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In Memphis, Conflicting Paths on Dr. King's Legacy

By KEVIN SACK

Thirty years after the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed on the balcony of a Memphis motel by a sniper's shot to his jaw, thousands of pilgrims plan to gather here this weekend to try to draw meaning from his remarkable life and death.

In three days of marches, rallies, forums and concerts, an old generation of civil rights veterans and a young generation of new disciples will visit a city that the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson likens to Calvary, "the site of the crucifixion."

This "Pilgrimage to Memphis," expected to be larger in scale and substance than previous commemorations here, will feature a Friday-night service at Mason Temple Church. The audience will hear a recording of the introspective "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech that Dr. King delivered there on the night before the shooting, when he seemed to forecast his own death.

On Saturday, the 30th anniversary of the assassination, marchers will retrace the route taken by Dr. King and the striking sanitation workers whose protests against subhuman conditions brought him to Memphis. That night, they will hold a vigil at the Lorraine Motel, the site of the killing, which has been converted into a National Civil Rights Museum.

"I simply wanted to offer the opportunity for people to come and experience those places," said the Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles, the Memphis minister who stood at Dr. King's side seconds before he was killed on April 4, 1968, and who organized this weekend's events.

"The basketball tournaments and black-tie balls that we usually have are O.K.," Mr. Kyles said, "but I wanted something that was reflective of his life."

Yet as those assembling here try to reinvigorate the relevance of Dr. King's legacy, they may have difficulty drowning out the background noise generated by an intense year-long re-examination of the assassination itself.

On at least one level, that search for answers has divided civil rights advocates into camps, pitting those who believe that James Earl Ray fired the fatal shot, perhaps to collect a bounty, against those who believe that Mr. Ray was a patsy in a vast Government conspiracy to silence Dr. King's preachings against poverty and the Vietnam War.

Those who are convinced of Mr. Ray's guilt say it is time to put the lingering questions about the assassination aside and to acknowledge that the full truth may never be known. The never-ending quest to establish a conspiracy, they say, saps the movement of energy that could be better used.

"It is tragic that real progress may be held up while we debate about something that may never be proven," said Benjamin L. Hooks, the Memphis minister, lawyer and judge who was executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Julian Bond, the recently elected chairman of the N.A.A.C.P. and a longtime civil rights advocate and historian, called the continuing focus on the assassination "an irritation."

"I think for the conspiratorialists it will just go on forever," Mr. Bond added. "It will never stop."

But those who doubt Mr. Ray's culpability contend that the truth about Dr. King's death must be discovered before the totality of his story can be told, particularly if the Government had played a role. As if to reinforce that point, they have scheduled a forum here on Friday night to lay out the latest evidence of a Government conspiracy. And a national organization of conspiracy theorists, the Coalition on Political Assassinations, has scheduled a meeting here to coincide with the commemoration.

"In the Jewish and Christian tradition, you do not slay one of God's prophets without a nation reaping the consequences," said the Rev. James M. Lawson Jr., a Los Angeles minister who helped lead the 1968 sanitation workers' strike here. "You cannot revise your history in a negative fashion and expect then that you are walking on a good foundation toward a new future."

Mr. Lawson said he believed that Mr. Ray was "innocent of either a plot or

the pulling of a trigger." That is the same position taken in the last year by Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and the Kings' four children, who have been convinced by Mr. Ray's lawyer, William F. Pepper, that Mr. Ray was framed for the murder.

Underscoring the conflict between the two camps, the Kings and several prominent allies held a news conference today in front of Dr. King's crypt in Atlanta. Mrs. King appealed to President Clinton to appoint an investigative commission to examine what she characterized as "new evidence and recent developments." Like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, she said, the panel should provide immunity from prosecution to anyone with knowledge of the assassination.

"It is morally wrong to make Mr. Ray the scapegoat," she said, "when he has never had a trial and there is mounting evidence that others were involved."

Mr. Ray pleaded guilty to the assassination in 1969 and received a 99-year sentence. Three days later, he recanted, saying he had been pressured by his lawyer at the time to admit guilt in order to avoid the death penalty.

