

# WHO AND WHAT KILLED DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

By U.S. Rep. Louis Stokes  
Chairman  
House Select Committee on Assassinations

JAMES EARL RAY has been imprisoned in Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary for over 12 years for the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Despite that fact or perhaps because of it, there is still doubt in the minds of millions of people around the globe that we really know who or what actually killed Dr. King. As a matter of fact, the controversy reaches new and higher levels every year on the anniversary of the assassination.

Because of the controversy and because of Dr. King's stature as a public leader and a public presence, the U.S. House of Representatives formed the House Select Committee on Assassinations—which I chaired—to investigate the circumstances surrounding the assassinations of Dr. King and President John F. Kennedy. That committee interviewed scores of witnesses and sent investigators across the country to examine every scrap of information relating to the Memphis tragedy. We not only investigated the movements of James Earl Ray and persons associated with him; we also investigated reports and rumors that the FBI or some other public agency or secret group was involved in the assassination. Finally, after 24 years of investigations and hearings, the Committee concluded—on the basis of hard and irrefutable evidence—that James Earl Ray fired the one shot that killed Dr. King, and that *Dr. King was probably the victim of a conspiracy.*

That conclusion, as you can see, raises a number of crucial and controversial questions. And since it and the new facts discovered by the Committee have not received proper public attention, it would perhaps be useful, on this thirteenth anniversary of the assassination, to review the record and clear the air. But in order to do that, it is necessary, first of all, to deal with the fact that I—a Black congressman from Ohio and a personal friend of Martin Luther King Jr.—was named chairman of the Committee. Needless to say, this was a precedent-shattering appointment, for never before had a Black served as chairman of a congressional investigating committee with a national scope.

I was, from the beginning, keenly aware of the honor—and the responsibilities and dangers—of the assignment. I remember, even today, the call I received from Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, just before noon, on March 8, 1977. Speaker O'Neill spoke fast, saying, "Louie, will you take the chairmanship of the Select Committee on Assassinations?" Without a moment's thought, I said, "Yes, Mr. Speaker, if you think I can do the job." His reply was, "You can do it. I'm appointing you at noon."

As I hung up the telephone, my mind immediately raced back to my own personal relationship with Dr. King, whose death it was now my responsibility to investigate. I had met him in 1965

when he came to Cleveland to lead a movement to register Black voters. Two years later, through the leadership of Dr. King, a record number of Blacks were registered in Cleveland and my brother, Carl B. Stokes, became the first Black mayor of a major American city. The night that Carl won, Dr. King and I sat together in a small room on the second floor of the campaign headquarters, while jubilant throngs celebrated below. Few people know that he was present that night. Characteristically, he decided to remain in the background—away from TV cameras and reporters—because he was proud of Carl's accomplishment and because he was determined not to take the spotlight away from him.

Five months later, on April 4, 1968, I was campaigning for Congress in Cleveland. As I came out of one campaign stop and got into my car to head for the next appearance, I heard on the radio that Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated in Memphis.

I remembered that April night as I sat at my desk on March 8, 1977, thinking about the Speaker's call and mandate. And I decided then—and I told my staff later—that no stone was to be left unturned in an uncompromising search for the truth. In that connection, I told my staff director, C. Robert Blakey, that I wanted the staff to be fully integrated. And I am happy to report that Blacks and other minorities constituted at least one-third of the professional staff.

I believe, under the circumstances, that our Committee and the brilliant staff we hired came as close to the truth as was humanly possible. And although we were hampered by the fact that we started our investigation a full eight years after the shot had been fired, I believe our two major findings will stand the test of history.

The first finding was that James Earl Ray was the probable killer of Dr. King. The evidence in support of this finding can be summarized under five general headings:

1. *James Earl Ray stalked Dr. King for a period immediately preceding the assassination.* It was the judgment of the Committee—which was composed, incidentally, of able men of different races, backgrounds and persuasions—that the evidence clearly showed that Ray pursued King cross country from Los Angeles to Atlanta and finally to Memphis.

On March 16, 1968, for example, Dr. King was in Los Angeles for a speaking engagement. At that time, Ray was living in Los Angeles, where he was attending a bartending school. The next day, on March 17, Ray filled out a post office change of address card, listing Atlanta as a temporary address. On the same day, he drove eastward from Los Angeles to Atlanta.



