

Oral Interview,
Ransay Clark Poyers
L. B. Lickly, Austin
Texas

Interview IV April 16, 1969
Harri Baker
Place: Clark Home in
Falls Church, Va.

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B: Was this to show the federal presence?

C: It had a variety of purposes. I think the main purpose was to demonstrate our commitment and to be sure that we were doing everything that could possibly be done to apprehend the assassin. Actually, I stayed here all through the night because things were pretty restless and left, I'd say, about five o'clock in the morning. I took the third-ranking official from the FBI with me and Roger Wilkins, as I recall, and Cliff Alexander, I believe, from the White House staff at that time, and a few others. And we proceeded to Memphis, had fairly lengthy conferences with the local FBI staff, with the Chief of Police, who is a former special agent in charge of the FBI there, with people who were gathering all of the evidence information we had. Had a press conference that morning; there was of course just immense national concern. The statement I made, the critical part, had been typed out for me at my request by the assistant to the director, Cartha DeLoach, who was the third-ranking official in the FBI, because it was an investigative matter and I wanted to say the facts in language that would be consistent with the investigative status of the case and also not undercut it in any way.

At that time we felt that the man would be apprehended in less than twenty-four hours. In fact, I won a bottle of sherry, as I recall, from Mr. DeLoach in a wager that we made on whether he would be caught in twenty-four hours. I did not think we would catch him in twenty-four hours, and he thought we would. I won another bottle later on whether we'd catch him in a week. I'd rather have lost both of those, but anyway at that particular time, that Friday, we thought we would have him very soon. And Sunday, we still thought we'd have him very soon. I remember

Cartha DeLoach

The FBI was much closer to DeLoach than I knew it would

when we were flying back Friday night, probably April 5, thinking perhaps when we got on the ground, we'd find we'd caught him. It kind of reminded me of the . . . We were airborne when Mrs. Liuzzo was murdered, or at least when we got word, flying back from Montgomery, Alabama to Washington, D.C. I thought perhaps we'd get some good word, you know, similar tragic subject.

The FBI, I think, realized how much was at stake in this investigation. And in my opinion they did everything that could possibly have been done to locate the killer. I think it was their number one priority for a long time, and I doubt that they ever put so much manpower into a single investigation. They had agents in every city in the United States that just on routine inquiries, areas of town where Ray had been known to--I mean, towns where we never knew him to be, but the type of, the part of town where he would tend to hang out. They'd take pictures and other identification that was quickly accumulated. Because there was just such a very substantial body of evidence right from the beginning, you know. There were good strong fingerprints, handprints, and personal identification by people who had seen him twice when he bought the gun, when he bought the binoculars, when he checked in at the Rebel Motel, when he checked in at the little place, the little flophouse from which he fired. So there was just a tremendous amount of evidence, more than you get in the average case. But as chance would have it, he got away and even got out of the country, and the trail would grow hot and cold from time to time. Then I had a fear all through May that he was dead. There was a lot of speculation in the press that he was dead. I remember on several occasions a body would be located. One was dug up

in the sand at Puerto Vallarta, and we had to send a man down to try to get fingerprints and dental identification and other things. And they'd have to pump up the fingers so they could get a print; it turned out not to be Ray, of course. Same thing up in Pennsylvania, while we'd wait six or eight hours kind of anxious to hear. There became speculation in the press that he was dead because it was a conspiracy; the conspirators had killed him because he had been identified and they didn't want to be identified by him.

Actually, the trail picked up from Canada because he had been known to have been up in Canada. In addition, it was known that that was a good place to get passports. He was identified as having gotten a passport up there, and then his movements were followed through airlines and other ways. And the word of his capture was made public during the ceremony in St. Patrick's Cathedral on the Saturday that Bob Kennedy was buried. I was in the church, and when I came out somebody gave me word that I should call Washington immediately, and the word I got when I called Washington was that Ray had been arrested in London. I had known for about two days that we thought we were close, but it was one of those very nerve-racking things where he could get on a plane and be a long ways off real quick. We were afraid of Africa and other places. Lisbon was a place that he had been looked for pretty closely. I was kind of surprised he was back up in London when I finally got the word.

B: Did you, to your satisfaction, remove any question of a conspiracy?

C: Oh, I don't think all question of a conspiracy has been removed. The circumstances give rise to greater doubt than the circumstances surrounding President Kennedy's death, or Bob Kennedy's death. On the other hand, I

*Not so from
FBI records
He knew only
what FBI wanted
him to know*

watched all of the evidence for a long time. I mean, I'd go by the laboratory and I'd look at the physical evidence. I'd just spend hours and hours on it. I'd read all the reports, and it was a, you know, quite ^{many Mursons?} consuming interest. All of the circumstances, as I see them, tend much more strongly toward his acting alone than in conspiracy. It's not impossible that someone helped him. I think you can be pretty sure that it wasn't anyone of great power or wealth; because they could have either gotten rid of him or gotten him out of the reach of the United States. He was hopelessly floundering, he was broke, he was having to make small robberies in England, he had no money left, he couldn't make communication and contact to find a way to get to Rhodesia or other places. And it wouldn't have taken much help to get him beyond the reach of--to get him to a country that doesn't have an extradition treaty where we couldn't get hold of him.

