

Army feared King, secretly watched him

Spying on blacks started 75 years ago

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The intelligence branch of the United States Army spied on the family of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for three generations. Top secret, often illegal, intrusions into the lives of black Americans began more than 75 years ago and often focused on black churches in the South and their ministers.

The spying was born of a conviction by top Army intelligence officers that black Americans were ripe for subversion – first by agents of the German Kaiser, then by Communists, later by the Japanese and eventually by those opposed to the Vietnam War.

At first, the Army used a reporting network of private citizens that included church members, black businessmen such as Memphis's Robert R. Church Jr., and black educators like the Hampton Institute's Roscoe C. Simmons. It later employed cadres of infiltrators, wiretaps and aerial photography by U2 spy planes.

As the civil rights movement merged with anti-war protests in the late 1960s, some Army units began supplying sniper rifles and other weapons of war to civilian police

departments. Army Intelligence began planning for what some officers believed would soon be armed rebellion.

By March 1968, King was preparing to lead a march in Memphis in support of striking sanitation workers and another march a few weeks later that would swamp Washington with people demanding less attention to Vietnam and more resources for America's poor.

By then the Army's intelligence system was keenly focused on King and desperately searching for a way to stop him.

On April 4, 1968, King was killed by a sniper's bullet at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis.

In the 25 years since, investigators have focused on the role the FBI and other police agencies played in King's life. Few have paid attention to the Army's activities.

Some of the Army's spying against anti-war and civil rights groups became public knowledge in 1971 congressional hearings. But key intelligence officers avoided testifying, leaving the full story untold.

The Commercial Appeal's 16-month investigation of the Army's secret spy war with black citizens provides a first-time look inside the Army's largest-ever espionage operation within the United States.

Much of the story was pieced together from a trail of memos, memoirs, diaries and meeting notes scattered around the country in military archives, the Library of Congress, presidential libraries and private collections. Some of the documents are still classified. Other pieces came from interviews with nearly 200 participants, including the recollections of several dozen Army agents still living in this country and in Mexico.

This newspaper's investigation uncovered no hard evidence that Army Intelligence played any role in King's assassination, although Army agents were in Memphis the day he was killed.

But the review of thousands of government documents and interviews with people involved in the spying revealed that by early 1968 Army Intelligence regarded King as a major threat to national security.

A threat

Army Intelligence opened its file on King in 1947 with a photograph showing him and other Morehouse College students leaving a meeting of Mrs. Dorothy Lilley's Intercollegiate Council. She was a suspected Communist, according to the file on King kept by the 111th Military Intelligence Group at Fort McPherson in Atlanta.

Reports on King's activities were added periodically through the 1950s, but comments in his intelligence file indicate Army officers at first considered him more of a phenomenon than a threat.

Army spies pegged King as a Communist tool in the fall of 1957 when he spoke at the [25th anniversary of the integrated Highlander Folk School](#) in Monteagle, Tenn. Army Intelligence had watched the school for years.

A Sept. 6, 1940, report from Maj. G. R. Carpenter, assistant chief of staff for intelligence for the Sixth Corps Area in Chicago, said the school's executive director, Myles Horton, and Rev. Claude Williams of Memphis, a New York native known for his "Communitic activities," were working together to teach "a course of instruction to develop Negro organizers in the southern cotton states."

King's visit was given extra weight because of an FBI report received the previous July of his Baltimore meeting with Stanley D. Levison, a New York millionaire who had been under bureau surveillance as a Communist fund-raiser since June 9, 1952. Levison and King formed a long friendship and business relationship.

The suspicion with which top Army officers viewed blacks had its genesis in simple ignorance but gained credence because of real and perceived links between black civil rights activists and Communists and other subversives.

From the Civil War through Vietnam, Army officers were almost exclusively white and lived on military posts where contact with ordinary black Americans was virtually nonexistent. As late as 1967, only 3.49 percent of the Army's 143,517 officers were black. Few Army commanders understood that lynchings, denial of basic human rights and economic repression were at the root of black unrest.

Successive generations of Army leaders saw black Americans in the same light as Maj. R. M. Howell, assistant chief of staff for intelligence at Fort McPherson in Atlanta.

