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Ray Wobbles From

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... An Opinion

Washington — The room was silent, but every eye was on him. It was 3.30 P.M. Friday. James Earl Ray stuffed his papers into the brown briefcase. Then, cordoned by husky U.S. marshals, a gray-faced, tight-lipped Ray went up the steps and out the heavy door.

You recognized the ritual. Ray looked like an exhausted, beaten fighter being led from the arena, trailed by a disgruntled manager — in this case, Mark Lane — ready to wail, "We wuz robbed."

This had been James Earl Ray's title shot. This had been his chance to prove he had not murdered Martin Luther King Jr., or at least that he deserved a new trial. He lost it. If not knocked out, Ray left the ring terribly mauled.

It had been three days of high drama and low comedy. There were moments of Perry Mason-style shock. At other times the brawl between a floundering House Select Committee on Assassinations, a shrewdly evasive Ray and a screaming, sneering Lane had the class of, well, your basic Philadelphia City Council meeting.

But in the end, when Ray made his exit in that loping, country-boy gait, he left a single impression heavy in the air:

That James Earl Ray shot the civil rights leader in 1968, that he did it alone, and that he escaped alone.

Sure, conspiracy theories will always abound, and Ray may add surprises if he testifies, again in November as scheduled. But as one committee member, Rep. Bob Edgar (D-Pa), said, "I'm not sure he's going to want to come back."

Not that the committee had covered itself with glory. It made one near-fatal mistake, as we'll see. But Ray left in frustration, shoulders sagging, defeated, for two reasons: His credibility had been undercut by dozens of contradictions, and his main alibi — that he had not been on the murder scene at 6.01 P.M. on April 4, 1968, and that the shadowy

Ring, the Decision Thumbs Down

"Raoul" was a true assassin — was all but shattered.

If Raoul was not fantasy, this was Ray's moment to give him flesh. Last name? Ray says he never asked. Appearance? Blond, red or black hair. "If I had identified him," Ray said almost plaintively, "Raoul might have testified against me." He suggested Raoul kept his fingerprints off the murder rifle by using "Band-Aids on his fingers."

"How could Raoul wipe his fingerprints off the rifle and keep yours on?" asked Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), the most damaging inquisitor.

A defiant Ray said if the committee could prove he was in Atlanta on April 1, "I'll take responsibility for the King case right here on TV." Even the showboat Lane looked startled. Stokes quickly produced an Atlanta laundry ticket dated April 1, 1968, with Ray's alias. "That's a mistake," mumbled Ray.

The solemn Stokes built a case that Ray had been stalking King, shirt-like, from L.A. to Selma to Atlanta to the Memphis kill. "I didn't know King existed," Ray said, incredulously.

So it went, Ray ducking, twisting with a jailhouse lawyer's cunning, the committee damning him with documents, while Lane screeched sarcasm. But the main blow was delivered after Ray left the room. It served to puncture Ray's 10-year-old alibi that he had been in a nearby filling station, servicing his Mustang, when King was gunned down.

Enter Dale Cowden, a stocky, hoarse-voiced man in a flowery shirt. Cowden had recited a tale, printed in the National Enquirer and a Mark Lane book, that he had seen Ray and his Mustang in a Memphis Texaco station at the fatal moment.

Now, under Edgar's questioning, Cowden said flatly: "It's completely false. I made it up. I was in Port Witches, Tex., 400 miles away." Laughter exploded when Cowden said of Lane: "He bought it hook, line and sinker."

But the congressmen nearly threw away the ball game. They made a serious goof when Rep. Sam Devine (R-Ohio) read aloud testimony from a former British policeman, Alexander Eist, that while guarding Ray after his London arrest, he heard Ray boast of

killing King ("He was proud of it"). The rep said he threw away the rifle, and that the racial murder would "make him a hero."

It was a dumb move. Nobody had checked Eist's background. Mark Lane gave the congressmen deserved hell. He shouted that Eist had been "dismissed in disgrace" from his British police for perjury and robbery. Lameley, the committee said it would investigate. For once Lane, the abrasive buffoon, had scored.

Well, two mysteries survived the committee's finances on his odyssey after the King slaying, and the FBI's curious role before and after the assassination. But after three weeks of tedium and tumult, one conclusion seemed inescapable:

James Earl Ray, this embittered gray wolf, was the triggerman. The Conspiracy Industry, which thrives on labyrinthine plots, may have to turn to honest work.

Sen. Grady's opinion column appears Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.