

# **New York Times, June 5, 2019**

## **His Martin Luther King Biography Was a Classic. His Latest King Piece Is Causing a Furor.**

David Garrow found F.B.I. documents alleging King stood by during a rape. But some scholars question whether to trust records created as part of a smear campaign.



Martin Luther King Jr. leaving the office of J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in December 1964. The F.B.I. conducted extensive surveillance of Dr. King's private life. Credit...Bettmann, via Getty Images

**By** Jennifer Schuessler  
June 4, 2019

When David J. Garrow, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., sat down last spring to dig through a trove of previously unreleased

government records, it was business as usual for a researcher known for prodigious reporting and doorstep books.

“There’s this weird ability I have of complete recall with regard to what I already know and don’t know,” Mr. Garrow said, describing the experience of wrestling with some 54,000 separate web links posted by the National Archives and Records Administration. “I was just scrolling through the PDFs, looking for new little factoids.”

Mr. Garrow found factoids aplenty, about the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s infamous surveillance of Dr. King — and, most controversially, about alleged sexual misconduct by the civil rights leader.

In a 7,800-word article published last week by the British monthly magazine [Standpoint](#), which teased the piece on its cover as “Martin Luther King and #MeToo,” Mr. Garrow provides new details about the F.B.I.’s tactics alongside graphic descriptions from documents recounting alleged group sex in bugged hotel rooms. He also names some of Dr. King’s purported lovers, including fellow activists who have never been publicly identified as such.

While Dr. King’s infidelities have long been known in broad outline, Mr. Garrow concludes by saying that the new material — including an explosive allegation that he witnessed, and even encouraged, a rape committed by a fellow minister — “poses so fundamental a challenge to his historical stature as to require the most complete and extensive historical review possible.”

The revelations have sparked a heated reaction. But so far, it has been as much about the ethics and evidentiary standards of Mr. Garrow’s article as it is about Dr. King.

Some fellow historians credit Mr. Garrow with finding potentially important new information about both Dr. King and the F.B.I. attempts to discredit him. But others are denouncing him for publishing incendiary claims generated as part of an F.B.I. smear campaign, without offering any corroborating evidence. And some are accusing him of running roughshod over the privacy of the women with whom Dr. King was allegedly involved.

“It is deeply irresponsible for a historian to cast such F.B.I. sources, which can be deeply unreliable, as fact,” Jeanne Theoharis, a professor of political science at Brooklyn College and the author of [a biography of Rosa Parks](#), said. “Most scholars I know would penalize their graduate students for doing this.”

But in an interview shortly after the online publication of the article — which he said had been rejected by more than two dozen outlets, including The New York Times — Mr. Garrow, 66, said he wrote about the alleged rape and the other sexual material in the documents out of a sense of obligation.

“I think any journalist and any historian has to deal with the public record that the government puts out there,” he said. “These are government documents that the National Archives has put into view for anyone with an internet connection.”

## The F.B.I. vs. Dr. King

The documents Mr. Garrow, 66, writes about stem from one of the most notorious abuses of power in F.B.I. history. In November 1963, the bureau, with the permission of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, [began wiretapping](#) Dr. King’s home and office telephones. It also placed bugs in his hotel rooms.

The intent was to monitor Dr. King’s connections with suspected Communists. But as the surveillance began capturing his extramarital sexual activities, that “fig leaf,” as Mr. Garrow puts it in his article, fell away.

To further its goal of “neutralizing King as an effective Negro leader” (as a 1963 F.B.I. memo put it), the bureau peddled lurid details of his sex life to journalists and politicians. In late 1964, it anonymously mailed him a tape reportedly including some of the sexual encounters it had captured, along with [a letter urging him to commit suicide](#).

The F.B.I.’s surveillance tapes and the transcripts of them remain under seal until 2027. But some summaries and related material were included among intelligence documents covered by the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992, and [released in 2017](#) and 2018 in accordance with that law.

Mr. Garrow, the author of the 1981 book [“The F.B.I. and Martin Luther King Jr.”](#) said he was initially interested in what the documents would reveal about the behavior of the F.B.I., of which he is harshly critical.

As for his claim that Dr. King was an enthusiastic witness to an alleged rape, it rests on a single paragraph in an F.B.I. summary of what supposedly took place in January 1964 in a Washington hotel room where King was staying. There, according to the summary, another minister (now deceased) and unspecified other men discussed which of the “several women ‘parishioners’” brought to the room by the minister would be “suitable for natural and unnatural acts.” After one of the women objected, the other minister “immediately and forcibly raped her.”