“Communism has chosen the Southern Negro as the American group most likely to respond to its revolutionary appeal,” Howell told the War Department in a Dec. 5, 1932, intelligence report.

“Anti-communism” became a “secular religion” for most Army officers after World War I, according to Dr. Christopher Pyle, a former Army intelligence school instructor who blew the whistle in 1970 on the Army’s domestic spying on anti-war groups.

“Anyone who appeared soft on communism” soon found his career in limbo, Pyle, now a professor at Mt. Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass., told *The Commercial Appeal*.

As King gained prominence as a civil rights leader, intelligence officers also came to believe he was a man who sparked violence wherever he went, his nonviolent philosophy notwithstanding.

For example, an agent of the 113th Intelligence Detachment overheard King at a January 1963 dinner at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago telling “two black men and a pretty white woman that Project C was ready to go,” according to the surveillance report the agent filed.

A followup report dated Jan. 24 describes Project C as “plans for massive disruption of public and private enterprise in Birmingham.”

Three months later, King entered Birmingham. Television screens filled with pictures of marching black elementary school children being herded into police wagons while their parents were bombarded with high-powered water guns as they left the 16th Street Baptist Church. Riots broke out and Ku Klux Klansmen patrolled the night streets with shotguns.

On May 12, the White House ordered Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Earle Wheeler to send 3,000 men from Fort Benning, Ga., to Birmingham. Maj. Gen. Charles Billingslea, commander of the Army’s 2nd Division, had asked for help in Birmingham because “I may have a full-scale revolt on my hands down here.”

Portions of the monthlong Birmingham disturbances were recorded by U2 spy planes taking off from the supersecret “Site 98” outside Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. Over the next seven years, at least 26 other such domestic spy flights by U2s and at least two involving the more advanced SR71 were requested by Army commanders and flown by the Air Force, according to classified documents reviewed by *The Commercial Appeal*.

These expensive spy flights illustrate Army commanders' growing fear of domestic upheaval as King's influence grew.

When King turned against the war in mid-1965, it merely made him that much more dangerous to some Army officers.

"To career officers, these (King's and other black militant) attacks were tantamount to giving aid and comfort to the enemy in time of war," Pyle said in an interview. "Since the enemy was a Communist government, suspicions of an international conspiracy were confirmed."

Maj. Gen. William P. Yarborough, the Army's top spy, became convinced that either the Chinese or Soviets, through Cuba, bankrolled King and other black radicals.

Yarborough's evidence came from Lt. Gen. Marcelino Garcia Barragan, the Mexican minister of national defense.

Through a trusted aide, Garcia gave Army Intelligence a report on June 29, 1967, that said Mexican Army Intelligence had discovered militant black Americans receiving combat training and secret funding from the Havana-based Organization of Latin American Solidarity (OLAS), financed by Communist China's military intelligence agency.

The report said, "American Negroes (were) sighted (with) automatic weapons/unarmed combat training/drilling evident" at an urban guerrilla training camp near Chiapas in southern Mexico.

OLAS's aim was to "commence guerrilla wars throughout the hemisphere to destabilize United States-backed governments . . . and (OLAS) has pledged its support to the Negro liberation movement."

Stokely Carmichael, co-chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and a leader of the black power movement, was among a number of black Americans associated with the OLAS.

And Carmichael increasingly was seen in King's company.

Army Security Agency microphones recorded Carmichael trying to warn King that he was making powerful enemies during this exchange in King's Ebenezer Baptist Church office in Atlanta in early 1967:

Carmichael: You making a lot of new enemies. Not sure (unintelligible) Birmingham as dangerous as people you're pissing off. The man don't care you call ghettos concentration camps, but when you tell him his war machine is nothing but hired killers, you got trouble.

King: I told you in Los Angeles I can do nothing else.

In speech after speech the year before he died, King tied the growing disillusionment of inner-city and rural Southern blacks to the country's preoccupation with Vietnam.

On [April 4, 1967](#), he told 3,000 people at New York's Riverside Church:

["A few years ago](#) ... [i]t seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program....

"[And] then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor, so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. . . .

["Somehow this madness](#) must cease. We must stop now."

The speech shook the world. *Life* magazine called it "a demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi."

