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ANALYSIS: New 'leads' in King case invariably go nowhere

Do the never-ending claims of revelations concerning the April 4, 1968, assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. leave you a bit confused? What should we make of the assertion that U.S. Army military intelligence --- and President Lyndon B. Johnson --- were somehow involved? Why is Jack Ruby, who killed Lee Harvey Oswald two days after Oswald assassinated President John F. Kennedy in 1963, now turning up in the King assassination story? And what about former FBI agent Donald Wilson's claim that notes he pilfered from James Earl Ray's automobile and then concealed for 30 years contain a significant telephone number.

Maybe you saw the ABC "Turning Point" documentary with Forrest Sawyer that demolished the Army intelligence allegations. Or perhaps you watched CBS' "48 Hours" broadcast with Dan Rather last week, which refuted the claims that some fictional character named "Raoul," acting in cahoots with Ruby, was responsible for both the Kennedy and the King assassinations.

Don't worry. All of this actually is easier to follow than you may think, so long as you keep a relatively simple score card. All you need to do is remember the "three R's" --- Ray, "Raoul" and Ruby --- and also distinguish the "three P's" --- William F. Pepper, Gerald Posner and Marc Perrusquia.

Ray you know. Now 70 years old and seriously ill, Ray pleaded guilty to King's slaying in 1969 but has spent the past 29 years trying to withdraw his plea.

"Raoul" is a mythical character whom Ray has long claimed directed his travels and actions in the weeks preceding King's murder. Only in 1995 did Ray for the first time positively identify a particular photo as the "Raoul" he claims to have worked for in 1968.

Ruby was jailed following his nationally televised Nov. 24, 1963, murder of Lee Harvey Oswald and died in prison on Jan. 3, 1967.

Why would notes purportedly found in Ray's car in April 1968 contain the 1963 phone number of Ruby's Dallas strip joint? Is this evidence of a massive conspiracy, as Ray's attorney says, or of document forgery and fraud? FBI documents detailing the search of Ray's car list five agents who took part, and Donald Wilson wasn't one of them. Two of the named agents, including Jack Beverstein of Valdosta, confirm that Wilson had no role in the car search. An FBI spokesman called Wilson's claims a "total fabrication."

Pepper is Ray's lawyer and the author of a 1995 book, "Orders to Kill," which was recently reissued in an expanded paperback edition by Warner Books "in association with" Intellectual Properties Management, which represents the King family and the King estate. IPM's president, Phillip Jones, is listed as "executive producer" of Pepper's new paperback, and Dexter Scott King, King's youngest son, wrote a three-page foreword. In it he "wholeheartedly" recommended William

Pepper's "well-reasoned" work and "credible answers." Warner Books publicist Anita Diggs has told reporters that publication of Pepper's paperback is part of the 1997 multibillion-dollar deal between Time Warner Inc. and the King estate.

Pepper's contentions about an Army intelligence role in King's murder, and particularly about an eight-man "sniper team" supposedly headed by a deceased National Guard officer named Billy Ray Eidson, were destroyed by the reporting of ABC News. Forrest Sawyer, during a filmed interview with Pepper, offered to introduce him to Eidson. "Well, do you think it would serve any purpose?" Pepper asked. When Eidson appeared, Pepper told him, "I would never have written about you if I had any idea you were alive." Dead people can't sue for libel, but after the ABC broadcast Eidson filed a \$15 million damage claim against Pepper in a South Carolina state court. The case is pending.

A thorough look at Ray

Gerald Posner is the author of a new book on the King assassination, "Killing the Dream." Posner is a well-credentialed lawyer; among his previous books is "Case Closed," which most serious journalists and historians regard as far and away the best volume on the assassination of JFK.

Posner's "Killing the Dream" is a state-of-the-art review and reconsideration of everything that's known about Ray and the events that led up to King's assassination. Ray's individual and family biography was comprehensively researched by the late author George McMillan. Posner, who's had full use of McMillan's files, has been more painstaking than any previous writer on Ray and the King case.

That's not to say, however, that there's anything truly startling in Posner's conclusions. His bottom line is the same one that earlier probes, including the 1978 House Select Committee on Assassinations, reached: "There is no doubt that James Earl Ray shot and killed Martin Luther King, Jr."

The crucial questions, of course, are what motivated Ray and who may have encouraged or helped him. Here, too, Posner's bottom line is the same as previous conclusions: James Earl Ray, like two of his brothers, John and Jerry, was an out-and-out racist. But it was expectation of financial reward, not race hatred, that led Ray to purchase a high-powered rifle and begin stalking King.

Where did Ray get such a financial expectation? Probably through one of his brothers, who most likely had learned of a reported \$50,000 bounty for King's murder offered by a wealthy, right-wing St. Louis-area lawyer, John H. Sutherland.

