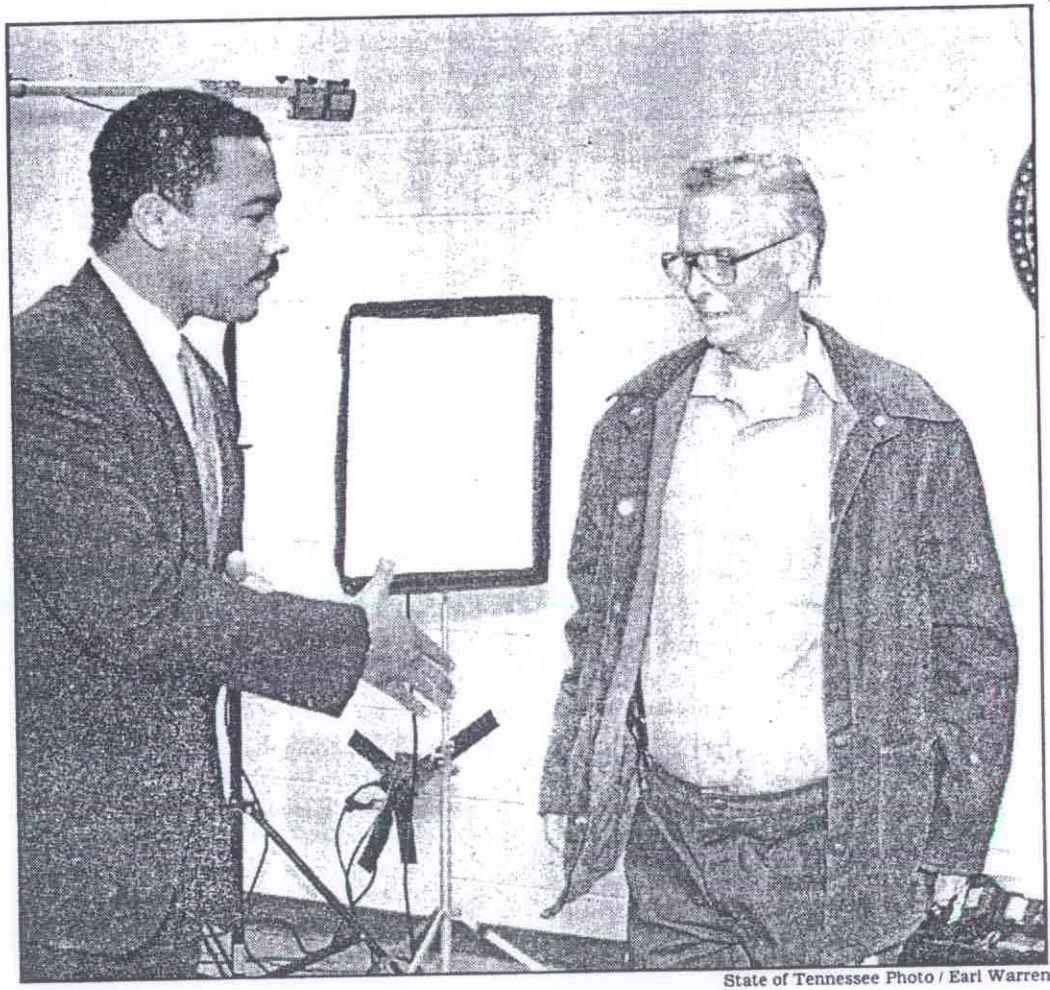
AP Photo



State of Tennessee Photo / Earl Warren

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., left, in 1968; in 1997, his son, Dexter King, right, extends hand to convicted assassin James Earl Ray after meeting.

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Questions Live

James Earl Ray dead at 70; his role in King death still debated

By Michael Dorman

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

James Earl Ray, a penny-ante hoodlum convicted as the assassin of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., died yesterday in Nashville, Tenn. He carried to the grave many unanswered questions prompted by his initial confession that he fired the fatal shot, his later recantation and a myriad of conspiracy theories surrounding the 30-year-old case.

Ray's death at 70 in Nashville Columbia Memorial Hospital followed prolonged treatment for liver and kidney ailments. He never delivered the deathbed confession sought by civil rights leaders and others.

Donel Campbell, commissioner of the Tennessee Correction Department, said a routine autopsy probably would be conducted.