So, you know, I think motives can be seen pretty clearly. The way he got away seems incredible, but it would be incredible if people helped him too that we hadn't picked it up. From everything you see about his life, he's a loner. He's a real loner, always has been a loner. Therefore, I'd say, that while any new evidence should be thoroughly investigated and while we should remain skeptical, that the overwhelming preponderance of the evidence today is that he acted alone. When I say today, known to me today.

B: I was going to say--let me put in here for the benefit of anyone using this in the future, that as of now, Ray's first trial has been completed with his sentencing, but without his testimony and he is now, I believe preparing an appeal.

Did you have any part to play in the disturbances in Washington and elsewhere after King's assassination?

C: Yes. While I was in Memphis on that Friday, I talked with Washington a good many times and late in the afternoon before we turned around to come back--I had also met with the family down there, Mrs. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference people--. About four o'clock in the afternoon down there, it would be five o'clock up here, I had had one conversation in which the indication had been we should bring troops in. I got back up here fairly late Friday evening, I'd say it was nine o'clock. When we flew in, I asked the pilot to circle the city, which he did fairly low two or three times, and it was one of the saddest sights you'll ever see. There were substantial fires in four or five widely scattered areas, and smoke miles to the south of Washington. The blazes were at their height probably at that time or within a few hours after that. The rumors that we had heard in the meantime from our own sources and others were just incredible about all downtown destroyed, things like that. Of course, it was bad enough, but it wasn't that bad.

So I was back on the ground and back in the office probably by ten o'clock that night and I don't believe I went home for seventy-two hours probably, I was at the office all the time. The first time I left was to--I went out and surveyed Fourteenth Street and Seventh Street on Saturday morning. I don't believe that we went to bed Friday night. I spent Saturday night there and slept three or four hours and went out to be on "Meet the Press" Sunday; and I don't think I got home until Tuesday, working, you know, not only on Washington but on the commitment of troops to Chicago which came Sunday, and Baltimore which came Sunday

afternoon, and half a dozen other places that didn't get the headlines. Pittsburgh was a place of great concern, and I must say that there Governor Shafer and Mayor Lawrence evidenced really great restraint. As best I can tell, there was substantially greater justification for a commitment of troops to Pittsburgh than to Baltimore or Chicago. While in the other two places there were insistent demands immediately for troops when they weren't really needed, particularly Baltimore. Neither the Commanding General of the National Guard nor the Army General who had been sent over as advance command potential recommended that troops go, but troops went. Pittsburgh, as an illustration, had more violence and a greater threat by far from all that we could see, did not ask for troops. Had it asked for troops as I had told them, it would have taken twenty-four hours to get troops there.

B: Were you in regular touch with Mr. Johnson during that weekend?

C: Yes.

B: Was he occupied pretty much fulltime with all of this?

C: I'd say by far the greater part of his waking hours were concerned with the combinations of call for troops and domestic violence that was going on--the riots, Dr. King's death, and what to do about that. What could be done in terms of investigation, in terms of, you know, leadership.

B: One thing that comes up in this whole general area--it came up a good deal that summer and on into the presidential campaign--you got a good deal of criticism for not prosecuting, say Stokley Carmichael, or Rap Brown, under the laws about crossing the state lines to foment riots. What was your reasoning in that area?

C: My judgment is that you can't prosecute individuals just because the public

wants you to. You have to have evidence and laws that would warrant prosecution, and we never had evidence that would support the prosecution under an interpretation of the law that was constitutionally valid. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for me and a very comfortable thing to prosecute Stokeley Carmichael, but we didn't have the evidence. I reviewed, you know, a good many files where the investigative agencies had brought forth materials that warranted review, but we never found it.

Actually, Rap Brown was prosecuted, and under a fairly peculiar and a somewhat technical statute. I think there was a clear violation. The penalty was unjust; he was given five years. What he did was he traveled in interstate commerce across state lines with a gun in his possession, when he knew, or at least the evidence showed he knew, he was under a felony indictment in the State of Maryland as a result of the riots at Cambridge. We found out about it about three o'clock Friday afternoon. He had flown back from Louisiana that night. We had to get investigations going simultaneously in Atlanta, Georgia, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, New Orleans, New York City, and Los Angeles. And by two a.m. that next Saturday morning, less than twelve hours, we had enough evidence to convince me that there was probable cause to think he violated this law. And he was arrested, and has since been tried and convicted. The case is on appeal. He was given five years for it. It's a rarely used statute, although it's a reasonable statute, although I think five years is pretty extreme.

I've got a lunch with the Community Relation Service, so I'm going to have to cut off. Is there one thing we need to wind up here?

B: I was just going to ask you if you had ever received any kind of pressure or criticism or encouragement from Mr. Johnson in this area we were just talking about. It would have been comfortable for his administration too.

C: It certainly would have, yes. I think he wondered, as most laymen in the country did, whether there wasn't a conspiracy among people and whether violence wasn't being fomented, and whether Carmichael and others weren't violating the law. He admonished me on a good many occasions to, you know, really be very aggressive and study the thing, but he certainly never urged me to bring a case that I didn't think was right.

We had the same thing with the Adam Clayton Powell case. We had letters signed by over a hundred congressmen urging prosecution, but, you know, you just can't prosecute because somebody wants to. You've got to have a case.

B: Thank you, sir.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 of Interview IV]