Convicted assassin, James Earl Ray, takes oath before testifying at hearing of the Stokes Committee on Assassinations. Chairman Louis Stokes (D., Ohio) (c., right), examines the murder rifle with two members of his committee, Delegate Walter E. Fauntroy of the District of Columbia and Rep. Robert W. Edgar of Pennsylvania.



Taking note of this unusual circumstance, the Committee decided that Ray's decision to leave California was planned and was not triggered by impulse. After graduating from bartending school, Ray had, in fact, mentioned to associates his plans to travel east.

Ray emphatically denied that he had filed the change of address card in Los Angeles until he was confronted

with the card during the hearings. The Committee viewed Ray's travel plans and what they viewed as his attempted coverup as the first significant indication of his interest in tracking Dr. King.

Ray's pursuit of Dr. King continued next to Selma, Alabama. Dr. King spoke in Selma on March 21, 1968, and a registration card from the Flamingo Motel in Selma showed Ray as a registered guest on March 22, 1968. Ray later told the Committee that he had been traveling from New Orleans to Birmingham and got lost on the way. The Committee questioned Ray's alibi, for he had two maps. Even more incriminating is the fact that there were two direct routes from New Orleans to Birmingham—and Selma was not on either route.

There is also evidence to indicate that Dr. King and Ray were in Atlanta on the same day—March 30, 1968. On that day, King returned to Atlanta from Memphis after the first sanitation workers march. Ray denied that he returned to Atlanta before going to Memphis, but two events compellingly verify his presence there. First, Ray paid his Atlanta landlord for a second week's rent. (The landlord testified to this before the Committee.) Secondly, there is a laundry ticket bearing his name which was written on April 1, 1968. In testimony before the Committee, an official of the cleaners noted, and the evidence proves, that the laundry was picked up on April 5, 1968.

From Atlanta, James Earl Ray went to Memphis, the Committee concluded, for the express purpose of shooting Dr. King. Although Ray contended that he did not know that Dr. King was in Memphis, in newspapers retrieved from his personal belongings, Dr. King's visit to Memphis and the place he was staying were noted.

The evidence is clear, then: James Earl Ray stalked Dr. King for a malign purpose.

2. The evidence is also clear that *James Earl Ray was in the boarding house and the bathroom from which the fatal shot was fired.* Evidence uncovered by the Committee clearly showed that the shot was fired from the rear bathroom window of a rooming house across the street from the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King was staying. Ray admitted renting a room at the house owned by Bessie Brewer. Mrs. Brewer testified that Ray insisted

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on renting room 5-B which was located at the rear of the building and which gave him a perfect view of the Lorraine Motel.

Two tenants of the rooming house testified that the occupant of room 5-B frequently used the bathroom in the hall on the crucial afternoon of April 4. One of the residents told the Committee that he made two attempts to use the bathroom only to find it occupied by James Earl Ray, the tenant in Room 5-B.

After two of the tenants heard the shot—the shot authorities and experts believe killed Dr. King—they also heard the sound of footsteps running from the direction of the bathroom. One of the tenants recognized the man who was carrying something under his arm as he turned the corner.

3. The third major point is that James Earl Ray was directly linked to the murder weapon. Only moments after the assassination, the rifle later identified as the one used to kill Dr. King was found outside Canipe's Amusement Company, which was across the street from the rooming house. Expert law enforcement officials testified at Ray's trial and before our Committee that this was the same type of rifle that Ray purchased on March 30, 1968, in Birmingham.

Although Ray admitted on several occasions under oath that he had bought a .243 caliber rifle and a telescopic sight at Aero-marine Supply Company in Birmingham and subsequently exchanged it for a more powerful .30-06 Remington Gamemaster, he later changed his story to say that he transported the original rifle from Birmingham to Memphis. It was in Memphis, he said, that he gave the rifle to an associate named Raoul as a sample for prospective buyers in a gunrunning scheme.

