

Ralph Abernathy's "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down," "Memphis" chapter 1/15/90-HW

At the time of the controversy about two pages in this chapter in which Abernathy reports King sexual activity the night before he was assassinated I was shocked repeatedly, first that Abernathy would find it necessary to write such stuff and then by his repeated defense of it with the claim that his reporting was essential to his personal integrity and that of his book. It stunned me that none of the commentary I saw or heard, particularly by black leaders, noted that had there been any question of any kind of integrity, that could have been more than met by reference to what was public, particularly what was made public by the FBI. *(And was in the book, elsewhere.)*

What probably influenced my thoughts and beliefs more than anything else is the fact that by years of costly and difficult litigation I had gotten the FBI's headquarters and six or seven field office files on the assassination and related subjects, including the Invaders, the unorganized young Memphis blacks who are made a target by Abernathy in a remarkable display of his ignorance of the actualities in "Memphis," to which I'll come. (The case, filed in 1975, has not yet reached its end, which indicates the official resistance to disclosures.) What Abernathy alleges is what the FBI sought perhaps more than anything else and despite close and inclusive coverage does not have in these thousands of pages. In which, I note also, the Abernathys of the black community have not had any interest of any kind.

Moreover, not only did the extensive FBI records fail to even suggest any thing sexual activity that night, they also did report a night of what might be assumed by many if not most, a night of brainstorming about the next day's events, particularly the matter of the injunction against the planned march in support of the sanitation-workers strike.

Abernathy, who has had several strokes and many other events to interfere with his recollections, is not the only one whose memory may not be trustworthy. Perhaps mine also isn't. But it is my recollection that the FBI reports do include accounts of the movements from one room at the Lorraine to another by King and others as they spent that night in talk.

So, I'm saying that I begin this commentary on the one chapter of the book I'm going to read, with a confession of what others may take as prejudice. I think it isn't that.

Almost half of this chapter has nothing to do with Memphis but is on the funeral. The part that relates to events there is seriously flawed, factually incorrect and, like the entire chapter, is not at all like King in, for example, singling out those with whom Abernathy ^{disagrees} as "enemies" in the black community. He uses this word.

Throughout the part of the chapter that deals with Memphis and events there Abernathy is rather vague, particularly on time, by which I include dates. And is wrong on them

even when they are basic. He either knows little about or cares little about the strike in support of which King et al went to ~~Memphis~~ Memphis because ^{it} ~~is~~ so long a chapter he has so little to say about it and is so wrong about what triggered the strike. On page 416 he says that the immediate cause was "discriminatory action." In fact it was the crushing of two black sanitation workers in a truck's compacter. And at this point he makes his only reference to the union that was on strike, Local 1733 of ~~Afame~~ AFSCME.

On page 417 he refers to Solomon Jones as a preacher. Maybe he was, but that is not my recollection, and I've seen a number of FBI and press records in which he is not so described. At this point and several others, including 419 and 458, he blames the violence of the March 28 march on the "Invaders." If he knew anything about the Memphis actualities of which he was part he'd have known first that the "Invaders" stayed away from the march for a number of reasons, one of which is their fear they'd be blamed for any violence, and that the use of the sticks on which signs were mounted to break windows was by younger blacks. He is also wrong on page 418 where he says that several of the "Invaders," who he does not name, came to his and King's Rivermont motel room the next morning to apologize. They were actually there by invitation because King had assigned one of his people to meet with them and learn what their grievances were. The FBI's account of this meeting to which Abernathy makes only passing and incorrect reference is quite different and it is supported by other reports on meetings and discussions leading up to the Invaders going to the Rivermont.

On 418 Abernathy's account of how King left that violence omits the ugly racism of his own party's first effort to get transportation. They were refused before the second person asked, a black woman, allowed them the use of her car. (I think he is also wrong in referring to State troopers present. I'm not sure but I think it then was only local police.)

His account of the return to Memphis is, according to what SCLC itself stated contemporaneously, ^{of} not really accurate. There was considerable controversy and dissention ^{of more violence and that} because of fear something would happen to King and the decision to return was not as he represents (426) immediate: "Now we have to go back to Memphis." The violence was March 28, the announcement of King's return was made April 1, and it is my recollection that the decision was King's, personally.

Abernathy is even wrong on when they returned to Memphis. ^{Wednesday} He has this the day King was assassinated (page 428) ^{Thursday} when it was the day before. And his account of the landing at the Memphis airport is more than merely inadequate, it is factually incorrect. The FBI's records are quite inclusive on who was there, who ^{did} and did what and what followed, all omitted by Abernathy.

His account of King's alleged anger over Andy Young's alleged failure to speak on

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behalf of SCLC at the hearing on the injunction at this point may not be correct because the injunction was against the union and it was represented at the hearing and was heard. I'm not sure on this but I cite it as an evidence of the nasty little digs Abernathy has throughout on most other black leaders, in this instance Andy Young.

On ~~430~~ 430 his account of how he was asked by King to speak in King's stead the night before the assassination is not in accord with my recollection of the investigative reports. Abernathy, making a dig at King, says it was because King did not like to appear before small audiences and because of inclement weather they expected a small audience. My recollection of the records is that King wanted the time to rest, being quite tired, and to think about immediate problems and perhaps discuss them with others.

Here I digress to note that the FBI and the local police had fairly complete sources of information, including through "symbol" informers of the FBI and a number of the local police. The FBI's informers included the top NAACP leadership and it had "sources" throughout the black community, including in all the schools and colleges. The most effective of the police informants was the plain-clothes cop, Marrell McCullough, who spent the day before the assassination and of it providing transportation to King's people. I believe that the FBI's reports, which include copies of those of the police, are dependable in this and similar areas. I also believe that this is one of the many instances in which Abernathy uses his personal account to puff himself up, sometimes by putting King down in so doing.

