

Reno Reopens Probe of King Slaying

Inquiry to Focus on 2 Men's Claims About '68 Assassination

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The Justice Department yesterday reopened its investigation into the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., but said its new inquiry will be much narrower than the late civil rights leader's family had hoped.

Attorney General Janet Reno said she directed her department to review allegations by a former FBI agent and a former Memphis bar owner suggesting that convicted assassin James Earl Ray was part of a broader conspiracy. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, had asked Reno to establish a national fact-finding commission to conduct a more extensive investigation, including a review of Ray's claims before his death in April that he was wrongfully convicted of murder.

"We hope this review will provide answers to new questions that have been raised about a tragedy that still haunts our nation," Reno said.

In her statement, Reno indicated that "the evidence gathered during the inquiry will be followed wherever it may lead," and pledged to issue a report when the review is complete. Coretta Scott King yesterday issued her own statement, saying she welcomed Reno's decision as "a first step toward revealing the truth."

"I hope this inquiry will open a wider investigation of all pertinent leads bearing on the investigation," King said. "When this is accomplished, our family and the American people will at last have the satisfaction that all relevant evidence has been fully examined."

Coretta Scott King put the department in an awkward position in April when she met with Reno to press for a wide-ranging investigation into this politically sensitive matter. Last year, King's son Dexter publicly embraced Ray in a prison hospital, and made the stunning claim that the federal government had plotted his father's slaying to silence King's opposition to the Vietnam War.

Over the last 30 years, Ray's conviction was upheld eight times by state and federal courts, and this March a follow-up investigation by Tennessee authorities found no evidence that anyone but Ray was involved. The House Select Committee on Assassinations also concluded in 1979 that Ray killed King, although it left open the possibility that he might have been part of a conspiracy.

Reno's limited inquiry represents a kind of middle ground between the family's demands for a full investigation and the FBI's insistence that no further investigation was necessary. It will focus on claims by Donald

Wilson, a former FBI agent who has said he removed papers suggesting a conspiracy from Ray's car, and by Lloyd Jowers, a former bar owner who has claimed he was paid \$100,000 by a Memphis produce dealer to arrange the King assassination.

In March, after three decades of silence, Wilson said he had discovered papers in Ray's car with the name "Raul," lending credence to Ray's claim that he was set up by a gunrunner named "Raoul." But the FBI has denied that Wilson was part of the team that searched the car, calling his account a "total fabrication." And Tennessee authorities have dismissed Jowers's claim that he hired King's real killer, saying he has changed his story several times.

Nevertheless, after considering the issue for months, Reno informed Coretta Scott King on Tuesday that she would conduct a limited inquiry. Barry Kowalski, who prosecuted the Los Angeles police officers who beat Rodney G. King, will lead the review.

Reno and FBI Director Louis J. Freeh also decided that the FBI will not participate in the reexamination, officials said. The King family has made no secret of its distrust of the FBI, which spied on the civil rights leader during the 1960s under Director J. Edgar Hoover.