After 24 years, King's

Expert: Ray isn't guilty

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By TERESA FRANKLIN
News-Post Staff

Local author Harold Weisberg will greet the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday with his conviction of more than 20 years: The wrong man is imprisoned for the assassination of a dream.

"Just imagine how awful it is. You have a great American man honored with the national observance of his birthday. He's been killed and there has never been a trial to determine whether or not the accused was guilty," said Mr. Weisberg at his home on Old Receiver Road shortly before the holiday.

The man who pleaded guilty to King's 1968 assassination, James Earl Ray, is serving a 99-year sentence and still fights to have his side of the story heard fully in court.

In his new book, "Who Killed Martin Luther King?," Ray claims he should go down in history as no more than a petty criminal.

Mr. Weisberg, 78, agrees. He makes his case in his book "Frame-Up: The Martin Luther King-James Earl Ray Case," published in 1971, which maintains Ray was framed by a criminal gang that conspired to assassinate King.

Maybe gang members murdered King under contract or because of their political beliefs, Mr. Weisberg said. But the author has little doubt that the gang used Ray so they could somehow frame him for the crime.

"The crime is unsolved," said Mr. Weisberg, author of six books contending that the assassination of John F. Kennedy also remains

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Staff photo by Mark Crummett

Americans are becoming morally bankrupt, the Rev. Luke J. Robinson declared during a memorial service for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday.

absence still felt

U.S. has lost its morality since leader's assassination

By SAM HANKIN
News-Post Staff

America has slid into a moral cesspool since the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Rev. Luke J. Robinson said at a ceremony Sunday to celebrate the birthday of the slain civil rights leader.

"It has been 24 years since this nation lost . . . a moral leader silenced in the spring of 1968. And it was a voice that has not been heard since," the Rev. Robinson said.

Seventy-five people attended the ceremony, held at the Quinn Chapel AME Church on East Third Street. The Frederick County NAACP-sponsored service featured a gospel choir and brief remarks by NAACP president Lord D. Nickens. But the Rev. Robinson, Quinn Chapel's pastor, received a standing ovation for his remarks about the decline of American society.

"He left a void," the Rev. Robinson said of King's death. "We need more people with his conviction. There ought to be some things worth living for that you are ready to die for," he said.

King "was a drum major for peace . . . for rights," the Rev. Robinson said.

Instead, "when I think of what has happened in the time since" King's assasination, "my heart is saddened," he said. "We have lost the vision."

The Rev. Robinson said America has lost its morality, citing statistics to support his contention. "More than 23 million Americans are illiterate." In addition, the Rev. Robinson said, "African-American boys are killing each other over drug transactions."

"The problem in America is not the loss of jobs or the lack of money . . . but the loss of moral direction," he said.

As additional evidence of "a moral breakdown in this country," the Rev. Robinson pointed to several news accounts, including one about a mother who killed her child on Christmas Eve.

"When you read the newspaper, some things should shock you to death."

The Rev. Robinson also criticized the showing of a painting showing a nude President Bush at the Delaplaine Visual Arts Center.

"No one deserves to be handled this way. I don't care if it's David Duke," the Rev. Robinson said, adding that he agreed with efforts to cut state aid for the center. "We have homeless and people without a job and they want half a million dollars to put trash on display," he said.

"This is the most damnable thing I've ever seen."

"If you want to honor Martin Luther King Jr.," the Rev. Robinson said, "then go back to churches and pray for what's happening in our land."

He said that the country needs "to practice love, to reach out to the homeless . . . to stand up for righteousness" to reverse the moral decline.

In addition, he said blacks need to bolster their self-esteem. One way to do that, he said, is by devoting more attention to them. "African-Americans have a problem with low self-esteem," the Rev. Robinson said. "We've been stripped down to nothing like George Bush."

"What we need in America is to save our children," he said. The Rev. Robinson urged both black and white people to do so by relying "upon the African-American tradition of the extended family."

Expert

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unsolved," said Mr. Weisberg, author of six books contending that the assassination of John F. Kennedy also remains unsolved.

On April 4, 1968, King was shot once by a rifle as he stood on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn. Ray was arrested in London two months later.

Convinced his attorney was unprepared to defend him, Ray pleaded guilty on March 10, 1969, Mr. Weisberg said. When Ray recanted later, prosecutors were unwilling to reopen the investigation, he said.

"They had no idea 'who done it,' " he said. "They had a bird in the hand and they were not about to beat the bushes."

But bent upon proving the authorities failed to give the country with no closure for Mr. King's death, Mr. Weisberg and defense attorneys for Ray set out to prove his innocence, Mr. Weisberg said.

They dug through official records, newspaper libraries and found witnesses. Their persistence won Ray in October 1974 a two-week evidentiary hearing, a civil hearing to determine whether Ray would be given a chance to prove he was entitled to a new criminal trial, the author said.

To this day, Mr. Weisberg is convinced the evidence presented at the hearing in Memphis proved Ray was not the trigger man and wasn't involved in the King assassination conspiracy.

