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INVESTIGATION NEGATION

Last year brought a bizarre postscript to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. James Earl Ray, who pled guilty to murdering King but has denied it ever since, was absolved of the crime. The absolution came from none other than Dexter King, the martyr's son. "I believe you, and my family believes you," said Dexter of Ray's protestations that, despite his confession, and despite the discovery of his fingerprints on the murder weapon, he was a fall guy for the mysterious "Raoul."

Now the King family has gone one step further: The civil rights prophet's heirs are marking the thirtieth anniversary of his assassination by asking the Department of Justice to conduct another investigation to determine whether Ray was a patsy for a government conspiracy. Earlier this month, King's widow, Coretta Scott King, accompanied by no less a personage than former Atlanta Mayor (and King aide) Andrew Young, made this request during a two-hour meeting with Janet Reno. King said Reno had listened "very sympathetically" and would decide the matter soon.

We hope that the attorney general has the courage to say no. Talk of a governmental conspiracy to assassinate King is preposterous. While it is true that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover plotted to harass and stymie King and other black civil rights leaders whom he loathed, there is no evidence that he or any other government official played any role in King's murder. David Garrow, a highly sympathetic King biographer and Emory University professor, has convincingly laid out the case against Ray. An even more exhaustive account is contained in Gerald Posner's *Killing the Dream*, which concludes: "There is no doubt that James Earl Ray shot and killed Martin Luther King Jr."

Alas, the orchestrated effort to find a conspiracy behind the King assassination—like similar efforts to pin the murder of John F. Kennedy on the Mafia or the CIA—has very little to do with facts. Conspiracy theories are, rather, an all-too-familiar feature of our political culture. Most recently, we have seen the phenomenon in its right-wing variant, in connection with the death of Vince Foster. Investigations by two independent counsels have demonstrated that he killed himself. Foster's family is convinced his death was a suicide. Yet the Foster murder conspiracy industry continues to thrive.

To be sure, genuinely aggrieved people understandably turn to conspiracy theories because it is so difficult to accept that an enormous historical tragedy such as the death of Martin Luther King could be the work of a lone, insignificant individual. But that does not explain the motives of people like Jerry Falwell (the Foster conspiracy theorist par excellence) and Oliver Stone (the JFK conspiracy theorist with whom the King family has struck a movie deal). Though not themselves understandably aggrieved, they propagate conspiracy theories to exploit the grievances of others for their own psychic, ideological, and financial benefit.

So why shouldn't Reno just investigate King's death and quickly prove the conspiratorialists wrong? What could be the harm? The trouble is that conspiracy theories are essentially irrefutable, which is why they are so culturally durable and politically satisfying. Even if the evidence in the case wasn't already 30 years old, and even if it hadn't already been sifted twice by Congress, Reno would never be able to quell the doubts about King.

Consider the CIA-crack conspiracy episode of 1996. A story in *The San Jose Mercury News* contended that the CIA, through its Nicaraguan contra minions, had plotted to introduce crack to the inner cities. Outraged black talk radio hosts and political leaders demanded a full investigation. Even though the charges were absurd on their face—and the *News* itself later backed away from the story—CIA Director John Deutch dutifully visited South Central Los Angeles, promising to conduct an investigation. The inquiry, in turn, found that the allegations were baseless. Yet this finding itself didn't satisfy anyone. Rather, it passed into the conspiracy lore. The fact that the CIA had gone so far as to issue its own formal whitewash simply proved the importance of the conspiracy.

Janet Reno should indeed treat the King family's request as a historic opportunity—not to make amends for some imagined federal murder plot but, rather, to take a stand against one of the most debilitating ills of our political culture. She can do this by stating forthrightly that the Clinton administration will not launch a new King assassination investigation and that it will not do so because it will not be a party to paranoia. Rather than patronizing the conspiratorial impulse, Reno ought to repudiate it. •