

Ray Lawyer Wants to Meet Bell

'It's got to be tied in some way to a trial for James Earl Ray.'

—Attorney James Lesar

By NANCY LEWIS
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WASHINGTON - James Earl Ray's attorney said Thursday he wants to talk with Atty. Gen. Griffin Bell about his desire to interview the confessed assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The attorney, James Lesar of Washington, made it clear in an interview that his own desire is to get a trial for Ray and that any interview will have to be linked with that.

"It's got to be tied in some way to a trial for James Earl Ray," Lesar said. "I'm convinced that Ray is in jail wrongfully. The only way I know to get him out of jail without an admission of guilt on his part is to have a trial."

Lesar, who said he has represented Ray without pay since 1970, said it would probably be "several weeks" before he could get all the information together to present to Bell.

The attorney general told reporters at a breakfast meeting Thursday that he would like to personally interview Ray in an effort to resolve still unanswered questions in connection with

King's murder April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tenn.

"There's always been some desire on my part to interview Ray," Bell said. "I'd like to find out where he got his money and his travel documents. I don't think we're going to find out except from Ray."

Asked if he might favor "legal consideration" for Ray in exchange for

information, Bell said he would "if I believed he was telling the truth."

To determine that, Bell said he would "want to meet with him myself" or send a top Justice Department official "in whom I have complete confidence and who knows how to interrogate or negotiate."

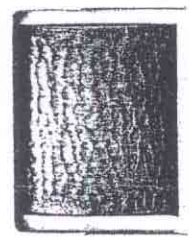
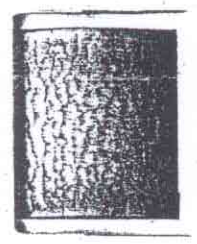
Then, Bell said, he would decide about possible legal consideration for

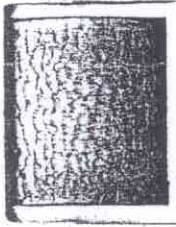
Ray "if I came to the conclusion he wanted to make a clean break."

Bell's comments came less than a week after his release of an extensive Justice Department review of the entire King murder investigation which indicated Ray acted alone, but didn't conclusively rule out the possibility of a conspiracy.

The biggest question the seven-person task force wasn't able to answer was where Ray got his money between his escape from the Missouri State Penitentiary in April, 1967, and his capture in London in June, 1968, 65 days after the killing. Ray, now serving a 99-year sen-

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FROM THE PAST

Bell

force in the Brushy Mountain Penitentiary in Petros, Tenn., has never been interviewed extensively by the FBI or the Justice Department, according to a spokesman for the department.

When Ray was captured in London, his attorney said he didn't want to be interviewed and so there was no attempt to talk with him there, the spokesman said.

The FBI was told that he might talk on the flight back to the United States after his extradition, but he wouldn't talk then either.

Ray was turned over to Tennessee authorities upon his return and he was not interviewed then, either. On March 10, 1969, Ray agreed to plead guilty in exchange for the 99-year sentence.

Immediately after that, the assistant attorney general in charge of civil rights instructed the FBI to attempt to interview Ray, the spokesman said. The FBI did meet with Ray on March 13 and March 14, 1969, according to FBI files, but he "provided no pertinent information." The spokesman said Ray simply "would not talk with them about the case."

The task force which reviewed the case wrote Ray on Dec. 15, 1976 that they would like to interview him. Although he did not answer the task force directly, in a Dec. 20, 1976 letter to Lesar, Ray said, he agreed with "your advice opposing the interview."

"At the present I believe the only body I should testify before is a jury," Ray said.

In a letter to New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis revealed 10 days later, Ray reportedly volunteered to testify under oath to the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

But Lesar said Thursday that was really a job at the news media, not a legitimate offer to testify. Lesar said Ray was angered over favorable reviews given a book on the King murder — George McMillan's "The Making of An Assassin"—and that the offer was actually a sarcastic challenge, in essence that he would talk to the committee after Lewis and some other reporters did.

"Quite obviously there would be no reason to call them," Lesar said. "It was a job at the news media for carrying uncritical and glowing accounts of a childish book."

Lesar said he has corresponded with Ray several times since then and that

Ray has made general comments about the offer to testify, but nothing, he would divulge.

A spokesman for the House committee said Thursday it has reached no agreements for Ray to testify. Bell said he will wait to see what the House probe turns up before he launches a Justice Department investigation.

Ray has been seeking a trial in the King case since shortly after he confessed to the murder. His pleas have been turned down by the Tennessee courts and those decisions have been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

But Justice Department sources Thursday would not rule out a trial for Ray. If they could be convinced there is new evidence that would answer some of the lingering questions, that might be the type of "legal consideration" Bell could offer. Bell said he will coordinate any efforts with Tennessee authorities.

Lesar contends that "Ray was set up by the persons who conspired to shoot Dr. King, to take the rap for a crime he did not commit."

The attorney said Ray "did not willingly participate in the conspiracy and that he did not shoot Dr. King."