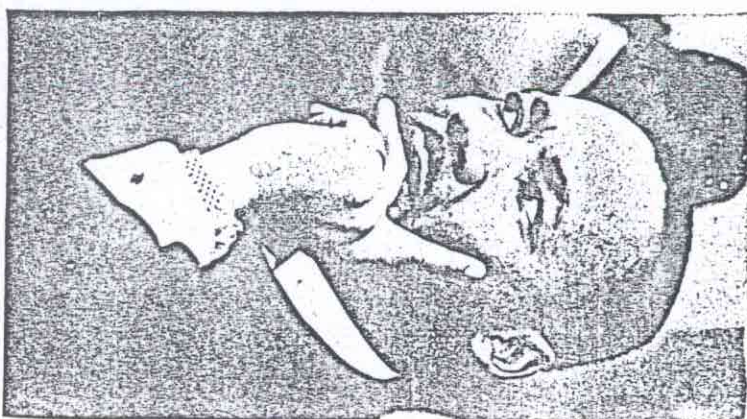
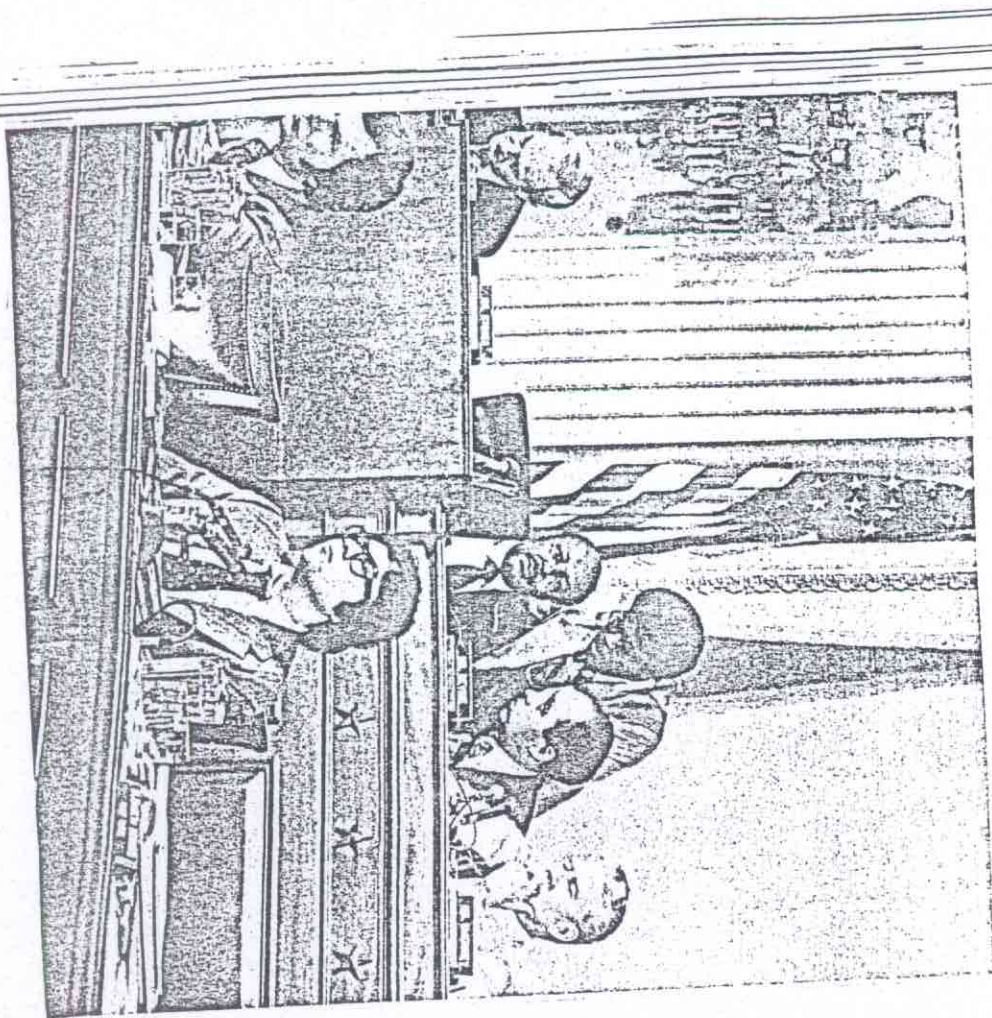
This brings us to the fourth and decisive point.

4. James Earl Ray was unable to produce evidence to explain his unusual movements or to identify the mysterious "Raoul," who supposedly directed Ray in every phase of their so-called gunrunning scheme before Dr. King's assassination. To mention the obvious and centrally important fact, the evidence indicates that the mysterious "Raoul" never existed. Consider, for example, the following facts: Ray was unable to produce a single witness to establish "Raoul's" existence. The Committee, moreover, interviewed several witnesses from three rooming houses where Ray allegedly met "Raoul." In every instance, the witnesses said they remembered seeing Ray. But not a single witness remembered seeing Ray with anyone else.