Funeral arrangements for Ray weren't announced immediately, but earlier this year his brother Jerry said Ray wished to be cremated and have his ashes flown to Ireland.

King's widow, Coretta Scott King, who backed Ray's effort for a trial, said in Atlanta: "This is a tragedy not only for Mr. Ray and his family but also for the entire nation. 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."

Coretta King said the family's efforts for a new investigation would continue. She met with Attorney General Janet Reno in Washington earlier this month seeking creation of a federal investigative commission with the power to subpoena witnesses, grant immunity and file charges against suspected conspirators. "We are more determined than ever to find the truth about this tragedy," Coretta King said in a statement yesterday.

But Memphis District Attorney General Bill Gibbons, whose office prosecuted Ray, saw his death far differently. "James Earl Ray's death brings proper closure to the killing of Dr. King," he said. "This country can rest comfortably knowing that the person who killed Dr. King is finally dead. We were always convinced Ray was a lone killer. For those people who believe in conspiracies, we'll never be able to assure them."

Ray's chief lawyer, London-based William Pepper, accused Tennessee officials of "barbarism" for refusing to release Ray when he became seriously ill. "He could have died in the bosom of his family," Pepper said.

On the night of April 4, 1968, King was killed by a single rifle shot while standing on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn. Investigators concluded the shot had come from a bathroom window of a boarding house that backed up to the motel.

Investigators found that Ray, a prison escapee, had rented a room in the boardinghouse, had been in the bathroom about the time of the murder, had left fingerprints in the bathroom and elsewhere in the house and had left behind a pair of binoculars bearing his prints. Moreover, a .30-06 Remington rifle identified as the murder weapon bore his palm print. A transistor radio found alongside it was imprinted with Ray's convict number from a Missouri prison.

Ray was arrested in London July 8 while try-

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AP Photo

Ray, handcuffed and wearing bulletproof vest, is taken to jail cell in 1968.

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ing to board a plane for Brussels. Returned to the United States for prosecution, he hired as his defense attorney the Houston criminal lawyer Percy Foreman. His clientele had included more than 1,000 persons accused of murder, and only 57 had served as much as a day of prison time. Foreman said he told Ray that even his courtroom skills could not beat this case and that the only way he could escape execution was to plead guilty. Ray did so on March 10, 1969, and received a 99-year sentence.

But almost immediately afterward he began claiming that he was not guilty — that he had been duped into participating in an assassination conspiracy, had not fired the fatal shot and had been coerced by Foreman into entering the guilty plea.

In a 1993 interview with Newsday he said: "After you have been asked the question a thousand times, it becomes humiliating to have to answer it again. But, no, I did not kill Martin Luther King."

The road leading to international notoriety began for Ray in the Mississippi River town of Alton, Ill., where he was born into a family of minor outlaws on March 10, 1928. His father, George Ellis Ray, had been convicted of robbery in 1925 and sent to prison in Iowa, but he escaped and spent the rest of his life as a fugitive. James Earl Ray told of having other criminal relatives, including an uncle who was a cattle rustler and forger. His brother Jerry has served time for burglary and theft.

The family moved during Ray's childhood to Ewing, Mo., where school records described him as "shiftless" and said he "violated all regulations" and was "seldom if ever polite." In the eighth grade, when he was 15, he dropped out of school. Still, Jerry Ray insists his brother always wanted to be "somebody" and enlisted in the Army at 17 to become eligible for GI loans that would enable him to make something of himself.

"But by the time he came out of the Army, he had changed," Jerry Ray said in a recent interview with Newsday. "He still wanted to be somebody, but not somebody legitimate."

James Earl Ray's legal problems began, in fact, in the Army, where he served 3 months in the stockade for being drunk, fighting and resisting arrest. Ray received an honorable discharge in 1948, but it specified the cause was "ineptness and lack of adaptability to military service."

Then began a string of amateurish crimes in civilian life — small burglaries, robberies and forgery of stolen postal money orders. His first imprisonment came when he traveled to the West Coast, was arrested in Los Angeles for burglary and served 8 months. Then he was arrested on several vagrancy charges, followed by 2 years in the Illinois State Prison at Pontiac for the armed robbery of a Chicago taxi driver.

In 1955, federal Judge Charles Evans Whittaker,

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Michael Dorman, who has written extensively about the King assassination and interviewed Ray in prison, will answer questions about the case online at newsday.com's Soapbox Forum. To post your questions, go to http://www.newsday.com.