Mr. Pepper argues that Dr. King was killed in a conspiracy involving the United States Army, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, a New Orleans-based Mafia family and the Memphis police -- all with the knowledge of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The lawyer had previously promoted the story first put forth in 1993 by Loyd Jowers, a Memphis tavern owner at the time of the shooting, who has said he hired a black produce worker to assassinate Dr. King after being paid off by a Mafia operative. But in a new paperback edition of Mr. Pepper's 1995 book on the assassination, "Orders to Kill," the lawyer now hypothesizes that a Memphis policeman, now dead, was the actual killer.

Mr. Pepper's book was re-released last month by Warner Books, a division of Time Warner, which has a multimillion-dollar publishing deal with the King family. Phillip Jones, the manager of Dr. King's estate, said he had asked Warner Books to re-release the book, which sold poorly in hardcover. Anita Diggs, a spokeswoman for the publisher, said there was "no chance" that it would have done so without the Kings' request.

The calls for a new inquiry into the King assassination have taken on urgency in the last year as Mr. Ray's health has declined. Mr. Ray, a career criminal at the time of the killing, is suffering from terminal liver disease and has been hospitalized 14 times since December 1995, said Pamela Hobbins, a spokeswoman for the Tennessee Department of Corrections.

He has slipped into comas three times, most recently last month, only to surprise his relatives and lawyers by returning to consciousness. Eight months ago, a Pittsburgh surgeon who evaluated Mr. Ray's medical records gave him three to six months to live.

State officials have rejected Mr. Ray's request to be allowed to travel from

his Nashville prison to a Pittsburgh hospital to receive a liver transplant. When alert, Mr. Ray, now 70, alternates between periods of lucidity, and even dry wit, and periods of dullness and confusion, his lawyers say.

"What have I got to be happy about?" Mr. Ray asked in a recent interview. "I can't think of anything. I haven't gotten a trial yet to clear my name. I keep going in and out of comas. I can't keep doing that."

In recent weeks, the efforts to absolve Mr. Ray have taken on the thrust-and-parry quality of a public relations war.

For instance, G. Robert Blakey, the chief counsel for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, has announced that he stands strongly by the committee's 1979 conclusion that Mr. Ray was the assassin, even if he was part of a conspiracy. But former Representative Walter Fauntroy, the subcommittee chairman who presided over the King investigation, now questions that finding.

While Mr. Pepper's revised book has named a new suspect in the case, a new book by Gerald Posner, "Killing the Dream" (Random House), maintains that the evidence points conclusively toward Mr. Ray, perhaps in collusion with a small band of racists.

Last Tuesday, Mr. Pepper held a news conference in Atlanta to maintain that a retired F.B.I. agent, **Donald Wilson**, had concealed evidence found in the search of Mr. Ray's car and hidden it for 30 years.

Mr. Pepper argued that the evidence -- two slips of paper with handwritten notes -- verified the existence of "Raul," the shadowy gunrunner who Mr. Ray has long said guided his movements before the assassination. The next day, the F.B.I. dismissed the account as a "total fabrication" and said Mr. **Wilson** had not taken part in the search of the car.

Last Friday, the district attorney in Memphis released a report rebutting Mr. Pepper's claims about Raul and Mr. Jowers, the Memphis tavern owner. The Kings responded with today's news conference, at which Andrew J. Young, a former King lieutenant, former Mayor of Atlanta and former chief delegate to the United Nations, criticized the Memphis prosecutors for dismissing Mr. Jowers's claims without interviewing him. Mr. Jowers has refused to cooperate with prosecutors without a promise of immunity.

Mr. Kyles, the minister, who holds Mr. Ray responsible, said the debate over the assassination might create "some minor distraction" from the weekend's events here. The minister said he would prefer that participants take note of the racial progress made since 1968 in Memphis, where the black population has grown to 55 percent from 39 percent.

The city that drew national attention 30 years ago for forcing its black sanitation workers to sit in the backs of their trucks with maggots and rats now has a black mayor, a black congressman, a black police chief and a black school superintendent.

"I went to jail in 1962 for riding in the front of the bus," Mr. Kyles said.
"Now the chairman of the trustees board of my church is the general manager of that same bus company."

But Mrs. King said her family could not move on.

"I realize that many people would rather forget about the assassination of my husband, and for America to focus on working toward the goals that defined his dream for America," she said. "But I feel strongly that you can't heal the scars of racial violence without exposing them to the light of truth."

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