

Still Piecing Together a Shattered Dream

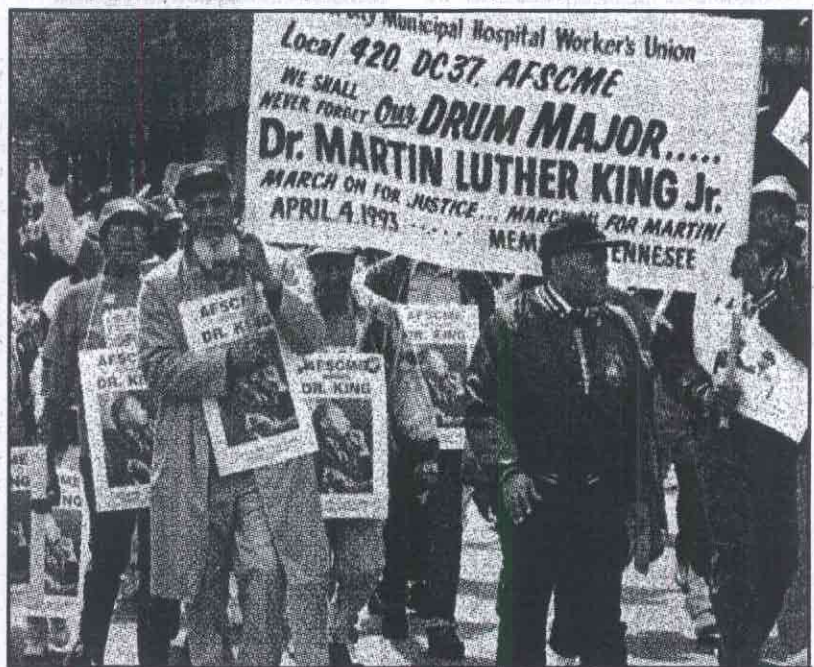
■ **Civil rights:** Martin Luther King died 25 years ago, leaving questions about his murder and his legacy.

By ERIC HARRISON
TIMES STAFF WRITER

MEMPHIS, Tenn.—Billy Kyles was closest, and his memory of that fateful day 25 years ago is as fresh as if it had happened last week. One moment he's standing next to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, about to go to dinner. The next moment—it happened that fast—his old friend was gone.

Kyles had started for the stairs, leaving King leaning over the iron railing and chatting with others in the parking lot. "I got about four, five steps away, and I heard this tremendous noise," remembered Kyles, a Baptist minister and long-

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Associated Press

Union members march in Memphis to commemorate a 1968 march.

KING: A Murky Past and an Unclear Future.

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time civil rights activist. "I didn't at the time realize it was a shot. I looked over into the courtyard and people were ducking and hiding, and then I realized."

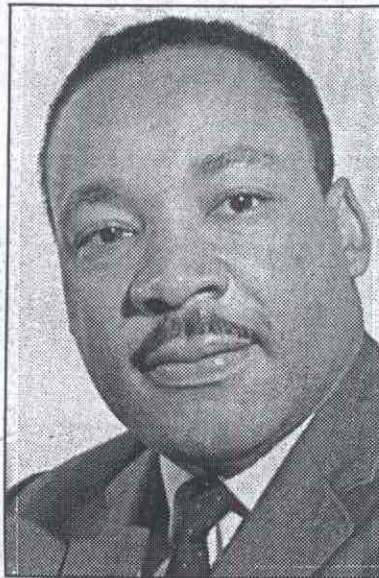
He turned and saw King lying on his back, his leg against the railing. "I rushed to him," Kyles said, "and I saw this tremendous hole in the right side of his face."

The confusion and disarray that swirled then about that scarred and aging section of Memphis mirrored the disorder that soon would engulf the civil rights movement, that had in fact already started to encroach.

As King's legacy is celebrated across the nation today on the anniversary of his death, his associates and disciples are still struggling to define and re-galvanize the movement, even as new questions are being raised about whether the U.S. government played a role in King's assassination.

King today is an icon, with a national holiday in his honor. And acknowledgment is widespread that America is a radically different nation because of the labors of King and the civil rights movement.

But, as Princeton University professor and civil rights scholar Cornel West noted Friday in a speech at the National Civil Rights Museum here: "He was hated, despised and harassed in his day by many of the same groups who now embrace his name."



Associated Press

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

For many young people, King has been eclipsed in popularity by Malcolm X, the black Muslim leader who, until a change of heart shortly before his death in 1965, challenged white America in a more openly confrontational fashion.

King partisans note that some college students today may falsely view the Southern Baptist minister as a "milquetoast, spineless brother," in West's words. But the white Establishment of the 1960s saw him as a major threat—enough so that government intelligence agencies spied on him and tried to

sabotage his leadership.

Believing that those agencies may also have played a role in his death, many of King's former associates have begun to press for full disclosure of the extent of government spying on King and other civil rights leaders—and for release of files on the House investigation into his murder.

"There are undeniable fingerprints of American intelligence involvement in the assassination," said Philip Melanson, a political science professor at the University of Massachusetts who has studied King's slaying.

While Melanson does not say which agency he believes was involved, he contends that there is enough evidence—and enough unanswered questions—to warrant a new investigation and release of the House committee's files, which have been sealed until the year 2028.

He makes his argument in "Who Killed Martin Luther King?" a new book that raises the question of possible CIA involvement.

It recently has come to light through a 16-month investigation by the Memphis Commercial Appeal newspaper that the Army also spied on King extensively and that Green Beret agents were in Memphis on the day he was killed.