Abernathy was ~~not~~^{not}, as he represents (page 440), the first to reach King's fallen body. In fact, he did not even get there rapidly. The first was McCullough, who ran up the stairs from the ground floor and had King in his arms before Abernathy got outside their motel room, which is where King had been standing. (I am inclined, from what I recall, to have other questions about the dependability of Abernathy's recollection. He makes a deal about putting his cologne on but it is my recollection that his delay was over the fit of a shirt, which he was changing. My point is not to nitpick but to raise questions about the dependability of his recollections when he depends on them and nothing else, despite contrary representation in his introduction.)

This point is not his only claim to have been the last to have words with King. I believe that was quite impossible for King, who may have had some nervous reactions but clearly was unable to speak and was probably irreversibly dead at the time of impact of the bullet.

On 441 Abernathy says he saw a "small hole" in King's right cheek and later he says that during the autopsy or at the hospital he saw a hole in King's chest large enough for him to put two fists in. The actual evidence, including the autopsy report, which I published, and autopsy pictures, which I saw, and FBI lab reports that I got in the litigation, is that the bullet exploded on impact and made a large hole in the jaw and

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immediately below it in the neck, where perhaps metal, perhaps bone, ^{perhaps both,} exploded outward and literally tore King's tie off. A fragment of the bullet then proceeded downward through the body and is visible just under the skin down on King's back.

He laments (460) that King had him as a close friend and associate but that when he took over King's role he had none. He does not realize what this says about him, not about others, that nobody in SCLC felt about him as he and they had felt about King. Relationships are not unilateral. And closeness and friendship must be earned. It is not inherited.

There is a point I forgot to note ~~xxxx~~ where Abernathy refers to two women who were at the Lorraine and to a third he says King fought with. He gives no names but the FBI reports do on the pair of women whose room was on the first floor and the records make it apparent that the woman Abernathy says King fought with was Dorothy Cotton, who was, as I recall, from SCLC headquarters. He uses her name elsewhere but not here.

The two women drove down from as I recall Louisville, Ky., where they were active in civil-rights matters. At least one had means and an expensive car. My recollection, which may not be correct, is that they brought King's brother, who had a church there, with them and that he, too, had a room on the ground floor. These were among the people involved in those protracted conferences referred to above. The FBI, which wanted very much to pin something personal on King, continued to investigate those women, who were on their way to a Florida vacation, and the ^{report} I got include ^A those of the Florida investigation. The FBI got no reason at all to ^{believe} ~~believe~~ there had been anything sexual going on *and it didn't.*

Most of the motel wing of the Lorraine was used by the King party and those connected with it, like some of the press. Abernathy's description of the woman I take to be Cotton's departure seems to have her going with her ^{149999e} ~~back~~ past the door to their room when there was no such need for her in leaving and my recollection of the registrations is that it could not have been anyone other than Cotton. I think also that in avoiding the name he is not sheltering her, really, because all those there knew who had what room. Moreover, assuming as I do that he refers to Cotton, it is entirely unlikely that she could have expected any relationship with King to have just started, out of the blue, in Memphis.

There may be a few other things I forgot to note that have to do with the dependability of Abernathy's recollection ^{wrote} ~~wrote~~ based on it. In any event, while for the most part these are not major errors, there are more than enough that are factual and are of some significance to raise questions about anything he reports as fact and supports with nothing but his recollections *when so much documentation was readily available.*

Perhaps forming an impression from reading the Introduction and this one chapter is unfair but I got the distinct impression that Abernathy uses his autobiography to make more of himself than he was and to put others, including King, down in so attempting.

After writing this I read two additional chapters, one on King and the one on Resurrection City. They give me no reason to amend the above comment.

In thinking more about the Memphis chapter I think it is remarkable that Abernathy has so little about the assassination in it and is so wrong, so prejudicially wrong, about matters in which he was personally involved. Like the Invaders, for example. Had he even discussed this with his associates of that day he could have learned the truth, as he could have from the readily available records.

Almost as though it supports what he says that is not true about the Invaders causing the violence of ^{March 28,} ~~and could be only,~~ Abernathy makes passing reference to the police killing of one of them. That was, clearly, the cold-blooded murder of the young man, Larry Payne, and it was not at the scene of the violence or in any way connected with it. I do not recall whether Payne was a "member" of the Invaders, who had no formal organization or to the best of my knowledge any formal membership roles, but the Memphis police did not so describe him and the readily-available news accounts make it apparent that Payne was the victim of cold-blooded murder, of a black kid about which Abernathy is silent.

To me this raises questions about how much, in retrospect, Abernathy cared, when he did no checking at all and when checking was so easy. Could he have cared so little about the police murder of a black youth? Could he have forgotten the details? (I'm sure that at the time he should have been aware of the fact because he was there and because the incident got extensive local and national attention. It was the only death in that violence.) I do not think for a minute that he would have been indifferent to such a police murder if he had been aware of it in his writing, and this again makes me wonder, particularly after his serious health problems that could effect recollection, why neither he nor his publisher had the most rudimentary checking done. I repeat that Abernathy begins by boasting of his checking of facts and his thanks for those who helped. His Memphis chapter is inadequate and incorrect and it was not checked for fact. All this tends to fortify my belief that Abernathy's real purpose in the book is to make his version of his role in King's life and efforts available. He is not faithful to fact that is so important like the assassination and what led to it.

I think and repeat, this raises questions about the dependability of all else that he reports in this book, most of all what depends entirely on his recollections. It also raises questions about the extent, if not the quality also, of any checking.