

King recalled 20 years later

SMU professor cites new conspiracy evidence

By Tom Gidwitz
Standard-Times correspondent

DARTMOUTH — Twenty years ago today, a sniper in the window of a Memphis boarding house fired the bullet that killed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on a motel balcony.

That single shot not only killed its target, but it shattered the dreams of millions and brought explosions of violence to America's cities.

When the gunman, James Earl Ray, was arrested in London the following June, law enforcement officers and the sniper himself claimed he acted entirely alone. In 1978 the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that the killer committed the murder alone but received money from three eccentric racists in St. Louis.

Dr. Phillip H. Melanson, head of the Political Science Department at Southeastern Massachusetts University, disagrees. "The official versions of this case — both of them — are wrong," he told an SMU audience Thursday night.

"I'm thoroughly convinced that James Earl Ray had help," Dr. Melanson said. An international network provided him with a cover identity, numerous aliases, a false passport and cash, Dr. Melanson said.

"This is a criminal who the official version credits with killing Dr. Martin Luther King with one perfect
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Area residents remember civil rights leader's impact

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NEW BEDFORD — Linda Whyte Toatley remembers the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as he was in life.

"His death isn't as significant in my mind as keeping King alive day to day," Mrs. Toatley said.

Lee Charlton, New Bedford NAACP president, speaks of men and women like Rev. King, "blessed with a vision and cursed with the responsibility to do something about it."

There is, Mr. Charlton said, still much to be done.

Twenty years after the civil rights leader was assassinated, local residents — both black and white — reflected on the man, his mission and an indelible moment in time.

"It seems like a lot has happened," said Mrs. Toatley, a New Bedford artist, "But there has not been wonderful change and growth..."

In August 1983, Mrs. Toatley and her husband Jim traveled to the nation's capital for the 20th anniversary of the March on Washington. Jim Toatley, who died Aug. 31, 1986, had been there on Aug. 28, 1963 when Rev. King delivered his "I have a dream" speech.

It is a dream, Mrs. Toatley said, that has yet to be
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When Mr. Ray bought a car, registered in hotels in Memphis, and applied for a driver's license, he signed the names of respectable Canadian citizens — a police officer, an educator, an insurance adjuster, and a warehouse foreman. All lived within a 12-mile radius in Toronto, and all bore a close physical resemblance to Mr. Ray. Mr. Ray also had plastic surgery, slightly rounding off his nose, which Dr. Melanson said increased his similarity to the Canadians.

Dr. Melanson said Mr. Ray contended that he made up some of the names and found one in a telephone book in Birmingham. But after the murder, Mr. Ray headed directly to Toronto, a city he had never visited, using the Canadian aliases. According to Dr. Melanson, this was a sophisticated attempt to confuse his pursuers and gain time. Mr. Ray was hoping he could escape while lawmen were busy interrogating the innocent Canadians.

It almost worked. For two weeks, while Baltimore, Chicago and Kansas City burned, while federal troops and the National Guard patrolled the streets, no one knew who James Earl Ray was.

"Ray was two stops short of his ultimate destination, which was Angola, where he could be either rewarded or disposed of in a context where few questions would be asked and few questions could be answered," Dr. Melanson said.

Dr. Melanson interviewed some of the Canadians whose names Mr. Ray used. Although the Congressional report called the pattern of these aliases troubling, Dr. Melanson discovered that two of them had not been interrogated by any American authorities.

When Dr. Melanson interviewed Eric S. Galt, he found he would have been the perfect red herring. Born in South Africa, he was a crack shot, had been in Birmingham, where the gun was purchased, and fit the physical description of the assassin, and the abandoned getaway vehicle was registered in his name. Although the real Mr. Galt had a sound alibi, the international manhunt might have been relaxed had not Mr. Ray been identified through fingerprints.

Dr. Melanson speculates that Mr. Galt's profile had been lifted from a file at Union Carbide, where Mr. Galt once worked on a secret military project.

"The fact that Eric Galt worked in the shadow of American military technology raises the possibility that his identity or his dossier could have been usurped for a uniquely American purpose... the assassination of Dr. King," Dr. Melanson said. He calls that explanation better than "no answer at all, such as Congress gave us" or Mr. Ray's "uncredible" explanations.

Dr. Melanson reminded his audience that Rev. King was perceived as a security threat. The CIA and FBI files showed Rev. King was viewed with "paranoia," and that his stand against the Vietnam War was seen as part of a communist plot.

According to witnesses, Mr. Ray also received envelopes from mysterious men in suits and ties. Dr. Melanson says these envelopes must have contained money, because the congressional committee found that Mr. Ray's spending outpaced his resources by 700 percent.

Dr. Melanson located one of these men, dubbed "The Fat Man," by the Canadian press at the time. The Fat Man would only talk to Dr. Melanson if he preserved his anonymity because he was certain he would be killed if exposed. He told Dr. Melanson, "The people behind James Earl Ray are gangsters. There was big money behind Ray."

Mr. Ray signed a confession maintaining he acted alone. By admitting guilt, he avoided a trial but later said he had been aided by someone named "Raoul," a mysterious Latin who never was found. Dr. Melanson believes Raoul is a composite of the actual conspirators.

Congress pinned the blame on a St. Louis group whose leader was a wealthy businessman "who was fond of playing Civil War dressup," and who would don a Confederate colonel's uniform and, "through a haze of bourbon and branch water, talk about the importance of killing Dr. King." The group had a standing offer of \$50,000 for anyone who would kill Rev. King, and this group supposedly bankrolled Mr. Ray, the SMU professor said.

When Dr. Melanson interviewed James Earl Ray, Mr. Ray's memory turned hazy at times. However, Mr. Ray has written a book to take advantage of the assassin's anniversary.

"I'm afraid to say it remains an unsolved mystery," Dr. Melanson said, adding, "The kind of help that I saw provided to Ray suggest that... it was some people who seem to have a modus operandi that I would associate with the netherworld of intelligence gone renegade."

Dr. Melanson called for a new investigation that uses subpoena power under the guidance of an independent counsel.

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the rifle shot, miraculously escaping the Memphis crime scene, and then proceeding to evade what was then described as the greatest manhunt in law enforcement history for two months," Dr. Melanson said.

During three years of research, which resulted in a book to be published this summer, Dr. Melanson found past official investigations to be "tragically inept" and "replete with logical and investigative errors."

Dr. Melanson consulted FBI documents he obtained under the Freedom of Information Act and interviewed 60 people, including Mr. Ray, and important figures in the assassination ignored by the congressional committee.

Although unable to pinpoint who the conspirators were, Dr. Melanson maintains that the case is "solvable," although time is running out because key characters are getting older and evidence more elusive.

The most telling sign that Mr. Ray had extensive help was the marked difference in his "criminal competence" before and after the assassination, Dr. Melanson said.

He said that before the assassination, Mr. Ray was "one of the most ludicrously inept robbers in all of petty crime." For aliases, Mr. Ray used the names of criminal friends and family members.

Yet, in the year before the assassination, "his criminal behavior changed radically," Dr. Melanson said. He had mysterious help in a successful prison break and began using new and unusual aliases.