

Ray Alone in Slaying of King, U.S. Probe Review Concludes

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WASHINGTON — A Justice Department inquiry has concluded that the FBI probe of the murder of the Rev. Martin Luther King was "thoroughly, honestly and successfully" conducted and that the best available evidence suggests that the convicted murderer, James Earl Ray, acted alone.

The Justice Department investigators, who made an eight-month review of the FBI's handling of the case, also concluded that the bureau may have had grounds for starting a security investigation of King, but that its six-year surveillance was clearly unwarranted.

The report released yesterday said the FBI never developed evidence that King had any affiliation with the Communist party, and that it was the personal feuding between him and the late FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover — not legitimate national security concerns — that resulted in the bureau's "determination to discredit Dr. King."

The Justice Department investigation was ordered by then-Attorney General Edward H. Levi last April after the Senate Intelligence Committee had disclosed that the FBI had engaged in a six-year surveillance of the civil rights leader that had included the use of wiretaps, electronic bugs and paid informants, and that it had attempted to discredit him by circulating stories about his personal life.

After sorting through more than 200,000 documents and interviewing approximately 40 witnesses, a team of

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lawyer-investigators headed by Justice Department attorney Michael E. Shaheen Jr. concluded that although the FBI's surveillance of King had become "twisted," the bureau's subsequent investigation of his murder in 1968 had been a "credible and thorough job."

The report is not likely to end all speculation that Ray was only one figure in a broader conspiracy to kill King. For one thing, the Justice Department investigators concede it still is not known where Ray obtained the money for the expensive equipment he bought and for the extensive traveling he did both before the assassination and in the months between the murder and his arrest.

And Atty. Gen. Griffin B. Bell himself said on a television news show last Sunday that the report left some questions unanswered.

"I think if you read the report, you could lean to either side of it," he said. "You could say that there's no evidence of a conspiracy, but you could still wonder . . . if there happened to be a conspiracy."

Even so, the release of the report at this time could further cloud the future of the Special House Committee established to investigate the deaths of President Kennedy and King, since opponents of that investigation are likely to argue that a further study of the King assassination is likely to be duplicative and unnecessary.

The investigation by Shaheen's group cost an estimated \$200,000 and involved a review not only of the so-called

"Murkin File" (Murkin being an acronym for "Murder of King"), but FBI records in 15 cities. It concluded there were several weak spots in the FBI investigation, but none serious enough to challenge its conclusions that Ray was the killer.

It said that the FBI should have worked harder to obtain information about Ray from members of his own family, who may have had contact with him after King was murdered and it agrees with some critics of the investigation that the question of where Ray obtained his money is still not fully answered.

As for a motive the report relies heavily on testimony from former prison inmates that Ray was strongly biased against blacks and had suggested repeatedly that he would be willing to kill King, particularly if someone would pay him to do it.

The report's conclusion, however is that the best available evidence is that he did it on his own, without the backing of or payment by others.