But the most convincing evidence in this general connection was Ray's inability to give a consistent description of "Raoul." If, as he said, "Raoul" was his close associate, he should have been able to describe him consistently. But—revealingly—he could not. On four different occasions, Ray described "Raoul" to different

never identified

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Stokes Committee on Assassinations said in official report that Martin Luther King Jr. (above) was probably the victim of a conspiracy. The committee asked the FBI to review the findings and determine whether further official investigation is needed.

**KING JR. Continued**

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and a "sandy-haired Latin."  
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duct was morally reprehensible,  
and unconstitutional.

to understand this finding, it is necessary to recall the climate

of the times. During the late '60s, fear of the burgeoning Civil Rights movement along with a strong anti-King feeling within the FBI led the Bureau to engage in a program to discredit civil rights organizations and ultimately Dr. King. This program was called COINTELPRO.

Initially conceived as a program to ensure that none of the civil rights organizations was subversive or connected with the Communist Party, COINTELPRO eventually blossomed into a full-scaled counterintelligence attack against civil rights organizations.

At that time, a security investigation of a specific group was a legitimate function of the FBI. But the program that endangered Dr. King and attempted to discredit civil rights organizations was never a legitimate function of the FBI.

The Select Committee concluded that the tactics used in the program and the actions taken by the FBI in COINTELPRO were clearly abusive and exceeded the agency's legal authority. The program also amounted to a violation of the civil rights of those being investigated.

The vigor and aggressive manner of the FBI COINTELPRO operation cannot be understood apart from the personalities of Martin Luther King Jr. and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who died in 1972.

Dr. King was a social critic, and FBI director Hoover was a man who strongly resented criticism from any source. Dr. King had been very vocal in his criticism of the minority employment practices of the bureau and its lax approach to following up civil rights complaints in the South. To further complicate the issue, Hoover was characterized as somewhat of a racist.

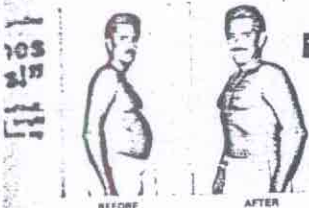
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## DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. *Continued*

This criticism angered Hoover who, on one occasion, called Dr. King "the most notorious liar in the nation."

It was in this setting of rancor and ill will that FBI field offices and agents began an aggressive COINTELPRO program against Dr. King, despite the fact that the connection between Dr. King and the Communist Party had been clearly disproven.

As the Civil Rights movement increased in prominence and Dr. King increased in stature, FBI activities were systematically stepped up. Following the March on Washington in 1963, ranking FBI officials met and decided to step up surveillance of Dr. King.

Between 1963 and 1966, the FBI, through electronic surveillance equipment, monitored Dr. King's telephone conversations. Although the specific assignment was to listen to and record conversations between Dr. King and alleged Communist Party workers, all conversations were recorded. The Committee discovered that these conversations and other information were used by the FBI to create tension between Dr. King, his civil rights associates and even members of his family.

One example of this, cited by the Committee, was an anonymous letter and alleged transcript of a surveillance tape which was sent to Dr. King in 1964. Records and a copy of the letter found by the Committee prove that the FBI sent the letter, which threatened Dr. King with exposure of derogatory personal information and implied that suicide would be a suitable course of action. Here is an excerpt:

King, there is only one thing left for you to do. You know what that is. You have just 34 days in which to do it. You are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy fraudulent self is bared to the nation.

During the hearings, the Committee also found that the FBI COINTELPRO actions extended beyond the invasion of Dr. King's privacy. The FBI, as revealed by witnesses, tried to interfere with fund-raising efforts of SCLC as well as the awarding of degrees and other honors to Dr. King.

The Crime Records Division at the FBI was also active in the COINTELPRO operation. The Bureau via its contacts with "friendly media" systematically placed articles or provided derogatory information about Dr. King.

A prime example of this occurred in a St. Louis newspaper less than one week before Dr. King was assassinated. The FBI placed an editorial in that paper which tried to discredit Dr. King.

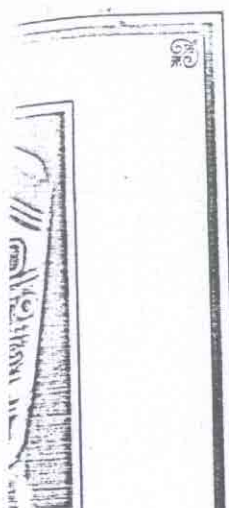
With the prospect of King's spring Poor People's Campaign in Washington and the aftermath of the violent sanitation workers march in Memphis on March 28th as a backdrop, the FBI authored an editorial which suggested that Dr. King could not control the march in Memphis and that the violence was merely a prelude to what would happen at the march in Washington.

