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King's killer Ray, 70, goes to his grave denying guilt

By WILLIAM NEUMAN

James Earl Ray, the man who killed Martin Luther King Jr., died yesterday, 30 years after the assassination of the revered civil-rights leader.

Ray, 70, took his secrets to the grave — sealing the mystery surrounding the notorious crime to which he originally confessed, only to then swear his innocence and seek to clear himself.

Like the John F. Kennedy assassination, King's killing spurred a raft of conspiracy theories. Last year, Ray won the support of King's family, who called for a new trial and a federal probe to prove Ray was not the triggerman.

JAMES EARL RAY
Retracted his confession.

Ray, who was serving a 99-year sentence for King's murder, died of kidney failure and complications from liver disease at Memorial Hospital in Nashville, Tenn.

"This is a tragedy, not only for Mr. Ray and his family but also for the entire nation," said King's widow, Coretta Scott King.

"America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new revelations about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., as well as establishing the facts concerning Mr. Ray's innocence."

William Gibbons, lead state prosecutor in Memphis, said: "I believe the history books will accurately record that James Earl Ray was the killer of Dr. King."

King, 39, was shot to death on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4, 1968.

Ray — whose fingerprints were found on the murder weapon — fled the country and was arrested in London three months later.

He was brought back to the United States and, in March 1969, pleaded guilty to avoid the death penalty.

But almost immediately, he changed his mind, declared his innocence and, saying he was coerced into making the guilty plea, tried to get a new trial. His requests were repeatedly refused, and over decades of legal maneuvering, his conviction was upheld in court seven times.

Ray's insistence that he didn't kill King fueled intense speculation.

He claimed he was a patsy, set up by a shadowy gun dealer in Montreal known only as Raoul — but the man was never found.

Many civil-rights leaders believed from the beginning that Ray wasn't smart enough to carry out the killing and his escape alone — and they suspected the involvement of others, including government officials who hated King and his movement for racial equality.

Finally, last year, King's family came out in support

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of Ray's quest for a new trial.

King's son, Dexter, held a jailhouse meeting with the man imprisoned for his father's death.

After Ray told him he didn't kill his father, Dexter said, "My family believes you."

Earlier this month, King's widow accused the government of covering up the truth about the assassination, and called for a special Truth Commission that could grant immunity to witnesses and get to the bottom of the mystery.

Others have insisted on a conspiracy while not buying into Ray's tales of innocence.

"I am convinced that Ray was involved in the assassination of Dr. King, but he did not act alone," said the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was with King when he was shot.

Gerald Posner, the author of a new book on the case called "Killing the Dream," claims Ray "takes with him to the grave the last little secrets about this crime."

Posner believes Ray was the triggerman — and that he was helped by members of his family, although not the government.

"It makes it unlikely that any of the co-conspirators will ever come to trial, and he gets the satisfaction of conning the King family into granting him an absolution before he died," Posner said.