



MEMPHIS IN APRIL

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The impact from the bullet drove the young leader backward. Immediately after the bullet inflicted the fatal wound the sound of the explosion shattered the air. The sound came from an area in front, the witnesses agreed. Although police officers were stationed about the area and FBI agents were also present—were, in fact, witnesses to the assassination—the man who fired the fatal shot left the scene unhampered.

Pictures of the "sniper's nest" were widely transmitted together with official assurances that the murderer was a lone assassin—there had been no conspiracy.

This was the scene in Dallas, 1963. It was the scene as well in Memphis, 1968.

One week after President Kennedy was killed his successor appointed a Commission to conceal the facts about the alleged lone assassin—who was by then dead himself, having been murdered in the basement of a police station. No such Commission was appointed one week after Dr. King's death, possibly because the "lone assassin" was not yet in custody—let alone safely dead.

The media evidently learned little from the experience of the intervening four and one half years. If it was unsound to endorse the Dallas police conclusions once the suspect had been apprehended—Oswald did it alone—was it not ludicrous for Walter Cronkite, as one example, to assure his listeners that the killer of Dr. King was a lone "crazed assassin," "one moral misfit"? The long distance posthumous psychoanalysis of Oswald by commentators and cops broke new ground, yet those scientific advances were as naught when compared with Cronkite's ability to evaluate the mental aberrations of an unknown suspect.

The otherwise hopeless television picture was marked by the intelligent comments of NBC's Edwin Newman. He presented the

facts and offered the opinion that the evidence did not preclude the possibility of conspiracy — in fact, almost suggested it.

In all other respects it was Dallas all over again, with the Memphis police rivaling their Dallas counterparts with an incredible incompetence that put the Keystone Cops to shame. The hapless FBI agents were effective only when telling witnesses not to talk about their observations — and, fortunately, not even totally effective then.

In the interim the assassin escaped from the scene while someone, quite possibly an accomplice, penetrated the Memphis police radio with broadcasts describing in minute detail the police chase of the assassin, although that exciting event never did take place in real life. Of course, the first lesson, painfully re-learned, is that the local and federal authorities cannot provide even the barest degree of protection—if indeed they wish to—and cannot even prevent the culprits from leaving the scene after the very public murder is accomplished.

I arrived in Memphis early enough to question the relevant witnesses before the FBI order of silence was in effect. Ramsey Clark, our Attorney General, had already been there to take charge. He predicted an "early arrest," to be made within hours, and that the federal authorities had "the man on the spot."

Informal conversations with amazed and disgruntled FBI agents revealed that they didn't know what Clark was talking about as, at that time, they had no idea who had fired the shot. "How can we chase someone when we don't know who we're supposed to be after?" one of them asked. Perhaps they might have checked with Cronkite for a profile.

Clark's performance altered not at all his previously unblemished record regarding assassinations. He had already stated that Clay Shaw was not only innocent but a fine man whom Garrison had ruined. He added that the FBI had checked out Shaw and found him to be innocent in the

weeks following the assassination, but he has been unable to explain why Shaw had been investigated at all some years before he was indicted in New Orleans. Clark also said that he probably would have to "prosecute Garrison" if he persisted in trying to find out who killed President Kennedy. The fact that no "early arrest" was forthcoming in the King assassination did not, in the circumstances, require a new evaluation of Clark's probity.

Memphis was a silent town. Black men stood on almost every corner in the business district. The signs they carried read, "Honor King — End Racism," "Union Justice Now" and simply "I Am A Man." Police were everywhere, but nowhere did I see Negroes enter downtown stores to shop.

My first stop was the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King stood when the bullet struck him. The witnesses were unanimous at the motel. They spoke as if in one voice. The shot had come from the direction of a brick structure across Mulberry Street, built on — can you believe it? — a grassy knoll. The little sloping hill ended not at the street level, as it does in Dealey Plaza, but at the edge of a wall which formed an embankment several feet above the street. Within moments black hands were pointing to the back of the brick structure and police officers were attempting, without success, to climb the wall—although a well-trained police dog might have made it.

Frustrated by the embankment that stood between them and the presumed killer, the officers finally tried another approach. They ran around the back and approached the building from its front, on Main Street.

My next stop was the building. Bessie Brewer had just taken over the management of the building the previous month. She opened the door reluctantly and suspiciously.

I saw a tiny woman wearing dungarees. "Well, what do you want?" was her way of opening the discussion. Finally she agreed to talk with me, and later even apologized for not having invited me into her room for the interview. "My husband is there and he is drunk—very drunk," she explained. She was bitter

about the whole affair—most bitter (at least at that moment) because of letters addressed to her "from all over the country, New York and those places." The letters condemned her as a southern bigot for having rented the room to the assassin. Unlike the owner of the rooming house where Oswald had lived, Mrs. Brewer did not charge a fee for an interview or for the privilege of taking pictures of the scene.

