King's Convicted Assassin Dies

Claims of Innocence Were Gathering Newfound Support

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James Earl Ray, the convicted killer of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., died yesterday, almost exactly three decades after the assassination and just as his latest claims of innocence were drawing new support from the slain civil rights leader's family and new attention from federal officials.

Ray, 70, had been gravely ill for some time. He suffered from liver disease and had long been confined to a hospital in Nashville. It was from there, in frail health and still serving a 99-year prison sentence for King's murder, that Ray had recently begun to persuade the King family and other civil rights leaders that the assassination was the result of a conspiracy—and that he had been set up to take the fall.

Just this month, in an unusual meeting with Attorney General Janet Reno, King's widow, Coretta Scott King, urged the Justice Department to investigate what she termed "new evidence" that supports some of Ray's claims. The session represented the most serious interest that Washington has shown in looking anew into King's murder since the 1970s, when a congressional inquiry concluded that Ray had shot King as he stood on the balcony of a Memphis hotel in April 1968 but left open the possibility that he had assistance.

In a statement from Atlanta yesterday, the King family said it was "deeply saddened" by Ray's death, reasserted his innocence and vowed to press for a new federal investigation into whether Ray was set up as a patsy in the murder. The Justice Department said yesterday that it was reviewing that request.

"It is regrettable that Mr. Ray was denied his day in court, but the American people have a right to the truth about this tragedy," the statement from the King family said.

But in Tennessee, prosecutors called Ray's death yesterday a "fitting end" to a case that has consumed their attention repeatedly for the past 30 years. State officials recently concluded a four-year investigation into King's assassination, finding that Ray was the killer and that there was no evidence of a conspiracy.

"Mr. Ray has had numerous opportunities over all of these years to put forth his story, and every time he has, it has always been the same garbage," said John Campbell, a prosecutor who has been involved in the case.

Ray confessed to shooting King in 1969 but recanted three days later, saying he had been pressured by his lawyer to admit guilt in order to avoid the death penalty. Until King's assassination, Ray was known as little more than a petty thief with a lengthy arrest record.

After his conviction, Ray had made many attempts to win a new trial, and had offered numerous theories on the murder and why his fingerprints were found on the rifle identified as the murder weapon. At one point Ray accused members of King's inner circle of hatching the assassination plot. He also has claimed he was framed by a mysterious gunrunner he knew only as "Raoul."

From his jail cell, Ray also wrote two books on the subject, and his various lawyers have written at least three books on purported plots to kill King. But through the years, Ray has repeatedly altered key details of the alleged conspiracy.

The latest round of controversy over King's murder began last year when the civil rights leader's son, Dexter King, asserted for the first time publicly that he believed Ray was innocent and that the assassination may have been part of a government plot.

Shortly before he made that startling statement, Dexter King had visited the ailing Ray in prison in Nashville and also met with his attorney, William Pepper. In court papers and in a book called "Orders to Kill," Pepper has claimed that King's murder was the culmination of a plot involving the FBI, the CIA and the Memphis police department.

Over the years, other civil rights leaders and King associates have raised questions about possible government complicity in the killing because of the intense campaign of harassment that then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover waged against King in the 1960s.

Civil rights leader Jesse L. Jackson said yesterday, "The haunting question remains the extent to which our government was involved in the killing of Dr. King."

But in a new book, "Killing the Dream," author Gerald Posner debunks many of the conspiracy theories surrounding King's death. He also depicts Ray as a criminal and racist who was skilled and resourceful enough to stalk and murder King.

"He did take to his grave, unfortunately, some of the final answers to this case," Posner said yesterday. "The question that has always been with him was, 'Would he get a conscience at the end of his life?' We've found out that the answer is no."

Staff writer Michael Fletcher contributed to this report.

FILE PHOTO/EARL WARREN—STATE OF TENNESSEE VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

In March 1997, Dexter King, right, son of the slain civil rights leader, met with convict James Earl Ray in Nashville.

James Earl Ray, Convicted Killer of King, Dies at 70

By Richard Pearson 4-24-98
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James Earl Ray, 70, a career petty criminal who was the convicted killer of legendary civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., died of liver failure April 23 at Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital in Nashville.

He was serving a 99-year prison sentence for the 1968 slaying, after pleading guilty in March 1969 and avoiding a possible death sentence. Mr. Ray, who had been in and out of hospitals since 1996 for treatment for liver disease, later recanted his confession, saying he was coerced into pleading guilty.

King was killed by a sniper April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The civil rights leader and noted preacher had gone to Memphis to lend his support to striking sanitation workers.

The echoes of that rifle shot ignited rioting in more than 100 cities, including Washington, and seemed to dim the spirit of the entire country, where King had become a leading civil rights figure by winning stunning victories for racial justice through militantly nonviolent means.

