

King's Convicted Assassin Dies

Claims of Innocence Were Gathering Newfound Support

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James Earl Ray, the convicted killer of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., died yesterday, almost exactly three decades after the assassination and just as his latest claims of innocence were drawing new support from the slain civil rights leader's family and new attention from federal officials.

Ray, 70, had been gravely ill for some time. He suffered from liver disease and had long been confined to a hospital in Nashville. It was from there, in frail health and still serving a 99-year prison sentence for King's murder, that Ray had recently begun to persuade the King family and other civil rights leaders that the assassination was the result of a conspiracy—and that he had been set up to take the fall.

Just this month, in an unusual meeting with Attorney General Janet Reno, King's widow, Coretta Scott King, urged the Justice Department to investigate what she termed "new evidence" that supports some of Ray's claims. The session represented the most serious interest that Washington has shown in looking anew into King's murder since the 1970s, when a congressional inquiry concluded that Ray had shot King as he stood on the balcony of a Memphis hotel in April 1968 but left open the possibility that he had assistance.

In a statement from Atlanta yesterday, the King family said it was "deeply saddened" by Ray's death, reasserted his innocence and vowed to press for a new federal investigation into whether Ray was set up as a patsy in the murder. The Justice Department said yesterday that it was reviewing that request.

"It is regrettable that Mr. Ray was denied his day in court, but the American people have a right to the truth about this tragedy," the statement from the King family said.

But in Tennessee, prosecutors called Ray's death yesterday a "fitting end" to a case that has consumed their attention repeatedly for the past 30 years. State officials recently con-

cluded a four-year investigation into King's assassination, finding that Ray was the killer and that there was no evidence of a conspiracy.

"Mr. Ray has had numerous opportunities over all of these years to put forth his story, and every time he has, it has always been the same garbage," said John Campbell, a prosecutor who has been involved in the case.

Ray confessed to shooting King in 1969 but recanted three days later, saying he had been pressured by his lawyer to admit guilt in order to avoid the death penalty. Until King's assassination, Ray was known as little more than a petty thief with a lengthy arrest record.

After his conviction, Ray had made many attempts to win a new trial, and had offered numerous theories on the murder and why his fingerprints were found on the rifle identified as the murder weapon. At one point Ray accused members of King's inner circle of hatching the assassination plot. He also has claimed he was framed by a mysterious gunrunner he knew only as "Raoul."

From his jail cell, Ray also wrote two books on the subject, and his various lawyers have written at least three books on purported plots to kill King. But through the years, Ray has repeatedly altered key details of the alleged conspiracy.

The latest round of controversy over King's murder began last year when the civil rights leader's son, Dexter King, asserted for the first time publicly that he believed Ray was innocent and that the assassination may have been part of a government plot.

Shortly before he made that startling statement, Dexter King had visited the ailing Ray in prison in Nashville and also met with his attorney, William Pepper. In court papers and in a book called "Orders to Kill," Pepper has claimed that King's murder was the culmination of a plot involving the FBI, the CIA and the Memphis police department.

Over the years, other civil rights leaders and King associates have

raised questions about possible government complicity in the killing because of the intense campaign of harassment that then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover waged against King in the 1960s.

Civil rights leader Jesse L. Jackson said yesterday, "The haunting question remains the extent to which our government was involved in the killing of Dr. King."

But in a new book, "Killing the Dream," author Gerald Posner debunks many of the conspiracy theories surrounding King's death. He also depicts Ray as a criminal and racist who was skilled and resourceful enough to stalk and murder King.

"He did take to his grave, unfortunately, some of the final answers to this case," Posner said yesterday. "The question that has always been with him was, 'Would he get a conscience at the end of his life?' We've found out that the answer is no."

Staff writer Michael Fletcher contributed to this report.



In March 1997, Dexter King, right, son of the slain civil rights leader, met with convict James Earl Ray in Nashville.

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