King's killer looks

By Christopher Sullivan
Associated Press

James Earl Ray, locked up in Nashville, is building his case for a new trial.

NASHVILLE — James Earl Ray will awaken on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s holiday tomorrow in his cell, a concrete cube with no bars and a 4-inch-wide glass slit for a window. Then, he will go to work.

Behind 12-foot razor-wire fences at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, the man serving 99 years as Dr. King's assassin will resume his quest to prove he is innocent, a claim repeated in a new autobiography and in a prison interview.

He is speaking the truth, he said, and the truth can set him free.

While once he escaped from prison by hiding in a bread truck, Ray now combs the prison law library for a legal way out. He has filed a string of lawsuits seeking investigative documents to build his case for a trial and is shopping for a judge who will order one.

Ray vows that once he is in court, he will prove he was duped, by a mysterious middleman named Raoul, into buying the gun that killed Dr. King and meeting Raoul at the flophouse from which authorities say Dr. King was shot.

Ray's new book, *Who Killed Martin Luther King?*, makes a case that his original guilty plea was coerced and that he was never anything more than "a two-bit career criminal."

"Why," he writes, "if official America is so firmly convinced that I pulled the trigger of the rifle that killed Martin Luther King, is there so much reluctance to allow me to have a trial and fully air the evidence?"

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In early April 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s untiring travels to the flash points of the civil rights movement took him to Memphis, Tenn., where sanitation workers, most of them black, were striking for better pay and an end to discrimination. As Dr. King stood alone on his balcony at the Lorraine Motel at 6:01 p.m., a single rifle shot struck him in the head.

Investigators tracing aliases and following leads across continents arrested James Earl Ray in London in June. Within a year of the assassination, on March 10, 1969, Ray pleaded guilty to Dr. King's killing.

In his new book, Ray calls the court proceeding a sham, but this sentiment is not new. He registered it before he left the courtroom.

The U.S. attorney general, Ramsey Clark, said immediately after the shooting that a lone assassin killed Dr. King; there was no evidence of a conspiracy.

But nine years later, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that there was a conspiracy. After a two-year investigation, the committee reported that Ray did indeed shoot Dr. King, but that St. Louis-based bigots were behind the killing.

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Ray complained that the committee cut short his testimony and misrepresented what he said.

U.S. Rep. Louis Stokes, who chaired the panel, denied that, saying Ray's book fails "to clear up all the inconsistencies that I developed during my cross-examination of him."

Stokes, an Ohio Democrat, defended the investigation as thorough and exhaustive, despite challenges to its central conclusion.

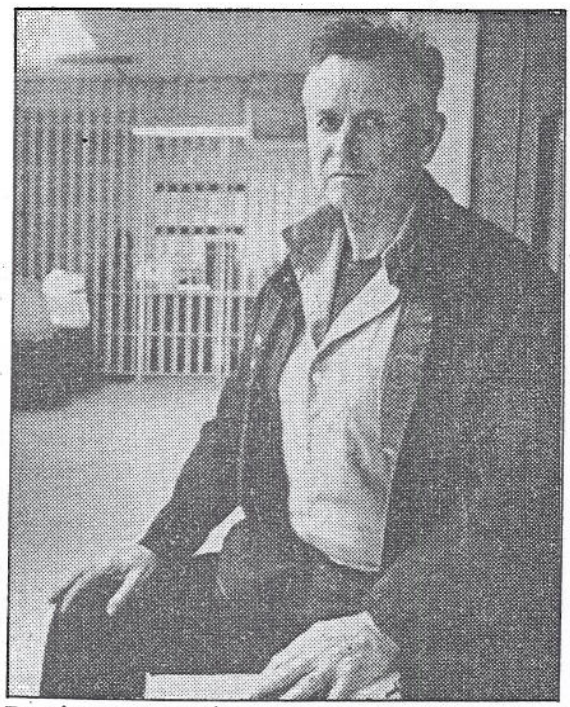
The committee also concluded that no federal, state or local agency was involved in Dr. King's killing — notably exonerating the FBI, whose campaign of spying on, threatening and attempting to discredit Dr. King was well-documented.

"I have always believed that the government was part of a conspiracy, either directly or indirectly, to assassinate him," said the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

The comment by Jackson, who was among those with Dr. King when he died, comes in a foreword to Ray's book, written at the publisher's request.

"No thoughtful person, after reviewing the evidence, can believe that this one man, James Earl Ray — who had bungled virtually everything he had ever tried, including criminal activity — acting alone, killed Martin Luther King," wrote Jackson.

for legal way out



Ray in 1988: In his new book, an autobiography, he says his guilty plea was coerced.

He endorses Ray's call for a federal special prosecutor and the unsealing of committee investigative records that are closed to the public until 2029.

Many who have interviewed Ray — including those who believe his claim of innocence — sense he's hiding some of what he knows.

Harold Weisberg, a writer and former congressional investigator who has amassed an 80,000-page private archive of documents related to the assassination probe, said he once asked Ray, while helping him prepare for a hearing, who his handlers had been.

"He said, 'I won't get out by putting somebody else in,'" Weisberg recalled.

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Philip Melanson, an archivist and researcher who has studied the King case for years, believes Ray was helped by several people before and after the assassination, but thinks he was kept at arm's length by the principal conspirators.

"He could have been recruited by people who were on the fringe," said Melanson, who teaches at Southeastern Massachusetts University. "I don't know that he was entrusted with enough information ... that he could provide specifics that would solve the case."

At the prison, Ray was coy in response to questions about the sources of aliases that turned out to belong to real people he didn't know, for example, and about new evidence he might present at trial:

"I really don't know."

"I don't know what I should tell you."

He was asked if he was revealing only enough to get back into court but not enough to endanger himself by giving away conspirators' identities.

"No, I don't think there's anything to that," said Ray, whose sandy hair is graying but who appears fit at 63. Whether or not his book holds significant revelations, Ray said, "I think the main thing now is that a lot of people are starting to demand a new trial — Jesse Jackson and people like that."

Besides Jackson, at least two groups in Washington are lobbying for the sealed files to be opened — not only on the assassination of Dr. King but on that of President John F. Kennedy.

Opening the records would help "resolve unanswered questions both about the assassinations and the [House committee's] investigation," said James Lesar of the Assassination Archive and Research Center in Washington.

A majority vote of the House would be required to lift the seal, and Kevin Walsh of the Association for the Advancement of Historical Research said he believed a resolution would pass this year.

In an interview, Stokes acknowledged that he had come close to supporting a resolution, but on consultation with House lawyers decided "it was not the right time."

He added: "I can say to a moral certainty that there is nothing in the records that would in any manner exculpate his [Ray's] complicity," Stokes said from his Capitol office. "There's nothing in those files that would change the course of American history."