Dispatches from the 525th Military Intelligence Group (MIG) in Vietnam reported that "Negro troops are unsettled" by articles on King's speech in *Pacific Stars & Stripes* and their hometown newspapers.

Maj. Gen. Joseph A. McChristian, Army chief of intelligence in Vietnam, sent Yarborough a top secret April 14 dispatch that "treasonous propaganda" from "a group calling itself Blacks Against Negative Dying (BAND) is being mailed to Negro troops telling them they are killing the wrong enemy."

The dispatch also included reports of two instances of enlisted soldiers shooting their officers. McChristian also said three black soldiers near An Khê had offered a \$200 pool for the execution of a white captain with the First Cavalry Division.

Desperate men

To many, King's shift in direction served as a lens to focus the nation's compassion and sense of justice on resolving its inner conflicts.

But Yarborough and other intelligence officers heard only the voice of an enemy who was gaining ground.

By summer 1967, the ground was shaking.

"Tank crews blast away at entrenched snipers with 50-caliber machineguns" was not a headline from Vietnam but from Detroit, where 43 people died and \$45 million in property was destroyed. Rioters burned and plundered 100 other American cities during that long, hot summer.

Detroit was particularly significant to Army leaders, not just for the bloodshed and damage but the results of a secret survey.

After the riot, 496 black males arrested for firing rifles and shotguns at Army troops were herded into a warehouse north of Detroit. They were interviewed by agents of the Army's Psychological Operations Group, dressed as civilians, in conjunction with the Behavior Research Institute of Detroit.

The arrested men were asked dozens of questions, but the responses 363 of them gave to the question "Who is your favorite Negro leader?" stunned Army Intelligence.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the clear favorite – 178 of the men named him. Men considered more radical, such as Carmichael and Malcolm X, came in a distant second and fourth.

Army Intelligence leaders repeatedly used this survey to signify the danger King represented to national security.

King really scared top Army commanders on [Dec. 4, 1967](#), when he announced his intent to lead a poor people's march on Washington the next spring to focus public attention on "total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty."

King's call for a "Poor People's Campaign" came on the heels of the nation's worst summer of violence in three years and an October anti-war protest in which 200,000 demonstrators had besieged the Pentagon as alarmed Army brass watched from the

roof.

Civilian authority's responses to these upheavals had shaken the faith of Army leaders in the government's stability. Top officers believed the years of violence and protest had weakened the nation's social and political foundations.

The escalating war in Vietnam, meanwhile, had stretched the Army's ability to keep peace at home, safeguard Europe from the Soviets and fight in Southeast Asia, secret documents show.

Now King, in a December press conference, promised "the worst chaos, hatred and violence any nation has ever encountered" if America did not heed his demands for change.

Memos obtained by *The Commercial Appeal* reveal Army leaders were increasingly frustrated with top civilian Pentagon officials who ignored warnings that black unrest was Communist-inspired, damaging morale in Vietnam and leading to armed revolt at home.

By December 1967, some officers felt desperate. Among them were Yarborough, who had been named assistant chief of staff for intelligence in 1966, and Maj. Gen. William Blakefield, chief of U.S. Army Intelligence Command, who reported to Yarborough.

"The Army was over a barrel," Yarborough said in an interview at his home in Southern Pines, N.C.

"Blacks were using the uncertainty of the Vietnam period and taking advantage of it," Yarborough said. "They were attacking the weak point in the line, which is tactically a good idea, but you couldn't do it without arousing animosity of all kinds.

"You couldn't expect people to be rational and look at this in a cool way," he said. "We were trying to fight a war at the same time where the home base was being eroded."

Army officers "take an oath to protect the country against all enemies, foreign and domestic," Yarborough said. "You see people breaking windows and throwing Molotov cocktails, snipers shooting policemen, people who are outwardly trying to shut the government down and announce that is what they are going to do, you have a feeling that this is perhaps a domestic enemy."

Blakefield told Army historians in 1975: "There was a fear among high-ranking Army officers that the long-term judgment of historians might be that the Army, in the late

1960s, failed to protect the people of this country, as they had in other times of crisis.”

To stop that “enemy,” Yarborough and Blakefield used the resources of the largest domestic spy network ever assembled in a free country.