Mr. Garrow also quotes a handwritten annotation in the margin that reads: “King looked on, laughed and offered advice.”

Some historians have strongly criticized Mr. Garrow for hanging an explosive allegation on an anonymous handwritten annotation. (A spokesman for the King Center in Atlanta said that Bernice King, Dr. King’s youngest daughter and chief executive of the center, had no comment on the article.)

Mr. Garrow said he believed the typed summary, and the handwritten addition, were based on the actual contents of the tapes, rather than an embellishment. Citing a passage in his 1981 book about the F.B.I., he noted that he first heard hints of an alleged assault around 1980, when he interviewed several Justice Department lawyers who he said had heard the tapes.

KING,

In view of your low grade, abnormal personal behavior I will not dignify your name with either a Mr. or a Reverend or a Dr. And, your last name calls to mind only the type of King such as King Henry the VIII and his countless acts of adultery and immoral conduct lower than that of a beast.

King, look into your heart. You know you are a complete fraud and a great liability to all of us Negroes. White people in this country have enough frauds of their own but I am sure they don't have one at this time that is any where near your equal. You are no clergyman and you know it. I repeat you are a colossal fraud and an evil, vicious one at that. You could not believe in God and act as you do. Clearly you don't believe in any personal moral principles.

King, like all frauds your end is approaching. You could have been our greatest leader. You, even at an early age have turned out to be not a leader but a dissolute, abnormal moral imbecile. We will now have to depend on our older leaders like Wilkins a man of character and thank God we have others like him. But you are done. Your "honorary" degrees, your Nobel Prize (what a grim farce) and other awards will not save you. King, I repeat you are done.

No person can overcome facts, not even a fraud like yourself. Lend your sexually psychotic ear to the enclosure. You will find yourself and in all your dirt, filth, evil and moronic talk exposed on the record for all time. I repeat - no person can argue successfully against facts. You are finished. You will find on the record for all time your filthy, dirty, evil companions, male and females giving expression with you to your hideous abnormalities. And some of them to pretend to be ministers of the Gospel. Satan could not do more. What incredible evilness. It is all there on the record, your sexual orgies. Listen to yourself you filthy, abnormal animal. You are on the record. You have been on the record - all your adulterous acts, your sexual orgies extending far into the past. This one is but a tiny sample. You will understand this. Yes, from your various evil playmates on the east coast to and others on the west coast and outside the country you are on the record. King you are done.

The American public, the church organizations that have been helping - Protestant, Catholic and Jews will know you for what you are - an evil, abnormal beast. So will others who have backed you. You are done.

King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what it is. You have just 34 days in which to do (this exact number has been selected for a specific reason, it has definite practical significance. You are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal fraudulent self is bared to the nation.

A copy of the "suicide letter" letter the F.B.I. sent to King in late 1964, along with a tape reportedly including recordings of his alleged sexual infidelities. (One person's name has been obscured by The Times because the claims about her have not been verified or disproven.) Credit...National Archives, College Park, Maryland

Over the past year, outlet after outlet declined to publish Mr. Garrow's findings.

(Dean Baquet, the executive editor of The Times, said that the paper declined to pursue an article about the documents because the historian wanted to write the piece himself. "We thought anything this explosive needed to be vetted — and edited — by The Times itself," Mr. Baquet said.)

Mr. Garrow finally found a home for the article in *Standpoint*, a right-of-center magazine that describes its core mission as defending the values of Western civilization.

Mr. Garrow, who identifies himself as a Democratic Socialist and noted that he donated to Senator Bernie Sanders's 2016 presidential campaign, brushed aside questions about the editorial that *Standpoint* published along with his article, which called Dr. King a "sexual predator" and "the Harvey Weinstein of the civil rights movement."

"We are going to talk about what is under my byline," he said. "I'm not responsible for what anyone else says. I'm responsible for the historical record I'm addressing."

## A Joe Friday With Sharp Elbows

Few people know more about the minutiae of both Dr. King's life and the F.B.I.'s pursuit of him than Mr. Garrow. His Pulitzer-winning 1986 book "[Bearing the Cross](#)" (for which he conducted more than 700 interviews) was the first serious biography of Dr. King, and helped cement the King-centric view of the civil rights movement. Ask him a question, and you tend to get an answer wrapped in a blizzard of names, dates, cross-references and self-references.