Motivation for murder

The Sutherland-bounty hypothesis was accepted 20 years ago by the House assassination committee, but with Sutherland and one other possibly crucial figure already dead, congressional investigators were at a dead end. What remained were simply the three Ray brothers, and Posner too concludes that "a crude family plot" aimed at fulfilling the St. Louis "contract" is the likeliest explanation of James Earl Ray's motive.

Marc Perrusquia is a reporter for the Memphis Commercial Appeal whose efforts rival and complement Posner's. Perrusquia's most important recent reporting, which postdates the printing of Posner's new book, concerns a March 1969 tape recording of Ray's brother Jerry telling Kent Courtney of New Orleans, publisher of the "The Conservative Journal," that "there was definitely a conspiracy." Courtney contacted the FBI, but the bureau did not follow through and have Courtney wear a "wire" to see what more Jerry Ray might say. The FBI's failure to probe aggressively the 1968 activities of John and Jerry Ray was its worst shortcoming in the investigation of King's murder.

"If there had been anyone else involved but (Ray's) family, he would have given them up in a minute," former House committee investigator

Conrad Baetz told Ferrusquia. But the Ray brothers "wouldn't give up each other. And that's the only reason why 'Raoul' has survived for the last 30 years."

The myth of "Raoul" not only has survived, but it has also done tragic harm to one completely innocent man and his family. Posner's "Killing the Dream" recounts their awful experience at the hands of conspiracy theorist investigators. That story is the most powerful and compelling portion of Posner's book.

That family's tragedy began when a Houston woman, Glenda Grabow, became convinced by the investigators collaborating with Pepper that a man she had once known as "Dago," and whom she was certain was both the assassin of John F. Kennedy and a good friend of Ruby's, also used the name "Raul," a different spelling than the one Ray first used.

Memphis investigator John Billings recounted to Posner what happened next. "I was the one who called Pepper when we heard what Glenda said. I told him, 'I have good news and bad news for you. We have found Raoul. That's the good news.' "

" 'What's the bad news?' asked Pepper. 'We can tie him into the Kennedy assassination a lot better than the Martin Luther King assassination.' 'Oh, no!' Pepper yelled. 'We can't say that. That would ruin everything.' "

Unfortunately, it didn't. Grabow wasn't sure of "Dago" or "Raul's" last name, but maybe it was the same as that of a man she thought was "Raul's" cousin. An investigator used "Raul" and the cousin's last name in a computer search of U.S. telephone listings and came up with two matches. One was deemed too old to fit Grabow's description. The investigators began a relentless probe of the other, a New York resident who had emigrated from Portugal in 1961 and worked for General Motors from 1962 until retirement in 1992. They obtained a copy of his 1961 immigration photo and presented it to Ray, who positively identified the photo as the "Raoul" he had supposedly worked for in 1968.

Case of the wrong Raoul

When the retired GM worker learned what was happening, he told Posner in a 1997 interview, he laughed. "I didn't take it very seriously because it made no sense to me. I was not the person, so it was a mistake, and would all be over with. That's what I thought, at least."

Wrong. Pepper stepped up the pressure and served "Raul" with a court summons. Soon "Raul's" real name was leaked to journalists, and camera crews turned up at his home.

"My whole life was in chaos. I couldn't go into my own back yard or walk around town. We actually thought of moving back to Portugal, but my wife and I did not want to leave our grandchildren."

When GM employment records conclusively proved "Raul" couldn't have been in Memphis in 1968 or in Dallas in 1963, a judge blocked Pepper's attempts to drag him to Memphis. Ray's identification of the photo was "a critical turning point," writes Posner. "Now that Raul turns out to be an innocent man completely unconnected to the case, Ray's long-standing alibi falls apart" even further.

But that breakthrough took an enormous toll on the innocent "Raul." "I didn't think this could happen in America," he told Posner. "When Dexter King said (on live national television) that I had been found, my wife and I were shocked. This will never end for me, I fear. There will always be someone crazy out there who will believe it. Doesn't the truth matter any more in this country? Who will give me back my life?"

Dexter King, in his foreword to Pepper's conspiracy book, recalls how his father "had a deep faith that truth and justice would one day triumph."

Indeed, Martin Luther King Jr. often preached that "No lie can live forever." But if his faith is ever to prevail, then all the lies that distort the truth about his death must be not only discredited, but also recanted.

David J. Garrow, presidential distinguished professor at Emory University, is the author of "The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr." and a biography of King, "Bearing the Cross."

Graphic :

Photo illustration: The three R's A King investigation score card should include these names:

James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, but has since recanted.

Some say he's responsible for the deaths of King and John F. Kennedy; others say he doesn't exist.

James Earl Ray's attorney claims a connection between his client and Kennedy's assassin.

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