

Who Really Killed Martin Luther King?

The Unanswered Questions About James Earl Ray

Part 4/4/93

By Robert Andrews

OLIVER STONE missed the mark. The questions clouding the death of Martin Luther King Jr. make JFK's assassination look open-and-shut by comparison. The questions slash to the very core of the conventional wisdom that, 25 years ago in Memphis, James Earl Ray acted alone.

I'm skeptical of conspiracy theories. Underlying any octopus scenario is a presumption that the government is: 1) leakproof and 2) capable of faultless operations of mind-boggling complexity. My skepticism comes firsthand from Vietnam tours as a Green Beret, as a CIA officer working a beat that stretched from the Koreas to Burma and as a Senate staffer for intelligence and national security affairs.

You can't put together an obviously illegal operation with hundreds of people and keep it quiet. There's going to be a leak; there's bound to be a deathbed confession. If you're up to no good, don't do it in government. Read the Pentagon Papers. Ask Richard Nixon.

But the intelligence officer's skepticism cuts both ways. And looking at the evidence, I can't help but wonder—who *did* kill Martin Luther King?

My questions about the King assassination began indirectly, starting with a passage I came across in "Parting the Waters." In that towering account of the civil rights movement, Taylor Branch complains about the government's reluctance to open up files regarding J. Edgar Hoover's claims that King was surrounded by communist agents. Branch's accusation stuck, and within days, I was sketching the plot for a novel about an intelligence officer who stumbles into the King files.

I thought I could do only minimal research, but within a short time I sensed a discordance, a note off-key about Ray, the convicted assassin. My doubts persuaded me to dig more than I'd ever intended: the official records in the National Archives, the files of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, books on the subject. Like Taylor Branch, I found doors closed all around me; crucial files on the King assassination were sealed, not to be opened until 2027. I also traveled to Toronto, where I traced Ray's path of a quarter-century ago. Out of this came my conviction that the official version is wrong—that James Earl Ray did not act alone.

What is particularly striking from the intelligence perspective is how Ray suddenly threw off a lifetime of incompetency to outwit the world's best law enforcement agencies.

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houses; his landladies reported that he received visitors and phone calls. Ray also frequented a bar called the Silver Dollar Tavern. Interrogating the bar's staff, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police got the description of a male companion who spent hours drinking and talking with Ray. A man fitting that description called on Ray at his rooming house, and a landlady testified that she saw Ray's caller pass him something "like papers" that Ray put inside his coat pocket. The following day, Ray bought a round-trip airline ticket to London.

Who were these people?

By the time Ray was arrested in London, he had been on the run for 14 months. During that time he had purchased a Mustang convertible (shortly after his prison break-out) and traveled extensively—Mexico, Los Angeles, Birmingham, New Orleans. In Los Angeles, a month before King's death, he underwent plastic surgery to disguise his features. The FBI tried—and failed—to pin various bank robberies on Ray. As the House assassinations committee later reported, "a specific answer to Ray's manner of funding alluded [sic] the FBI."

The committee did raise an intriguing matter missing from the original FBI investigation: that Ray might have been connected with a white racist in St. Louis who had put out a \$50,000 contract on Martin Luther King. But then-Rep. Christopher Dodd dismissed this theory as weak: "... I am unable to say with any degree of certainty who conspired with James Earl Ray or under what plan they were acting."

According to all testimony, Ray was not an obsessed racist. From records of his earlier stays in prison, it appears that Ray had no problems with blacks. After escaping, he chose to hide out in ethnically mixed neighborhoods. Unlike Lee Harvey Oswald, who had a history of fringe political associations, Ray never took up with any of the white supremacist causes or organizations of the '60s. He was never more than a small-time hood on the run.

What, then, did Ray have to gain by killing Martin Luther King? *not by denying it*

Nowhere has Ray himself addressed these questions. It's not as if he has been in isolation. He has been interviewed by assassinations scholars; he has appeared on television; he has written his autobiography; he will be a participant in a mock trial to be televised tonight by HBO. Ray contends that he is innocent, that he was set up as a fall guy. Nonetheless, questions about funding and the aliases seem to bother him. In a 1984 interview, assassination expert Philip Melanson pushed Ray on these topics, and Ray doggedly persisted in dodging them.

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Ray, after all, was one of life's perpetual losers. The army threw him out for unsuitability. He botched the theft of a typewriter from an L.A. restaurant. He robbed a cab driver of \$12 and fled into a dead-end alley, where he was caught. In 1959, he flubbed a \$120 supermarket holdup in St. Louis and was sentenced to 20 years in the Missouri state penitentiary.

But Ray defied this pattern in April 1967, when he escaped from the Missouri prison. Almost a year later, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was murdered. Two months after that, on June 8, Ray was arrested in London. From his prison escape until his arrest, Ray behaved more like a trained spy than a failed petty criminal. *nonsense!*

If it takes a spy to catch a spy, it also takes a spy to recognize red flags that criminal investigators may miss. Such a red flag was James Earl Ray's use of aliases.

After his prison escape, Ray chose the names of four men: Eric S. Galt, John Willard, Paul Bridgeman and Ramon George Sneyd. All four were men then living in Toronto. All four resembled Ray—dark hair, medium build, same age bracket. That's the kind of cover professionals build. One doesn't pick names like that from a phone book. The chiller: *James Earl Ray had never been in Toronto in his life.*

How did Ray—this loser, this loner—get these names? Why Toronto, of all places? And why, after King's assassination, did Ray go straight to that city? It is a choice that would set off alarms in any intelligence agency, for Toronto has long been known in espionage circles as a "passport mill." Leon Trotsky—and his murderer—traveled under Canadian passports obtained there. So did KGB master spy Rudolf Abel. Was it mere coincidence that Ray, the former bungler, got a Canadian passport there?

Ray stayed in Toronto for two months, during which time he lived at two different rooms.

Robert Andrews's forthcoming novel, "Death in a Promised Land," will be published by Pocket Books.

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These questions—and others—were never pursued because Ray never had a jury trial. Under pressure from his attorney, he pleaded guilty before a judge in Tennessee and, within an hour, received a sentence of 99 years.

Ironically, there's every likelihood that a jury would never have convicted Ray because of the lack of evidence:

- No witness placed him at the scene of the crime. Memphis police officers investigating the rooming house from which the shot was supposedly fired described the prime witnesses, a couple named Stephens, as intoxicated. Charles Stephens, who later claimed he had seen Ray run away after a shot was fired, initially swore that he had only seen the back of a man running away down a dimly lit hallway. The House committee later determined that Stephens had been "in a drunken stupor" at the time of the assassination and "could never really identify the assailant."

- Unknown fingerprints on Ray's rifle were never identified. There were also unknown fingerprints on other evidence said to belong to Ray.

- Ballistics tests failed to connect the bullet that killed King to the rifle Ray allegedly used. The fatal bullet broke into three fragments and no ballistics tests could be run.

- Ray's fingerprints weren't found in the room from which the shot was supposedly fired.

What does this add up to? Mere coincidence? Deliberate deception? Professional tradecraft? And do you dare say that darkest of all words in the lexicon of an open society—conspiracy?

Jesse Jackson, one of the survivors of that killing day in Memphis, recently wrote the introduction to Ray's autobiography. Jackson maintains that J. Edgar Hoover was responsible for the assassination. Experience tells me that a top-down conspiracy would have sprung a million leaks by now, but I also know there are important questions with no answers. And we won't get those answers unless we do what we should have done 25 years ago—open all the files on the King case and put James Earl Ray's case before a jury.

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