The messiah

Though many black leaders spoke out against the Vietnam War, Army Intelligence focused on King, whom Yarborough described as “the messiah for his people, his own personal qualities notwithstanding.”

King wasn’t the first black leader, nor the first in his family, to be targeted for surveillance by the Army’s spy agencies.

In September 1917, the War Department’s Military Intelligence Division (MID) opened a file on King’s maternal grandfather, Rev. A. D. Williams.

As pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Williams played a key role in Atlanta’s black community. He was the Atlanta NAACP’s first president in 1910 and an officer in the National Baptist Convention, the largest black religious organization of the time.

During World War I, Military Intelligence targeted black ministers and others as troublemakers or friends, depending on whether they worked as MID informants. Memphis businessman Robert R. Church Jr. supplied MID Maj. Walter H. Loving with names of prominent blacks in each major Southern city, intelligence files show.

One of the first items in Williams’s intelligence file was a top-secret telegram sent to the Army’s Southern Department headquarters in Atlanta. The telegram said in part:

“It behooves us to find out all we possibly can about this colored preacher.”

Later, a memo in Williams’s file labeled him a “radical Negro agitator” for leading a campaign to create a black high school.

His NAACP involvement also earned him the attention of Army intelligence officers, who believed the civil rights group was “an agitative pro-Soviet organization for propagandizing the Negroes,” according to a 1926 report by Lt. Col. Walter O. Boswell, Army Intelligence executive officer at the War Department.

King’s father, M. L. King Sr., eventually succeeded Williams as pastor at Ebenezer – and

inherited his own Army watchers, Army Intelligence records show.

King Sr.'s participation in the National Negro Congress tarred him with the Communist brush as well.

Col. Walter A. Buck, assistant chief of staff for intelligence, Third Army, at Fort McPherson in Atlanta said in a March 1947 report to the War Department that the NNC "serves as the staff unit of the Communist Party among Negroes."

The NNC's "program includes the ultimate founding of a Negro state in the South after the revolutionary overthrow of white landlords and capitalists," Buck said.

Of the three large black organizations active at the start of World War II – the NAACP, the National Urban League and the NNC – the National Negro Congress was considered the most activist and radical. Communist Party supporters gradually took it over, according to most histories, and a split with anti-war Stalinists at the start of WWII led to the group's decline.

Mere association with King's Ebenezer Baptist could put a person in Army Intelligence dossiers. For example, Army Intelligence files contain surveillance reports on Lillian D. Watkins, the church's financial secretary, and Felton Sims, the custodian. The only apparent justification was their employment by M. L. King Sr.

Army agents also watched an office two blocks from Ebenezer, which an April 1947 report from Third Army headquarters described as "the Auburn Avenue Branch (Negro) headquarters of the Communist Party of Georgia." Surveillance reports show local Communist head Dr. Ellwood Grant Boddie, a black dentist, visited Ebenezer regularly.

Not a clue

Despite the years of watching the King family, top Army officers were rattled by the prospect of Martin Luther King Jr. leading a horde into the nation's capital again.

An intelligence analysis distributed during a Dec. 12, 1967, conference at the Pentagon described King's plans for the march on Washington as "a devastating civil disturbance whose sole purpose is to shut down the United States government."

The analysis described King as "a Negro who repeatedly has preached the message of Hanoi and Peking."

Some of the Army's best officers attended that meeting to discuss "target city priorities" in light of "King's plans to ignite violence and mayhem" throughout the United States in April, according to a report on the conference.

But the meeting broke up in frustration, one participant said.

"Looking back, I remember nobody had any answers," he said. "We had all these West Point geniuses who could lead divisions. But when it came to stopping Dr. King, they didn't have a clue."

Nevertheless, Army Intelligence intensified its surveillance of King and covertly dispatched Green Beret teams to make street maps, identify landing zones for riot troops and scout sniper sites in 39 potential racially explosive cities, including Memphis.

The 20th Special Forces Group, headquartered in Alabama, seemed perfect for these scouting missions in the South. The 20th SFG was a National Guard unit, part-time warriors who lived and worked in many of the communities where black unrest was centered.

Green Berets from the 20th often spied on King and other black Americans during the 1960s, military records and interviews show.

