

Pieces in King puzzle don't fit

Washington — All morning long the great caucus room was nearly empty. Only the bright lights of television and the battery of cameras beneath them made the proceedings seem important.

Now there is no promise left in the inquiry the House assassinations committee is making into the killing of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. They are playing out the string. There is no feeling of urgency. There is no feeling that now, finally we will know if there was a conspiracy involved in the King assassination.

Yesterday the committee brought Ramsey Clark before the television lights. In April of 1968 when King was murdered, Clark was attorney general of the United States. It was the committee's job yesterday to put the tough questions to Clark. They failed.

"How do you explain the FBI's failure to pursue the conspiracy aspects of the investigation?" he was asked.

"You said they did a poor job ... you know something I don't know," he answered.

"Why didn't you take over the investigation?"

"I didn't think I was Sherlock Holmes. I wasn't going to take over the investigation myself."

Ramsey Clark is a New York City lawyer now. A few years back, he ran for public office and almost succeeded in getting himself elected to the United States Senate from New York. There is a quality that Ramsey Clark has that a lot of people like. He is not pretentious. And when you listen to him, you get the feeling that an honest man is talking.

He came into the great room wearing an old brown suit that hung loose on his lean frame and he wore tan Hush Puppies. And when he took the oath, his arm was high in the air and you could tell that he took it all seriously.

When the questions came, his voice was true and firm the way it always is but the problem yesterday was that he had nothing new to offer.

"What would you have done had you been heading the investigation?" he was asked.

"Your question of what would I have done is very difficult because I can't tell you that I've had vast experience in criminal investigation," he said. "I've had more than most attorneys general but I'm still a beginner ..."

"Did the bureau do all it could do in investigating the assassination?"

"I do not intend to convey the impression it did all it could do investigating conspiracy," he said. "I don't know. I can't tell you how far they went. I think they were enormously relieved when they got James Earl Ray. They were greatly relieved."

They asked Ramsey Clark about COINTELPRO, the secret intelligence operation conducted by the FBI. King had been one of the targets of that effort, one that often used such illegal methods as bugging and wiretapping.

"I couldn't believe it," he said.

"Where did you learn about it?" he was asked.

"From the press," he said.

They asked him if he did not know

everything that the FBI was doing. He did not hesitate to answer. "If any attorney general ever thought he had knowledge of everything the FBI was doing, I'd question his intelligence."

And that was the crux of it. Even

NY DAILY
NEWS

11-29-78

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the attorney general did not know what the FBI was doing. And it is too late now to try to piece together what role, if any it played in the assassination. It is even too late to find out if there was any real investigation by the FBI of any possible conspiracy. And all of that became even clearer yesterday here in Washington.

All of us have to share a bit of the blame. We wait, and then we criticize and complain. That evening in Memphis when King was shot, I was there, on assignment for my newspaper.

My room at the Lorraine Motel was just under the balcony where King was shot. The door was open. When the shot was fired, I burst to the door, first believing it was a bombing. I saw no debris, nothing. King lay on the balcony above where I could not see. I did not, for a moment, know what had happened. I looked out across from the motel, across the street into the bushes where I saw a figure rising. I figured that he'd know and I kept my eyes trained on the figure in the bushes.

I watched the man for what seemed a long time though it was really only moments. Then a commotion in front of the balcony snatched my attention. From there rose a wail that told the story.

Now there is a theory that King was shot not from the flophouse as the FBI would tell us but from the bushes. I was not the only one to see the figure who rose from the thicket. An older man who used to sit in those bushes and drink wine with his buddies swore that the shot was fired from there. A young kid saw the man. And so did a guy whose name was Solomon Jones. He chauffeured King in Memphis and he had been getting the car ready when King was shot. There were a number of others under the balcony. Most of them did not see the man.

Perhaps it was nothing. Perhaps.

But we will never know. We do not know because the FBI bungled the investigation. Cops are like reporters. When they want information, they go about asking questions. And that night in Memphis no police officer went door-to-door at the Lorraine Motel asking questions. The investigation began with a bundle of evidence left on the street a block away. That led to James Earl Ray. Everything else was ignored. Now it is too late to put it to gether.

"Tick, tick, tick tick. ..."

That was what G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel to the committee said yesterday. What he meant was that there is no time left now.