

LES
PAYNE



Was the FBI Out To Kill Dr. King?

TRUTH PRESSED to Earth," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used to say often, "will rise again." If this is so, we should expect that the truth of Dr. King's assassination will one day rise from the dust where, for more than two decades, it has been crushed underfoot. Only a flabby credulity would allow one to believe that James Earl Ray, a rather inefficient recidivist, acting alone, could have coordinated that dastardly moment in Memphis.

This is not to say that Ray was not involved, or even that he was not on the trigger, but rather that he did not, without skilled assistance, assassinate Dr. King.

With Oliver Stone's "JFK" packing them into the movie houses, it is open season for conspiracy theories. However, just because Stone is wrong and the conspiracy theorists are loony doesn't mean that Lee Harvey Oswald and Ray were lone gunmen.

I first took professional interest in the King assassination in 1975, after disclosures by the Senate intelligence committee that the FBI had followed the non-violent civil rights leader over a five-year period. Despite this, the bureau would have us believe that J. Edgar Hoover's men were nowhere near the Lorraine Hotel on April 4, 1968.

Many journalists charged with covering the assassination believed just that, and still do today. These reporters grew up watching Efram Zimbalist Jr., and believe like naive children that FBI agents, in their dark suits and white socks, were dedicated servants of truth, justice and fair play. Evidence to the contrary since those far off days has been piled up to the sky.

Laying aside the conspiracy theorists, several well-meaning public officials, as well as dedicated professors, scholars and free-lance citizens, have worked hard to move the King case toward resolution. Prof. David Garrow broke new ground with his first book on King entitled, "The FBI & Martin Luther King Jr." Others such as Harold Weisberg, with "Frame-Up," and professors David R. Wrone and Philip H. Melanson have contributed valuable analyses.

Hoover's objective was to eliminate King as an ef-

fective, albeit nonviolent black leader and to replace him with an Uncle Tom of Hoover's choosing. Some have identified Hoover's substitute choice as Samuel Pierce, also known as "Silent Sam," who served in President Ronald Reagan's cabinet as secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

Garro fully documents the FBI's attempts, led by Hoover and his number-two man, William Sullivan, to discredit King. Hoover's massive operations produced hundreds of thousands of pages of documents, buttressed with transcripts of hours of telephone taps and information from electronic bugging devices.

The spying cost millions of dollars in equipment and manpower. And this at a time when the bureau was allowing organized crime to crisscross national and state lines as it delivered heroin and other poison to those King worked to save.

Hoover kept up his character-assassination campaign for more than five years, placing King under constant surveillance, and harassing his friends and associates. Even after King's murder, Hoover considered having a book published to discredit the civil rights leader's widow, and the FBI planted news stories to tarnish King's image after his death. Seldom have the awesome powers of the FBI been so abused.

Most of the inquiries into King's assassination have had to rely on the files of the very bureau that had worked so diligently to discredit — if not eliminate — him. Even the House Select Committee on Assassinations was unduly influenced by the federal agency. One of its firmest conclusions, not surprisingly, was that neither the FBI nor any other government agency was in any way involved in King's murder.

The committee concluded, however, that a conspiracy was involved. A \$50,000 bounty had reportedly been posted on King's life by a racist St. Louis group, including a real estate developer and a wealthy industrialist. This conclusion, thin on hard evidence and lacking any government connection, is dismissed as myth by Melanson, in his book "The Murkin Conspiracy." "There are two goals regarding Dr. King's assassination," said Melanson. "Historical truth and justice. Presently, we have achieved neither."

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, OCTOBER 11, 1967

SP