

Ray Hearings

Cost \$4M

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WASHINGTON — They said it wasn't a trial, but last week's televised James Earl Ray hearings, staged at a cost of \$4 million in taxpayer's money by the House Assassinations Committee, was just that.

After five days of hearings that will not end for at least two months, several committee members had rendered their own verdicts. They found Ray guilty of the 1968 killing of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and believe that he acted alone.

One committee member, Rep. Harold Sawyer (R-Mich.), a former prosecutor, told Ray: "If I was a prosecutor I could not miss convicting you of first-degree murder."

The committee has all but demolished Ray's 10-year-old story that not only did he not kill King but he was just a pawn for a mysterious, and missing, gunman named "Raoul."

Ray contends that he met the French-Canadian in Montreal after escaping from a Missouri prison in 1967. But the committee investigators doggedly checked every location in three countries where Ray insisted that he and the illusive Raoul stayed, drank or dined in the year before King's murder. The committee could find no one, including waitresses or landlords, who had ever seen Raoul.

Without Raoul Ray has no way to explain why he bought the rifle which killed King in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Ray has been trying to peddle the lame explanation that Raoul ordered him to buy the weapon and that he turned it over to Raoul before the murder. Unfortunately for Ray the only fingerprints on the rifle belong to Ray, not to Raoul. Ray claims that Raoul must have plastered clear Band-Aids on all of his fingertips so that there would be no fingerprints on anything he touched.

The testimony leads more and more to the conclusion that Ray tracked King for two weeks and shot him as some kind of warped symbolic act for southern segregation.

Until late Friday the committee clearly had the better of the case. But, not content to let the circumstantial evidence convict Ray, the panel made a desperate stab at coming up with something new. That something new was a sworn written statement obtained from a former London policeman who had defended Ray when he was held as a fugitive in a London jail after the assassination.

Rep. Samuel Devine (R-Ohio), a former FBI agent, read the 21-page statement in which Ray reportedly told the cop that he hated blacks and had murdered King.

Ray had pleaded guilty in 1969 to killing King but recanted a few days later, contending that he had been "coerced" into the plea. For the last nine years he has insisted that he did not kill King; hardly

knew anything about the civil rights leader, and was certainly not anti-black.

Oddly enough, the British policeman Alexander Anthony Eist, now a pubkeeper, had never publicly discussed his conversation with Ray. When Devine finished reading the most damaging statements at the hearings on national television, Mark Lane, Ray's attorney, had a bombshell of his own. He revealed that Eist had been kicked off the police force after corruption, perjury and bribery charges had been made against him.

Devine lamely conceded that he was not vouching for Eist's statement, just reading it.

That blunder by the committee ended the Ray testimony until November, but in the meantime the panel will analyze at least 21 supposed conspiracies to kill King, some allegedly by Ray.

Knowledgable committee sources now believe however, that the chances of pinning Ray to any massive conspiracy are very slim. Instead, he will probably be shown to have financed his flight from Memphis through a series of petty robberies, such as the \$240 robbery of a London bank. Investors also believe that Ray received some minor financial help from his family.

When the probe is all over at the end of the year and the committee puts together a "final report," the public will be right back where it started. That is that Ray was telling the truth when he pleaded guilty to killing King back in 1968. The nation has also been treated to a masterful storyteller, James Earl Ray, who has been unflappable in three days on the witness stand even though the committee has time and again presented documents which directly conflict with his own memory. But Ray, in a soft sometimes inaudible voice, has just shrugged off the facts.

Anyone doing 99 years in prison for murder is hardly worried about facing an additional sentence of perjury or contempt of Congress.

The big question which will remain long after Ray is safely back in his Tennessee prison cell is: Will the American people, particularly those convinced that there was a right-wing conspiracy to kill King, really believe that Ray acted alone? Chances are that those who believe Ray was hired as a hitman by arch-segregationists who wanted to destroy the civil rights movement will continue to believe that, although no evidence will be presented to back up that theory.

Others on the left who insist that the FBI must have been either involved in the murder or involved in a coverup effort to find the real killer, will continue to espouse that theory. But the committee has uncovered no evidence that the FBI was in on the plot and, on the contrary, has discovered that federal agents did a thorough job in investigating it.