He recalled the precise date — "June 4, 1974" — when, as an undergraduate, he began what became "[Protest At Selma](#)," a scholarly monograph published in 1978.

"I always privately celebrate it as my private anniversary," he said. "And the book is still in print!"

And he recited a quote about him from a 1995 essay on civil rights historiography by Charles M. Payne: "Like the cop in 'Dragnet,' Garrow sticks to 'the facts, ma'am, just the facts.'"

"That's a characterization I've always embraced," he said.

But Mr. Garrow also has a reputation among some as a sharp-elbowed guardian of what he views as his turf. In 2017, when "[Rising Star](#)," his mammoth, myth-puncturing biography of Barack Obama, appeared, David Maraniss, the author of an earlier Obama biography, [tweeted](#) that Mr. Garrow was a "vile, undercutting, ignoble competitor unlike any I've ever encountered."

Mr. Garrow, whose book included jabs at Mr. Maraniss and other Obama biographers, said the comment was "utterly and completely false," and that it should not be repeated in this article because it was "defamatory."

Mr. Garrow, also the author of a well-regarded [1,000-page legal history of Roe v. Wade](#), similarly objected to questions about a 2002 episode at Emory University's law school. At that time, a school official in charge of the facilities said Mr. Garrow "went into an

uncontrollable rage” and grabbed her by the wrists while yelling at her about construction noise, according to an article in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. The official also said she had complained for years about abusive treatment of her and other employees by Mr. Garrow.

The incident led to a misdemeanor charge of battery and a lawsuit by the official. Both were eventually dismissed at her request.

Mr. Garrow, who retired from the University of Pittsburgh law school in 2017, said: “It was 17 years ago. It was false, and it was dismissed.”

He added, “It has no relevance to my scholarly credentials.”

Mr. Garrow said that his article, although titled “The Troubling Legacy of Martin Luther King,” was motivated mainly by a desire to expose the misdeeds of the F.B.I., including what he sees as its failure to stop or prosecute an alleged sexual assault overheard by its agents.

“Both civil rights preachers and F.B.I. agents coequally tolerated the abuse of women,” he said.

But some women scholars in particular expressed outrage at the way Mr. Garrow said he was speaking up for women, while also publicly naming activists whom he alleges were Dr. King’s lovers.

“He demonstrates no ethical discord about his own role in revealing unsubstantiated accounts about these women, dead or alive,” said Nishani Frazier, an associate professor of history at Miami University of Ohio who [writes about](#) the civil rights movement.

“He sexualizes them, and puts out their name without consideration for them, their family, their friends or their legacy,” she said.

(In the article, Mr. Garrow said he made repeated attempts to interview one of the women, through her daughter, but was rebuffed.)

## A Reckoning to Come?

Other scholars also criticized what they called the sensationalized presentation of the claims, which were quickly seized on by the conservative commentator Dinesh D’Souza, who called Dr. King “quite a sicko,” and by social media trolls suggesting statues of him should be taken down.

Peniel Joseph, a professor of public affairs at the University of Texas who writes about [the Black Power movement](#), said it smacked of “the kind of character assassination that folks peddled before the King holiday was signed into law.”

“This is all, unfortunately, a further example of the tabloidization of history for political ends rather than an illumination of the historical record,” Mr. Joseph said.

While there have been few full-throated endorsements of Mr. Garrow’s article so far, some historians say it cannot simply be dismissed.

[Beverly Gage](#), a historian at Yale who is writing a biography of J. Edgar Hoover, said that while the F.B.I. documents must be interpreted in the context of its efforts to discredit Dr. King, they cannot be assumed to contain fabricated information.

Mr. Garrow’s article is “potentially important research for rounding out King as a complicated person, and for giving new perspectives on women’s experiences in the civil rights movement,” she said.

David Greenberg, a professor of history and journalism at Rutgers, called for a “middle stance of uncertainty.”

“We can’t necessarily assume what’s in the F.B.I. report is completely accurate, but we have to reckon with the possibility that it is,” he said.

Mr. Garrow said his piece was not an effort to knock Dr. King off his pedestal, but a “corrective” — and a prelude, he suggested, to an even greater reckoning.

“People will not know the historical verdict until 2027,” when the tapes are unsealed, he said. “This is a warning message as to what’s coming.”

Jennifer Schuessler is a culture reporter covering intellectual life and the world of ideas. She is based in New York. [@jennyschuessler](#)

A version of this article appears in print on June 5, 2019, Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: An Article On Dr. King Creates A Furor.