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), a former King aide, has called on the Defense Department to fully reveal the nature and extent of the spying, saying the disclosure of Army surveillance "raises the unthink-

25th anniversary
file

25 Years After His Slaying

able question of whether the United States Army conspired with others and may have been involved with the assassination."

A congressional investigation concluded in 1978 that King was shot that chilly evening by James Earl Ray—a drifter, petty criminal and escaped convict who may have been encouraged by a racist, right-wing conspiracy.

Ray confessed to the killing in 1969 and, without ever standing trial, was sentenced to 99 years in prison. He later charged that he was coerced into the plea. Since then, he has insisted that he did not pull the trigger but that he may have unwittingly aided those who did.

"Nobody believes that James Earl Ray was the killer," said the Rev. Harold Middlebrook, a Baptist minister who was involved in the sanitation workers strike that brought King to Memphis in 1968. "He might've pulled the trigger, but he was not the killer. And I'm not really sure that he was the trigger-puller at all."

"I'm not sure if we'll ever find out what really happened," said the Rev. Joseph Lowery, executive director of the Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Council, the organization King founded in the late 1950s.

Ray, he said, "was a patsy and a tool. He was a small cog in a big wheel, a two-for-a-quarter, petty, punk thief. He could never have come up with anything like that."

Kyles agreed: "I think if [Ray]

knew who hired him, he wouldn't be alive. I think they would've offed him like they did [Lee Harvey] Oswald," President John F. Kennedy's assassin.

Ray, incarcerated in a Tennessee prison, explains his presence in Memphis in 1968 by saying that he was following the orders of the mysterious Raoul, a man he met the previous year in a Montreal bar and for whom he had done a succession of shady deeds.

As he outlined in a book and in testimony during a mock trial, part of which is to be aired on cable TV's Home Box Office, Ray says that it was at Raoul's direction that he traveled to Atlanta and then to Memphis by way of Birmingham, Ala., where he purchased the high-powered rifle authorities believe killed King.

It was Raoul, he says, who told him to rent a room in a flophouse near the motel. Ray contends that he thought he was aiding Raoul in

a gunrunning operation and that he had turned the room over to Raoul and was far away on the evening King was killed, supposedly by a bullet fired from a bathroom window in the flophouse.

Those who question whether government agencies were involved note that at the time of his death, King was struggling to expand the civil rights movement, speaking out against the war in Vietnam and trying to organize a massive poor people's march on Washington.

"He was bringing the poor people of the nation together," Kyles said. "You're talking about a reallocation of the wealth. You're talking about new tax laws and aiming it at that level. What's Martin's life compared to all that?"

It must also be noted that King was killed at a low ebb for the movement—after its major victories were behind it—when he feared he was losing control of its various elements. He was struggling to redirect it.

Twenty-five years later, those

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KING: 25 Years After Slaying, Questions Remain

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he left behind still are groping for direction.

"The issues today don't lend themselves to a bus boycott or a sit-in. We won those battles," Lowery said, referring to passage of civil rights laws in the mid-1960s that guaranteed blacks the right to vote and outlawed racial discrimination. "We're victims of our own success."

Lowery noted the hurdles facing the civil rights movement today: the anti-civil rights climate of the Ronald Reagan and George Bush presidencies, the perception that the obstacles to black equality were torn down in the 1960s, the intractable nature of economic inequities and the limits of altruism in tough economic times.

"If Martin were here, he'd face the same problems. . . . We're dealing with an economic system. If we eliminated racism tonight, there would still be 30 million poor people in this country," he said.

"Every struggle makes a greater struggle necessary," said C. T. Vivian, a former close associate of King's. "The question is, what's that struggle going to be? That's where we are 25 years after [King's] death."

At a conference this weekend held at the museum that occupies the former Lorraine Motel, a number of civil rights veterans said that, in many ways, conditions are worse for blacks today than they were 25 years ago. They mentioned the growing problems of homeless-

ness, drugs and violent youth gangs.

Lou Turner, a young activist from Chicago who identified himself as a member of the radical left, raised a provocative question, one that King's contemporaries in the movement were hard-pressed to answer:

Given the rioting that broke out after King's death and the urban disturbances that have occurred since, did King's death mark the

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end of the civil rights movement as it had been understood up to that time, or did it in fact open a new chapter of racial struggle in which the brick and the firebomb replaced marches and sit-ins as the weapons of choice?

And, if so, what is the meaning of the Los Angeles disturbances—or the succession of riots in Miami in the 1980s, or the other disturbanc-

es that have broken out across the nation in the intervening years—if not stark evidence that the post-King epoch of social rebellion is still going on, unaddressed?

"The defining moment that we've lived through in the last few years is Los Angeles," Turner said, advancing the notion that the problem is "an exhaustion of the ideas of the previous age."

It is a sobering thought, and one that a number of speakers supported, although in far less dire terms. The two-day conference was punctuated by calls for regrouping, re-prioritizing and rededication.

In Atlanta, Lowery, sitting behind King's old desk in the crowded SCLC headquarters, said the organization is continuing its work, helping the homeless as well as negotiating with corporations to get them to hire and promote more blacks. He is on the verge of signing a covenant with a restaurant chain and is talking to two other companies, he said.

"That's the stuff that we try to do," he said. "It doesn't get a lot of publicity."

Too much time has been spent idolizing King, putting him on a pedestal when efforts would be better directed toward improving conditions for blacks, he said.

He supported the King national holiday, but said: "Frankly, I'd rather see a business say: 'We're going to stay open on King's birthday, but we're going to promote 100 blacks.'"