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Reopening the King Case

THE OFFICIAL EXPLANATIONS of the circumstances of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have never been fully satisfying. A host of loose ends and contradictions have surrounded the case in which James Earl Ray was convicted. Not the least of them concerns the role of the FBI, first as an agency harassing Dr. King and then as an agency investigating the circumstances of his death.

Attorney General Edward H. Levi has taken what appears to be a positive first step in the case. He has asked the heads of Justice's civil rights division and criminal division to review the FBI's work in the investigation that followed Dr. King's murder in Memphis on April 4, 1968. The Justice Department has made it clear that this is not a reopening of the King case, but rather a review of the FBI's files to determine if there is any reason to reopen it. We think there is ample reason for such a move.

To begin with, Mr. Ray is serving a 99-year sentence for a crime in which he contends that he is a "fall guy" and that others were involved. Such protests by prisoners are fairly ordinary. But this is far from an ordinary murder case. It is a case in which a man whose previous

work had been small-time crime on a local scale who was suddenly possessed of the means to travel quickly from Memphis to Toronto, there to obtain false identification and move on to Lisbon, and from Lisbon to London, where he was apprehended at Heathrow Airport three months after the murder. Moreover, claims have been made that there are witnesses with evidence that has a direct bearing on the case.

None of that might turn out to mean anything. It may well be that Ray did, after all, act alone. Nonetheless, there must be a resolution of the questions that do not go away. This is especially true in the wake of the Senate Intelligence Committee's disclosure of the extent to which the FBI harassed Dr. King. It bugged him repeatedly and sent him a letter suggesting he commit suicide.

These disclosures are apparently what inspired Dr. King's widow, Mrs. Coretta Scott King to tell reporters in Nairobi, Kenya, the other day that she now believes her husband's murder was a conspiracy. Whatever is required of the Justice Department, or any other part of the government, to get quickly to a resolution of these questions, must be done.