It was Thursday, April 4, and a man, who said his name was John Willard, asked for a room. Did he have any accent? I asked, Mrs. Brewer, who speaks with a very pronounced Southern drawl, replied, "Wha no. He spoke jes lak ah do."

It was after 3 o'clock in the afternoon, but before 3:30. The man wore a dark suit, a white shirt and a dark tie. He had no luggage. Mrs. Brewer said that she had two vacancies. She showed him the expensive one first—ten dollars for a week for room 8. The man looked about the room. No window looked out on the Lorraine Hotel balcony. "I don't need no stove or ice box," he said. "I'll look at the other one." The other room was suitable. It

had no kitchen facilities, but was close to the bathroom, which looked out at the balcony—and it had a window from which, with some straining of the neck muscles, the balcony could also be seen. As the man entered room 5b the occupant of the only room between that one and the bathroom, Charles Q. Stephens, saw him. The man took a crisp \$20 bill from his pocket and paid the rent for a week in advance—\$8.50.

The next part of the story is told by the mute furniture. When I examined room 8 it was as "Willard" had left it, but not quite as he had found it. A chest that had stood in front of the one window in the room had been moved to the other end of the room. The thin plastic curtains that had originally been yellow and green, but which had deteriorated into a sooty greyness, had been placed up on a nearby mantle. The screen had been pried out of the window and placed near a wall. A chair had been moved from a table near the bed and placed at the window. The bed had not been used. "Willard," it seems, sat at the window, leaning out, waiting for Dr. King to appear on the balcony. Soon after—or shortly before—Dr. King stepped out to chat with some of his associates in the parking lot beneath the balcony, "Willard" entered the

bathroom at the end of the hall, passing Stephens' room. At that time Stephens was but a few feet from "Willard" with a rooming-house-thin wall between them. Stephens tinkered with a radio which he was trying to repair. "Willard" was looking at King through a telescopic sight. He fired. In that confined area the explosion sounded to Stephens "just like a German 88. I went to the door and walked out into the hall to see what happened. I saw the man just as he turned the corner. He had something in his hand, oh, say, about three feet long. It was wrapped in newspapers, it looked like."

The man quickly exited from the rooming house and dropped his rifle "in front of my place," said G.W. Canipe, owner of an amusement firm. Canipe said the man "walked south on Main." If so, he ignored the white Mustang which was parked to the north of the rooming house, in front of Jim's Grill. Lloyd Jowers, the owner of the grill, said that the Mustang remained in front of his establishment until about fifteen minutes after the shot had been fired. If Jowers is correct, then the Mustang was driven from the scene long after the police had arrived there. If the Mustang was driven by "Willard," then he evidently returned to the scene of the crime fifteen minutes after firing the shot. Or perhaps someone other than Willard drove the vehicle from the scene. Someone else, not fleeing the city in a vehicle, then broadcast false details of the non-existent chase of another vehicle by police officers. The evidence here seems clear: the calls were broadcast from a stationary radio. They did not vacillate in strength, as they would have had they originated from a moving vehicle.

Putting all of this information together in a scholarly and reas-

suring fashion, Attorney-General Clark stated that "there was no conspiracy." He added, "we are after one man on the run" and that his arrest was probably just hours away.

Two weeks later, the FBI—in absentia—charged Eric Starvo Galt with "conspiracy" in the assassination of Dr. King. At that time, Galt was still running, and it became clear that he was a suspect not because he had been running or followed from Memphis but rather because a week before a citizen in Atlanta had

notified authorities that a white Mustang had been parked there since the day after the assassination. The FBI had tried to suppress all details of the investigation, but the statement of one Memphis resident about the description of the presumed getaway car was reported nevertheless by the media and was read by the Atlanta resident.

One witness had seen the car leave the scene. Another noticed that it had been abandoned for a suspiciously long time. All the police had to do was to check with the motor vehicle bureau to secure the name of the owner. No wonder J. Edgar Hoover is so inclined to shroud the work of his agency in mystery: only the mystique can hide the fact that his agency is both unimaginative and incompetent, due, primarily, to the fact that his agents are frozen in the fear that by some action—however well intended—the bureau might be embarrassed, and the agent would therefore incur the wrath of the petty dictator who rules the bureau. And so they do little more than the routine work previously outlined for them while alert citizens solve the difficult cases for them.

Two weeks after the murder, Clark agreed that there had been a conspiracy to assassinate Dr. King. He added that the culprits would be apprehended — "the Lord willing, soon." If we are going to rely upon Him, perhaps we might consider replacing Clark with a minister or some other person with better credentials and a closer connection to that master detective in the sky.

Next week: The consequences of Dr. King's death. An article by Mark Lane: "Toward a Viable Alternative to Non-Violence."