Some Vietnam Special Forces veterans – particularly those who had worked in murky clandestine operations with the CIA, the Special Operations Group (SOG) or the top secret Detachment B-57 – were "dumped" into the 20th "for safe-keeping," according to a former major with Army counterintelligence.

"They couldn't let a lot of these crazy guys back into the states because they couldn't forget their training," he said. "Birmingham (20th SFG headquarters) became Saigon. The rural South was in-country and at times things got out of hand."

Many members of the 20th SFG during the '60s still live in the South, some under new identities. Some of them spoke to *The Commercial Appeal* only if their names were not used or locations revealed.

A former 20th Special Forces sergeant from Detachment B-6, Company B, who was stationed in Columbus, Miss., said the unit's undercover missions "didn't peak into windows, if that's what you mean."

"But a lot of us knew guys who knew things. You know, Klan guys who hated niggers, so

we'd ask them about where nigger troublemakers might meet, and we'd go there and then file a report. It wasn't any big deal."

But it became a big deal.

In return for paramilitary training at a farm in Cullman, Ala., Klansmen soon became the 20th's intelligence network, whose information was passed to the Pentagon.

Bill Wilkinson, chief of the Klan's Invisible Empire branch in 1983, told United Press International (UPI) that the group no longer had a training camp at Cullman.

"And they're not paramilitary. We called them 'Klan Special Forces,'" he said.

Tinderbox

While Army commanders chewed on the King problem, another one came to a head: The sinkhole of Vietnam had sapped the military's pool of available, experienced manpower.

A grim group of Army generals received that secret news on Feb. 8, 1968, in a bugproof conference room at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla., headquarters of the U.S. Strike Command, responsible for the defense of the continental United States.

Two secrets in particular chilled the combat veterans: Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam and a close West Point classmate of Yarborough's, badly needed reinforcements despite a publicly optimistic report he had given President Johnson just a few weeks before.

Yet there weren't enough troops left in the United States to control a nationwide outbreak of protests, let alone the armed revolt many officers expected.

"We knew the whole country was a tinderbox," said Ralph M. Stein, a Pace University law professor who in 1968 was the top Army Intelligence analyst in the Counterintelligence Analysis Bureau at the Pentagon.

"Once we recognized the magnitude of actual civil disturbances, based on our worst possible scenarios, we didn't have enough combat-type troops to react to widespread riots," Stein said.

"At one point, we even considered pulling troops out of Vietnam or withdrawing units

from the Seventh Army (in Europe).”

Upon his return from the MacDill meeting, Yarborough told a top aide: “I can’t believe what sorry shape we’re in.”

Shadowing King

But Yarborough and other intelligence officers had little time to bemoan their situation.

King was busy building momentum for his poor people’s march and trying to maintain a bridge between moderate civil rights forces like the NAACP and his own Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the increasingly militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee of Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown.

King did not have an easy task, as illustrated by a recording made Feb. 7, 1968, by Army Security Agency buggers.

Army undercover agents had followed Carmichael and King to the Pitts Motor Hotel in northwest Washington, where the two activists met in Brown’s room. Carmichael had recently returned from Hanoi.

Brown and Carmichael argued against turning the other cheek in the upcoming Washington march.

Brown: We stop the fuckers here. Right here.

Carmichael: No more Uncle Tom, dammit. This let-them-shit-on-you shit . . . ain’t working. You know it and so does everybody.

King: Is killing and burning (unintelligible) in your own people’s streets your answer?

Carmichael: It’s time. We can’t wait anymore, and the people (unintelligible) us are tired of waiting.

King: Nobody is as tired (of waiting) as me.

Carmichael: Then let’s shut the honkies down. They bring the Army, we fight the fuckers with ours. We got guns. Marching for peace – shit, you seen it. What’s it got us?

An hour after that exchange, Army agents listened to King tell 600 people at Vermont Avenue Baptist Church:

“We seek to say to the nation in our campaign that if you don’t straighten up, then you’re writing your own obituary.”

Intelligence officers and other high-ranking government officials found it hard to mesh such rhetoric with King’s avowed nonviolence.

In a Feb. 14 memo to President Johnson, White House aide Larry Temple called King’s philosophy “criminal disobedience” and urged the president to “publicly unmask this type of conduct for what it really is.”

