

Jack E. White

James Earl Ray, Cause Célèbre?

Some stand to profit by blaming King's murder on a government conspiracy

BILL CLINTON MUST REALLY HAVE IT IN FOR JANET RENO. Why else would the President saddle the Attorney General with the thankless task of reviewing "new evidence" presented by the family of Martin Luther King Jr. about his assassination 30 years ago? The King family claims that convicted assassin James Earl Ray, who died last week, was just a fall guy caught up in a sweeping conspiracy that included then President Lyndon Johnson, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, J. Edgar Hoover, several army units, organized crime figures, the owner of a Memphis diner and, one presumes, space aliens. Talk about a no-win situation. If Reno decides the allegations merit creation of the new "truth" commission the family wants, she is giving credence to outlandish conspiracy theories. If she concludes there is no cause for a new probe, she is sure to be painted as part of a cover-up. Either outcome would be a mess and tragically unnecessary.

Let's get this much straight: the King family has offered not a shred of credible evidence to support their charges of a wide-ranging government conspiracy. Absolutely none. What they serve up instead is a murky brew of truths, quarter-truths and outright lies assembled by the latest in a long string of Ray defense lawyers: one William Pepper, who is either a credulous buffoon or a con artist. To promote himself and his book on the alleged conspiracy, Pepper has exploited the King family's understandable desire to learn the full truth. Pepper's de facto accomplice is Phillip Jones, an old friend of Dexter King's, the martyred leader's son who heads the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. Jones' firm, Intellectual Properties Management, is responsible for marketing the Rev. King's writings and speeches. With Jones' help, King's relatives have made deals that could net them and their agents tens of millions of dollars: one deal with Hollywood conspiracist Oliver Stone for a film about the assassination; another with Time Warner, this magazine's owner, for a series of books and multimedia projects. Neither Pepper nor Jones wants the controversy about King's death to end. They've got an investment in it.

That may explain why Pepper keeps pushing his wild-

eyed theories, even after they have been shown to be fabrications. In his 1995 book, *Orders to Kill: The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King*, Pepper claimed that a team of U.S. Army snipers was standing by in Memphis to shoot King if a Mafia hit man hired by the government had missed. Pepper wrote that army captain Billy Eidson, purported commander of the sniper team, could not be questioned because he had been murdered, presumably to assure his silence. Trouble is, Eidson is very much alive; he denies any involvement in King's murder, and there is no evidence to dispute him. Then there is the man identified by Pepper



Graveside, Clinton with King's widow and son Dexter; at right, Ray after 1959 arrest for robbery



as the mastermind of the plot. He turns out to be a retired auto worker in New York State; he also denies any wrongdoing, and there's no evidence against him either. There are many more examples of Pepper's recklessness, especially in Gerald Posner's new book on the King assassination, *Killing the Dream*. But you get the idea.

Now, to be sure, there are also good reasons to question the official account of King's murder. The FBI's investigation was hasty, more designed to close the case than get to the bottom of it. Some of the mystery might be dispelled if the government were simply to open its files on the assassination. These include the evidence examined by a congressional subcommittee headed by Louis Stokes, a black Democrat from Cleveland, which concluded that Ray was the murderer and that if he had help, it came from violent white supremacists, not government agencies. That is the scenario we ought to be looking at, not William Pepper's nonsense. ■