But Ray's contentions, including the one that his attorney was unprepared to defend him, failed to persuade the judge to grant a criminal hearing in the case, Mr. Weisberg said.

"I've got the proof that would stack up in court if I could get it there," he said. He contends that the gang members kept their identities secret from Ray and allowed him to deal only with a middleman who called himself "Raoul."

Since he conducted the extensive interviews with Ray for the hearing, the two men have had only casual contact.

He said he hasn't had a chance to read "Who Killed Martin Luther King?," but then he doubts it will add any new to the King-Kennedy files that line his basement walls.

Book or no book, this holiday and many more will probably pass with the case left unsolved and Americans left in the dark about one of the most tumultuous times in history, he said.

"I don't know of any way it can be solved," Mr. Weisberg said. "It's a great tragedy this crime remains unsolved and the American people are left . . . without the slightest idea who really killed the black messiah or why."

Ray insists he's innocent

By CHRISTOPHER SULLIVAN
Associated Press Writer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — James Earl Ray will awaken on today's Martin Luther King holiday in his cell, a concrete cube with no bars and a 4-inch-wide glass slit for a window. Then, he'll go to work.

Behind 12-foot razor wire fences at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, the man serving 99 years as King's assassin will resume his quest to prove he is innocent, a claim he repeats in a new autobiography.

Once, Ray sought escape by hiding in a bread truck. He now combs the prison law library for a legal way out. A string of lawsuits seek investigative documents to build his case for a trial. He is shopping for a judge who will order one.

Once in court, he vows to prove he was a dupe of a mysterious middleman named "Raoul" in one of the century's most spectacular murder conspiracies.

Ray's new book, "Who Killed Martin Luther King?," makes a case that he was coerced into pleading guilty and that he was never anything more than "a two-bit career criminal."

"Why," he writes, "if official America is so firmly convinced that I pulled the trigger of the rifle that killed Martin Luther King, is there so much reluctance to allow me to have a trial and fully air the evidence?"

King's civil rights crusade won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. In early April 1968 he went to Memphis, where sanitation workers, most of them black, were striking for better pay and an end to discrimination.

He stirred a crowd with a speech that's memorized by children now, declaring, "I've been to the mountaintop." After spending much of April 4 planning a demonstration, he stepped onto his balcony at the Lorraine Motel.

At 6:01 p.m., a single rifle shot struck King in the head.

Investigators following leads across continents arrested James Earl Ray in London in June. The following March, Ray pleaded guilty to the killing.

In his new book, Ray calls the court proceeding a sham, but he registered the same sentiment before he left the courtroom.

Then-U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark had said immediately after the shooting that a lone assassin killed King; no conspiracy existed. When Ray pleaded guilty, he told the judge: "The only thing that I have to say is that I can't agree with Mr. Clark."

Nine years later, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded a conspiracy did exist. Its 1978 report, based on a two-year investigation, said Ray shot King and that a St. Louis-based conspiracy of bigots was behind the killing.

The question is posed in capital letters on his book's cover: Who killed Martin Luther King? But what is Ray's answer?

The book's 285 pages only hint at answers: Organized crime? Shadowy individuals in Louisiana? The FBI?

Many who have interviewed Ray sense that he's hiding some of what he knows.

Researcher Philip Melanson believes several people helped Ray before and after the assassination, but he was kept at arm's length by the principal conspirators.

"He could have been recruited by people who were on the fringe," said Mr. Melanson, who teaches at Southeastern Massachusetts University. "I don't know that he was entrusted with enough information ... that he could provide specifics that would solve the case."

At the prison, Ray was asked if he was revealing only enough to tantalize the public and get back into court but not enough to endanger himself by giving away identities.

"No, I don't think there's anything to that," said Ray, now 63.

He is forthright about his guilty plea. He entered it, he says, only after being subjected to solitary confinement for months in a cell with constant surveillance by closed-circuit TV cameras and bright lights kept on 24 hours a day.

He details longstanding charges that his lawyers compromised his defense so they could win lucrative publishing contracts for writing about the case. And he tries to discredit witnesses used against him.

Whether his book holds significant revelations, Ray said, "I think the main thing now is that a lot of people are starting to demand a new trial — Jesse Jackson and people like that."

Besides the Rev. Jackson, at least two groups in Washington are lobbying for the sealed files to be opened.

"There's nothing in those files that would change the course of American history," Mr. Stokes responded by phone from his Capitol office.

Ray scoffs: "You're supposed to trust politicians? That's like me saying, 'Trust me.'

"Hell, look at the records! They've got the same evidence today as they had 20-some years ago."

A television commentator Ray heard recently spoke of the lingering doubts about whether Lee Harvey Oswald alone killed President Kennedy: " 'If Oswald had just lived,' he said, 'they'd have had a trial and it would have cleared this all up, and the American people would have been satisfied.'

"Well, in my case, I'm still living," Ray said. "This could have been solved years ago. Still could be. I have serious doubts that it will."