On Feb. 15 at Fort Holabird, Md., Blakefield met with three of Yarborough’s top aides – Herbert Taylor, special assistant to the Army’s top spy; Dayton Cassidy of the Counterintelligence Analysis Branch; and Frederick H. Gaston Jr., Army Intelligence Systems Analysis Group.

A still classified memo of the meeting said Blakefield wanted a “systematic analysis of King’s plans, manpower and weapons we might see in the streets” of Washington in April.

On Feb. 19, King went to Miami to drum up support for the “Poor People’s Campaign.” Armed with a new \$230,000 Ford Foundation grant, he told a group of black ministers that American capitalism must be reorganized.

Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles of Memphis, who was in the audience, later that afternoon told King about 1,300 Memphis sanitation workers who were striking against the city for refusing to recognize their union. Kyles, joining Rev. James Lawson, asked King to come to Memphis to support the strikers.

A Feb. 22 report in King’s Army Intelligence file states: “Indications from reliable source are MLK will be in Memphis to support union striking city.”

Armed camp

While Army Intelligence scrambled to develop hard information that could be used to counter King’s Washington plans, others made their own preparations for what many feared would be another summer of violence.

Detroit Mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh, who saw his city become a war zone in July 1967, asked the city’s Common Council to authorize a \$9 million bond issue to buy

machineguns, M-1 carbines, gas masks, flak vests, 50,000 rounds of ammunition, infrared sniper scopes, tear gas guns and grenades, 50 new scout cars, eight armored vehicles, a helicopter and spotter plane.

Mayors and police officials in other cities such as Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Miami, Chicago and Newark also began buying high-powered rifles, machineguns, armored vehicles and tear gas grenades.

In Memphis, new Fire and Police Commissioner Frank C. Holloman began outfitting five new anti-sniper squads with 30.06 rifles with scopes, the civilian version of the rifle used by Army sniper teams.

While big city officials were making these public moves, some Army units secretly took matters in their own hands.

In February 1968, the 113th Military Intelligence Group (MIG) at Fort Sheridan, Ill., outside Chicago, began supplying the "Legion of Justice" terrorist group with tear gas, Mace, electronic surveillance equipment and money to harass anti-war groups.

Led by Chicago lawyer S. Thomas Sutton, who recruited Chicago police intelligence officers, the Legion used wiretaps supplied by 113th agents to break into and bug the offices of anti-war groups.

In Baltimore, the Inspectional Services Division of the city police received secret funding from the 109th MIG to spy on area black radicals.

In Washington, the Metro Police received \$120,000 in 1967 and \$150,000 in 1968 from Army Intelligence. Undercover police intelligence officers met regularly with 116th MIG agents. They maintained an index card file of 21,000 suspected black and anti-war radicals.

Teams of police and Army Intelligence officers followed and photographed King during a prayer march in Arlington Cemetery on Feb. 6, 1968, and his sermon the following day at Vermont Avenue Baptist Church. The officers later used the pictures for dart practice.

While these Army Intelligence units secretly worked with civilian police departments, other Army officers supplied automatic weapons and even rocket launchers to the black market, where they often ended up in the hands of militants, white and black.

Stolen or missing Army weapons had been sold to extremists and rioters as far back as

1940, according to Army records.

In May 1963, a carload of white men using Army-issue 45-caliber pistols with Army bullets shot up and firebombed the farm of Hartman Turnbow, who had dared to be the first black in Holmes County, Miss., to register to vote in the 20th Century.

The pistols had been “misplaced” from an Alabama armory and sold to Ku Klux Klansmen from Greenwood, Miss., by an Army National Guard sergeant, an Army officer familiar with the case said. The weapons were never officially recorded as lost, the officer said.

The Defense Supply Agency between 1958-63 supplied riot shotguns, M-1 rifles with bayonets and Army radios to police and highway patrol units in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. But the practice was discontinued in 1964 because “these weapons are finding their way into the hands of undesirables or extremists,” an October 1963 Army Provost Marshal report said.

Many weapons turned up “lost” during training exercises in the United States and Mexico, according to a classified Justice Department file reviewed by *The Commercial Appeal*.

