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The Other Assassination

By MARTIN WALDRON

Of the political assassinations that shocked Americans in the 1960's, that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has left the most serious and persistent unanswered questions, including a paramount one—why?

The civil rights leader and Nobel Laureate was fatally wounded by a single rifle shot at 6:01 P.M. on April 4, 1968, as he stood on the second floor of a motel in Memphis, Tenn. He was, at 39, one of the country's most effective and influential leaders.

James Earl Ray, a small time robber and escaped convict, was arrested in London two months later. On March 10, 1969, his 41st birthday, Ray pleaded guilty to the assassination and was sentenced to 99 years in prison.

Despite the seeming finality of a guilty plea, doubts persist that Ray was the sole assassin, or the assassin at all. Ray himself has contributed to the doubts with statements that he was framed by criminals and then sold out by his lawyers. Even during the court session when he pleaded guilty, Ray told the judge that by pleading guilty, he was not agreeing that he had not been part of a conspiracy. Although the judge, W. Preston Battle Jr., did not question Ray about that assertion, he later said that he himself had some doubts that Ray had acted alone.

Although he signed a stipulation that said he fired the shot that killed Dr. King, Ray has always maintained to his lawyers and to investigators that he did not do the actual shooting, and that he was lured to Memphis by criminal associates. He was their "patsy," he says, and he did not know that Dr. King was shot until more than an hour after he had been.

He said he had pleaded guilty because one of his attorneys, Percy Foreman of Houston, had convinced him that if he did not, he would be convicted and sentenced to death. Ray maintained that position so insistently that in 1970 the Justice Department tried to open a secret investigation of the King assassination. The inquiry did not get very far because the Federal Bureau of Investigation, according to one Justice Department official, refused to reopen the case and would not furnish some of its records to the Justice Department. A major reason was said to



James Earl Ray

be the strong dislike of J. Edgar Hoover for Dr. King. Attorney General Edward H. Levi said recently he has appointed two assistant attorneys general to review the King murder. It is not yet clear how extensive the new inquiry will be.

There are several questions that have gone without satisfactory answers, in addition to the one of motive. These are some of those questions:

● How was Ray, a stranger to Memphis, able to pick the one place where a sniper might shoot Dr. King and have a chance to escape? This was one of the questions that bothered Judge Battle.

Prosecutors have tended to gloss over how Ray was able to find Bessie Brewer's rooming house, the perfect place from which to shoot Dr. King. They say that anyone who knew that the civil rights leader was staying at the Lorraine Motel could have scouted out the area and noted that the flophouse would make an ideal sniper's nest.

But Ray had only two and a half hours from the time he arrived in downtown Memphis until the shot was fired, hardly time to plan what was an obviously well-organized crime.

Also unexplained is why Ray would be careless enough to leave his fingerprints around the place if he planned to shoot Dr. King. It was through the fingerprints that he was sought for the murder.

● Why was Ray reluctant to tell his lawyers about his connections in New Orleans? Ray's New Orleans activities have always been

something of a mystery. Arthur Hanes of Birmingham, who was Ray's lawyer until he was fired the day before Ray's trial was to begin, said Ray talked freely about everything "except New Orleans." Ray seemed scared to death of that city and all of Louisiana, Mr. Hanes said. Ray did say that he used a New Orleans number to contact his criminal associates.

● Where did Ray get the money he spent from the time he escaped from prison in early 1967 until he was arrested in London—after traveling through five countries in an effort to escape?

He got it from criminal associates, he said. The F.B.I. said he got it from robbers. Ray said he smuggled heroin into the United States from Canada and jewelry into Mexico for a "contact" he knew as Raoul. It was Raoul, he said, who lured him to Memphis to frame him for the King assassination.

● Whose clothes were found in Ray's luggage? Some underwear was found in Ray's travel bag, which was discarded with a rifle on the street near where Dr. King was killed. The Memphis police identified it as Ray's, but it has been established since that the underwear was too small to be Ray's.

"James Earl Ray couldn't have gotten his big toe into the underwear," Mr. Hanes says. These, and other anomalies, though puzzling, are not as compelling as the apparent lack of motive.

If there had been a trial, the prosecutors planned to try to prove that Ray was overwhelmed by a hatred for blacks. But the evidence of that was very slight—only the testimony of two fellow convicts that he had on a few occasions made anti-black remarks. That evidence was not nearly enough to offset the belief of those who knew Ray best, two of his brothers, that if he were involved, it was for money. The prosecutors apparently had no evidence that Ray felt any personal animosity toward Dr. King.

For months before the assassination, Ray had been living what was, for him, the good life in California. He was earning money from his smuggling. He had a girl friend. He was taking dancing lessons, attended a bartender's school, had his long nose bobbed, seen a hypnotist and a psychologist to improve his personality, and had settled into a comfortable rut.

Why, then, would he suddenly get into his car in mid-March of 1968, drive across the country and shoot Dr. King?

If he did not do it for money, his real motive is not readily apparent. If he did, then who paid him for Dr. King's murder?

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