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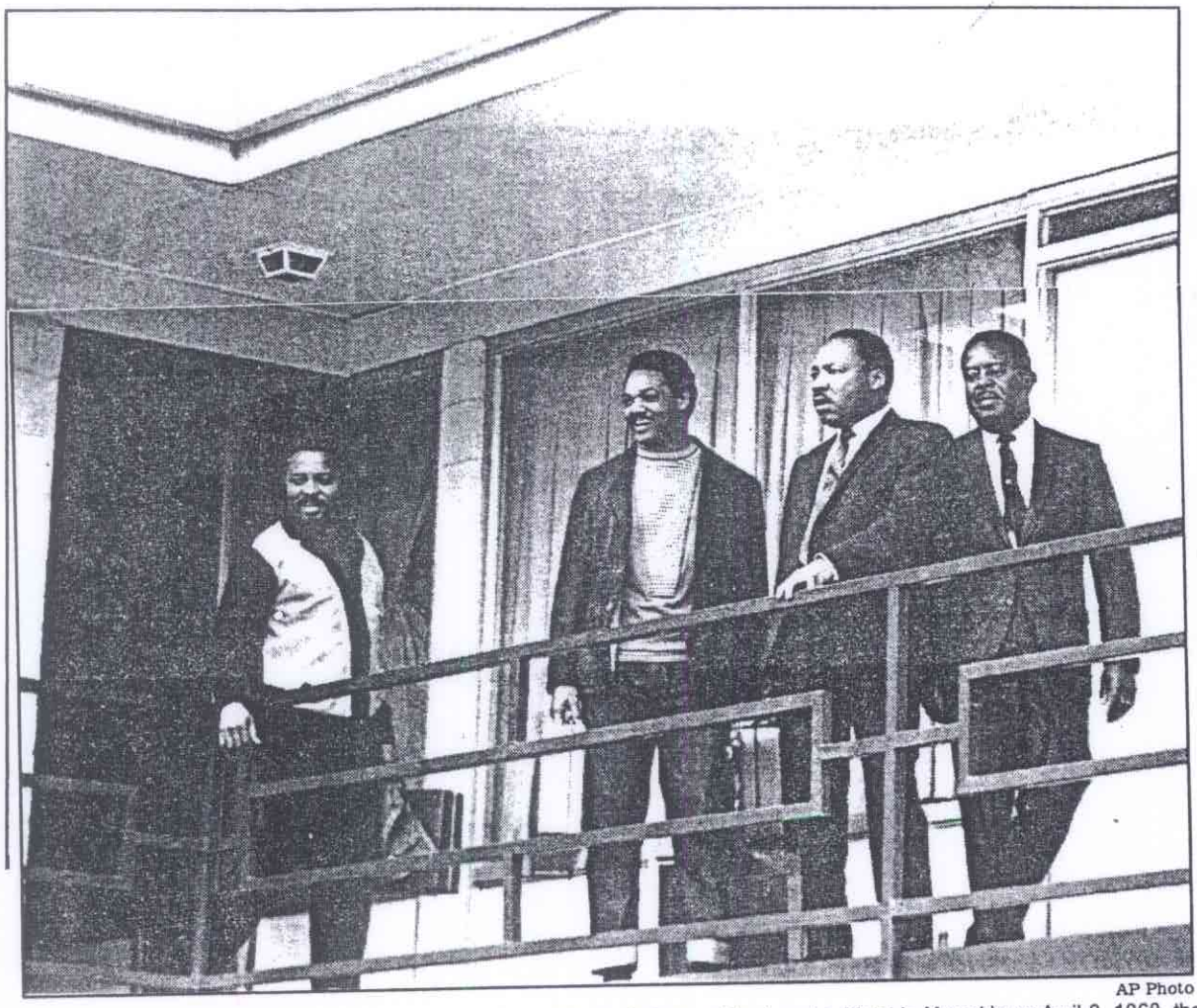
later elevated to the U.S. Supreme Court, gave Ray 3 years in the storied federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kan., for forging money orders. His stretch at Leavenworth provided a clue to a possible motive in the King assassination. Ray, described by relatives as "wild" against blacks, was offered a transfer from the main prison to a less harsh honor farm. But records reflect that he rejected the transfer because dormitories at the honor farm were racially desegregated.

