’s news conference, a salacious anonymous letter was delivered to King’s wife, Coretta Scott King, and later given to King. This letter was from a person masquerading as an angry African American.

The letter was in a package that also containing a tape recording that allegedly captured evidence of King’s sexual misconduct.

The typed letter condemned King as “a colossal fraud . . . and a dissolute, abnormal moral imbecile.”

“Your ‘honorary degrees,’ your Nobel Prize (What a grim farce) . . . will not save you,” the letter said. “You are done.”



*J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, is seen in his Washington office on Sept. 30, 1966. (AP)*

“There is only one thing left for you to do,” the letter said. “You know what it is . . . There is but one way out . . . You better take it before your filthy, abnormal, fraudulent self is bared to the nation.”

King suspected that the FBI was behind the letter and interpreted it as an attempt to blackmail him, apparently into committing suicide.

Swanson and Gage believe that the letter was probably written by Sullivan, who later admitted his involvement in the plan during testimony before a Senate committee but claimed that he had been opposed to the idea.

A draft copy of the letter was later found among Sullivan’s files, Senate investigators said in 1975, noting that Sullivan claimed that it had been planted there and was written by someone else.

In a 1979 book, Sullivan said he knew about the tape but not about the letter. Hoover was behind both, Sullivan suggested.

Swanson, author of top-selling books on the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations, said King was “one of the bravest men in American history.”

“Unlike John Kennedy, unlike Abraham Lincoln, King was under constant threat of harassment and death,” he said. “He was shot at. His home was bombed. He was hit with rocks and bottles and stones. . . . He received death threats.”

“For more than a decade during his rise, Martin Luther King was under constant threat of violence and fear,” he said. “And the FBI was very much part of this.”

By 1971, Hoover and Sullivan had developed bitter differences, and that year Hoover forced Sullivan to retire.

Two years later, Sullivan told the Los Angeles Times that Hoover was “a master blackmailer.”

In 1977, Sullivan was killed in a hunting accident in New Hampshire when he was shot by another hunter who mistook him for a deer.

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