During a 1967 training exercise at Camp Shelby, Miss., involving Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana National Guard troops, soldiers of the 20th Special Forces Group lost “70 M-16 rifles and assorted .45 pistols and ammunition,” a report in the file says. An undetermined number of M-72 light anti-tank weapon rockets also were “lost during the exercises,” the report added.

The Justice Department file was put together in preparation for the trial of Maj. Gen. Carl C. Turner, provost marshal of the Army. Turner, the Army’s top law enforcement officer, pleaded guilty in 1971 to selling firearms illegally to the Kansas City and Chicago police departments.

Turner also tried in February 1968 to secretly sell machineguns and sniper rifles to Memphis’s assistant police chief Henry E. Lux at a Sacramento conference on civil disturbances sponsored by the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Lux turned down the offer.

The Army had always battled theft of its weapons, but now powerful tools of death were turning up in the hands of growing numbers of people fighting the government.

Destiny nears

In public appearances around the country, King continued to hammer away at the “terrible, tragic, unjust war taking place in Vietnam” and to drum up interest in his “Poor People’s Campaign.”

King’s rallying cry came against the backdrop of Westmoreland’s request for still more troops in Vietnam and the 1968 presidential primaries. Anti-war candidate Eugene McCarthy won a startling 42 percent of the vote in New Hampshire’s primary. Sen. Robert Kennedy took the cue to get into the race, promising to end the war and heal the nation.

And the war was going badly. The Tet Offensive had shattered Westmoreland’s forecast of impending victory. More than 40,000 soldiers had deserted in 1967, and drug use among Army troops in Vietnam had gotten so bad that the 135th Military Intelligence Group in Saigon concluded in February 1968 that “we are approaching the stage where in some maneuver battalions whole squads are infested (with drugs).”

Meanwhile, the Army had finished its intelligence outlines on 124 cities with the potential for violence that summer. The outlines included maps with all “sensitive areas” marked, landing zones, secret storage sites for riot gear and weapons, and files on all civic leaders and known troublemakers.

Details of those plans were kept secret from civilian law enforcement agencies for fear of leaks. Still, at least the Army felt better prepared for King.

But before Washington came Memphis.

At 11:06 a.m. on March 28, King linked arms with Rev. Ralph Abernathy, his trusted colleague in the SCLC, and Bishop B. Julian Smith of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and led a march in support of Memphis’s striking sanitation workers.

The peaceful demonstration soon turned violent, leaving a 17-year-old dead, 60 injured and 120 in police custody.

Later, in his eighth-floor room at the Rivermont Hotel, King warned Memphis’s black leaders that he would not participate in another march unless it was better organized.

An FBI report on the Memphis violence condemned King.

“This clearly demonstrates that acts of so-called nonviolence advocated by King cannot be controlled. The same thing could happen in his planned massive civil disobedience for Washington in April.”

In Washington the day after the march, Sen. Robert Byrd (D-Va.) said, “The nation was given a preview of what may be in store for this city by the outrageous and despicable riot that Martin Luther King helped bring about in Memphis . . .”

King flew to Atlanta that day, but promised to return to Memphis the following week to lead another march.

On March 31, the president of the United States became a casualty of Vietnam – Johnson announced he would not seek re-election.

On April 3, King returned to Memphis. Army agents from the 111th Military Intelligence Group shadowed his movements and monitored radio traffic from a sedan crammed with electronic equipment.

Eight Green Beret soldiers from an “Operation Detachment Alpha 184 Team” were also in Memphis carrying out an unknown mission. Such “A-teams” usually contained 12 members.

On April 4, at 6:01 p.m., a bullet from a 30.06 rifle equipped with a scope struck King down on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

The man whose fingerprints were found on that type gun – James Earl Ray – pleaded guilty to King’s murder and is serving a 99-year prison sentence. Ray bought the rifle from a sporting goods store in Birmingham, FBI investigators said.

On Oct. 3, Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark sent a report to the White House. The predicted summer of violence that was to have begun with King’s April 22 demonstrations in Washington never happened, the report said.

Rioting had broken out in several cities as news of King’s assassination spread, but “there was a clear and significant decline in the number and severity of riots and disorders this summer,” Clark said.