After his release, Ray pulled a $120 St. Louis grocery holdup, was arrested within 20 minutes and drew a 20-year stretch at the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City. A psychiatric evaluation prepared at the prison reported: "Sociopathic personality, antisocial type with anxiety and depressive features."

On April 23, 1967, Ray escaped from the Missouri



AP Photo

DAY BEFORE SHOOTING. King is seen, second from right, on balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 3, 1968, the day before he was slain there. With him, from left, are: Hosea Williams, Jesse Jackson and Ralph Abernathy.

prison. He was still on the lam at the time of the King assassination.

Seventeen days after the King slaying, Ray found himself in Toronto. He wandered about the town until he found a bar carrying a Buffalo television channel showing "The FBI." Settling down at the bar's rail, he drank a screwdriver and waited for the event he suspected might occur. Then his mug shot flashed across the screen, and actor Efrem Zimbalist Jr. announced that Ray, wanted in the King murder, had made the FBI's "10 most wanted fugitives list."

Ray said later that the publicity elated him, although he knew it might lead to his arrest. During all those years as a small-time criminal, Ray had always wanted to be "somebody," as his brother Jerry said. And here was evidence he had made it.

Even in the face of possible execution after his London arrest, Ray seemed to revel in the worldwide attention he received. His hiring of Foreman, a lawyer noted for his flamboyance, appeared to heighten the likelihood of continued celebrity. Once Ray had been sentenced, he refused simply to disappear. Instead he claimed he had not been the triggerman but a mere dupe who had been drawn into an assassination plot by a mystery man he said he knew only as "Raoul."

Ray admitted involvement in the assassination, saying he did buy the murder weapon and did rent a room in the boardinghouse from which the fatal shot was fired. But he claimed he did so on orders from Raoul. All the evidence implicating him, he said, resulted from a plot to set him up as the patsy. But in 28 years, nobody else has been found who says Raoul even existed. Nonetheless, conspiracy theories flourished. Some blamed the assassination on white racists, others on black extremists, still others on the FBI. No solid evidence emerged to prove any of the theories.

Ray was sent to Brushy Mountain State Prison in Tennessee. In April, 1971, he and another convict broke out through an exhaust fan and escaped, but they were immediately captured outside the prison and returned to their cells. Ray was transferred to Riverbend State Prison, where he came down with the liver and kidney ailments, possibly caused by injuries he suffered in a prison fight.

Among those convinced Ray is guilty of the King murder is his former wife, Anna, a television artist who met him while sketching some of his court proceedings in the case. They were married for 15 years, ending in divorce in 1993. She says she originally considered him "very sweet," but eventually discovered he worshiped Adolf Hitler. And once, she says, he admitted during an argument that he killed King. Ray denies saying it.

Among those professing to believe in Ray's innocence are Martin Luther King's son Dexter and other members of the King family. On March 27, 1997, Dexter King met with Ray at a Nashville prison hospital and asked him: "Did you kill my father?"

"No, I didn't," Ray replied.

Dexter King told him: "I believe you, and my family believes you."

It was a striking development in the case. Members of the King family had previously supported a trial for Ray — his guilty plea notwithstanding — contending that such a trial might answer longstanding questions in the case. But they had not expressed opinions about Ray's guilt or innocence.

Ray's attorneys succeeded in 1997 in getting various hearings aimed at obtaining a trial. They also persuaded a Memphis judge to order ballistics tests supposedly intended to demonstrate that the rifle owned by Ray could not be scientifically identified as the murder weapon. But the tests were inconclusive. Memphis prosecutors said in September that the evidence reflected Ray had fired the fatal shot, but they would not rule out the possibility there had been a conspiracy to help him evade arrest. A grand jury launched an investigation into that possibility, but Ray did not win a full trial.

Last month, after a new, seven-month investigation conducted by a task force drawn from four Tennessee law-enforcement agencies, the Memphis district attorney said he was "absolutely convinced" Ray alone assassinated King. "The evidence against him is overwhelming," Gibbons said. He had ordered the new investigation after the King family spoke out on Ray's behalf. That investigation explored several conspiracy theories advanced by Ray's lawyers and others — including a claim that a New York man was the mysterious "Raoul." None of those conspiracy theories proved credible, Gibbons said.

Ray never expressed any illusions about his true station in the criminal community. All the attention he received in the King case aside, he told Newsday: "I was never no big-time guy."