On March 30, 1968, the editorial appeared in the St. Louis paper accompanied by a disparaging cartoon of Dr. King. The language was clearly taken from the FBI-authored editorial. For example, a line in the FBI article said, "Memphis may only be the prelude to civil strife in our nation's capital." The newspaper line read, "Memphis could be only the prelude to a massive blood bath in the nation's Capital."

With these actions and the already tense situation in the country, the FBI's COINTELPRO operation increased the hostility towards Dr. King. The Committee found that the FBI showed no concern about the very real possibility and consequence that their program could bring to Dr. King.

Although the FBI COINTELPRO operation harmed Dr. King, that agency did not conspire to kill him. But that does not mean that others were not involved in a King conspiracy.

In fact, the House Select Committee on Assassinations uncovered facts that point to the conclusion that James Earl Ray did not act alone. Several findings were central to the Committee's conspiracy conclusion. First, the Committee rejected Ray's claim that he was an unwitting "fall guy" manipulated by others.



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## DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. *Continued*

Second, a close look at Ray's activities before the assassination, underscores the possibility of a conspiracy. We found, for example, that Ray was a man with significant associations—many of them criminal. During the months prior to the assassination, James Earl Ray had escaped from the Missouri State Penitentiary. His financing during this period, in all likelihood, was supplied by a bank robbery in Alton, Ill., in 1967. Further, his activities in California, viewed against the background of his fugitive status, his apolitical nature and his consistent refusal to admit the activities also strongly suggested the involvement of others.

Third, the Committee's analysis of Ray's motive for killing Dr. King is critical to the conspiracy conclusion. While unsympathetic to the Civil Rights movement which was prevalent in the '60s, racism was not a major motivating force for James Earl Ray. The Committee found that Ray historically was a financially motivated criminal. The Committee therefore deduced that the promise or expectation of financial gain was Ray's primary motivation. This motive brings with it implications of conspiracy.

The Committee found that there was substantial evidence to establish the existence of a St. Louis-based contract on the life of Dr. King. The evidence uncovered by the Committee pointed to St. Louis lawyer John Sutherland and John Kauffmann, owner of the Buff Acres Motel in Barnhardt, Mo. A witness testified that the contract to kill Dr. King was perceived as a standing offer.

There was no direct evidence that the Sutherland offer was accepted by Ray or his representative prior to the assassination of Dr. King. Despite an intensive effort, no evidence was found of a payoff to Ray or his representative either before or after the assassination. However, the Committee believed that the opportunities for Ray or his representatives to hear of this particular contract were many. This conclusion was based on several considerations. First, Ray himself was in the St. Louis area on at least two occasions during his early fugitive period. Second, John Kauffmann was arrested and convicted in 1967 for the manufacture and sale of amphetamines. During his trial, a link between his drug operation and the Missouri State Penitentiary where James Earl Ray was imprisoned was made. Third, both Kauffmann and Sutherland were active in the American Independent Party. In fact, Sutherland was active on both the local and national levels of the party. Moreover, the tavern of Ray's brother, John—the Grapevine Tavern—was used as a local distribution point for AIP campaign literature and paraphernalia. It was in these campaign activities that the Committee found the most likely connection between James Earl Ray and the St. Louis conspiracy.

The Committee believed that the St. Louis conspiracy provided an explanation for the involvement of Ray in the assassination. It is unfortunate that this information was not developed in 1968 when it could have been pursued by law enforcement agencies equipped with tools not available to the Committee and at a time when principals like Kauffmann and Sutherland were still alive.

At the close of our investigation we recommended that the Department of Justice review our findings and decide whether further official investigation was warranted in this case. This was the end of our investigation, but it was not, by any means, the end of the story, which will never end until the Dream the Dreamer died for is secured for all Americans. And as I look back on my involvement in this investigation, I have only one substantial regret: And that is that so much time elapsed before a full-scale investigation. My Committee undertook an investigation of a murder that was almost nine years old. The trail was cold, some witnesses had disappeared and others were dead. Some evidence had disappeared or had been destroyed. Our Committee did a commendable job, given all of the adverse conditions under which we conducted this investigation. Many people in high places never wanted this investigation to go forward. I am confident that if my Committee had had the opportunity to investigate this murder when it first occurred, we would have solved it in its entirety.