Only weeks later, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (D-N.Y.), brother of the slain president, was gunned down in the midst of celebrating his victory in the California Democratic presidential primary. To many, the two 1968 slayings marked a watershed in U.S. history.

Mr. Ray was an escaped convict with a lifelong list of crimes and a distinct penchant for getting caught. He quickly became a suspect in King's slaying after the gun was traced to him and his fingerprints were found in the room where the shots were fired. The room, in a cheap rooming house across from King's motel, was registered to Mr. Ray.

UPI PHOTO

JAMES EARL RAY
. . . pleaded guilty, then recanted

Mr. Ray managed to lead authorities on a 25,000-mile chase. He drove out of Memphis through police roadblocks; took a bus from Atlanta to Canada, where he got false identification papers; then fled to Britain, Portugal and back to Britain. He was apprehended at London's Heathrow Airport on June 8, 1968, two months after the death of King and on the day of Kennedy's funeral.

He eventually waived extradition and returned to the United States. He fired his first attorney the day before his trial was to begin and instead hired Percy Foreman, the noted Texas trial lawyer.

Foreman persuaded Mr. Ray to plead guilty to the shooting, saying that the evidence was overwhelming and that the media had already convicted him. A trial could well end with a death sentence, but a guilty plea would result in a life sentence.

Mr. Ray pleaded guilty to murder, got a 99-year prison sentence and, three days later, tried to recant his story. He also began a tortured and disturbed decades-long prison incarceration.

Over the years, he was attacked several times by fellow inmates, once receiving 22 stab wounds.

Once, he escaped from Bushy Mountain Prison in Tennessee, eluding authorities for 54 hours before being recaptured in another one of the greatest manhunts in modern memory.

Mr. Ray constantly changed his story about the assassination, at times saying that he was part of a conspiracy and other times saying he acted alone. By 1974, at his first parole hearing, he said he had not killed King at all. He did not win parole.

Many of those supporting Mr. Ray's calls for new trials or investigations were people who really did not like Mr. Ray. Civil rights leaders, journalists and congressional investigators questioned whether an inept petty criminal could have masterminded the shooting of King or the subsequent chase that ended in Europe. King's killing eventually took on the air of a possible conspiracy, much as did the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Among those with doubts about Mr. Ray and the shooting were the King family. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, recently called for a new trial. Dexter King, one of the Kings' four children, met Mr. Ray in 1997 and said he was convinced that Mr. Ray did not kill his father. Other doubters included the Rev. Joseph E. Lowery Jr., a founder of the King-led Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who said he never believed Mr. Ray was smart enough to mastermind the assassination.

Mr. Ray was born in Alton, Ill., and was a high school dropout. He robbed gas stations and stores, served prison sentences in Illinois and nearby Missouri and received a suspended sentence in Los Angeles.

Over the years, those who knew him painted a portrait of an almost comically inept criminal who, when imprisoned, spent his time planning great escapes.

His first criminal failure was in 1949, when his holdup of a cabdriver ended ingloriously after he was chased and fell through a basement window. The second may have been in 1950, when he received a 90-day jail sentence for stealing a typewriter.

Later brushes with the law included an incident in which he leapt into a police car, thinking it was a taxi, to escape a crime scene. Another time, while robbing a drycleaning establishment, he fled the store after dropping his wallet on the floor and severely cutting himself on the glass he had broken to enter the building.

His early prison escape attempts also were unsuccessful. He made several attempts, once managing to nearly suffocate himself in a heating vent and another time receiving a serious injury when he fell on his head after climbing halfway up a prison wall on a makeshift ladder.

But, in April 1967, he escaped from the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City. His odyssey, as it was later reconstructed, included Chicago, where he worked as a busboy; Birmingham, where he obtained a driver's license and took dancing lessons; and Los Angeles, where he took more dancing lessons, studied bartending, had plastic surgery done on his nose and underwent hypnosis.

He also made stops in Louisiana, Atlanta and Canada, where he claimed he took part in smuggling operations masterminded by a "blond Latin" named Raoul. In late March 1968, Mr. Ray was back in Birmingham and bought two rifles at a marine supply store. The second gun was the deer rifle believed to have been used to slay King. Mr. Ray had been serving his sentence at Riverbend Maximum Security Prison in Nashville when he entered the hospital in 1996 with liver ailments.

On Dec. 24, 1996, his brother, Jerry, told reporters: "I'm not going to sit here and say James is an angel, because he's been in trouble. The family still supports him. The family knows he's innocent."

The brother also deplored the justice of Mr. Ray dying of cirrhosis of the liver, as he supposedly had never drunk alcohol or smoked.