P WP 4/25/98 James Earl Ray

JAMES EARL Ray, the man who pleaded guilty to murdering Martin Luther King Jr., died on Thursday. Mr. Ray recanted his admission only three days after the plea and has long sought a trial on the murder charge, for which he spent his remaining years in prison. He never got the trial. And though he ultimately managed to convince the King family of his innocence, he never raised a serious question about whether he shot Dr. King.

There is a reasonable discussion to be had about whether others, in addition to Mr. Ray, were involved in the King assassination. A congressional investigation of the killing in 1979 did not rule out the chance that Mr. Ray may have had help. Some historians and leading civil rights figures also are convinced that he did not act alone. But it is important to note that the congressional panel—along with several law enforcement investigations—found unequivocally that Mr. Ray was the killer and rejected the notion that a government conspiracy was behind the assassination. While it is certainly true that Dr. King had enemies in high places and that these enemies—most notably FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover—grossly misused their power in order to intimidate him, there is simply no evidence of a government plot to kill him. And while Mr. Ray has offered a variety of explanations of the assassination, his discussion of his own role was never persuasive.

All of which makes the last year of Mr. Ray's life rather confusing. His claims of innocence—despite their implausibility—were publicly embraced by the family of the man he killed. His impending death was anticipated with nervous hand-wringing, as though he would take some great untold truth to his grave. He was granted an unusual degree of absolution after committing a crime for which this country has not yet finished paying. James Earl Ray, having killed one of the great men of American history, managed somehow to become a victim.