

Ex-Aides Deny FBI Led Dr. King to 'Death Motel'

Houston Chronicle 4/1/76

BY WILLIAM CHAPMAN

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Washington — Aides to the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. deny that King was taunted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) into moving to the black-owned motel in Memphis where he was murdered by a sniper.

"It's a false lead," said Rep. Andrew Young, D-Ga., of the recent speculation that an FBI plot to embarrass King caused him to move to the motel room where he was killed by a rifle bullet fired from across the street.

King was shot on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel, which catered almost exclusively to blacks, on April 4, 1968, while participating in a strike by garbage workers.

A week earlier, King and two aides had spent several hours in a white-owned motel, the Holiday Inn-Rivermont, overlooking the Mississippi River.

King's reason for changing motels has been scrutinized by the Justice Department and other assassination investigators in recent weeks because of an FBI memorandum unearthed by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

The memo, dated March 28, 1968, detailed a plan to publicly portray King as a "hypocrite" for staying in a white motel while he was leading a black protest aimed at boycotting white merchants in Memphis. The memo suggested using a friendly news media source in Memphis to publicize where King was staying, apparently to cause disillusionment among his followers.

A Justice Department source said recently there is no evidence the FBI ever put the scheme into effect.

Whether it was or not, the scheme had nothing to do with King's change of lodging, according to former aides who were interviewed in Atlanta this week.

Bernard Lee, who is now executive vice-president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, recalls that there never was any plan for King to stay at the Rivermont in the first place.

He said that he, King, and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy wound up at the Rivermont on March 28 simply because it was the safest place to find shelter when their protest march that day erupted into violence, looting, and clashes with Memphis police.

In the confusion, Lee said, they flagged down either a police car or a private automobile and at someone's suggestion — he has forgotten who — fled to the Rivermont. They remained there a few hours before flying to Atlanta, having

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announced preparations to return the next week for a renewed protest march.

In the meantime, Young, who was then a top aide to King, moved with other staff members into Memphis and set up headquarters in the Lorraine.

Young said this week it was "natural" for them to choose the Lorraine. In any city, King and his staff customarily stayed either in black-owned motels or with friends in the black community, he said.

When King returned to Memphis on April 3, Young said, it was natural for him to stay in the motel where his staff had set up headquarters.

"The FBI may have tried to exploit it (King's brief sojourn in the white motel)," Young added. "But there was nothing suspicious about Martin's staying in the Lorraine. It was natural."

James Earl Ray pleaded guilty in 1969 to killing King. However, he denied at the time that he had acted alone and has since claimed he did not fire the fatal shot. His petition for a trial is now before the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.