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AS I SEE IT

Cynthia Tucker

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Conspiracy Can't Change King's Legacy

WHILE Coretta Scott King watched a Memphis courtroom and far-fetched accounts of a plot to assassinate her husband, a national commission approved a memorial to the civil rights leader on the mall of monuments, where the most revered of American leaders are honored. The approval of the memorial site is testimony to another case that was proved long ago: Martin Luther King Jr.'s life — tragically ended at 39 years — transcends death.

But the triumph of his life and legacy, sadly, seems cold comfort to his widow and their children. The Kings barely acknowledged the announcement of the site on the Tidal Basin. They gave no public hint of celebration at this overdue acknowledgment that King belongs among the national gallery of heroes. While his heirs may have been pleased by a memorial honoring his life, they were busy helping further comfort the events of his death.

For three years now, the Kings have been caught up in a quixotic quest to overturn the official record of the assassination, which fingers James Earl Ray as the lone triggerman. Their latest tactic — a civil suit against a dubious character named Loyd Jowers, who claimed to have hired a different triggerman — gave them a sense of victory. The jury bought Jowers' story, which the Kings say links the assassination to a broad conspiracy reaching into Lyndon Johnson's White House. On December 8, the jury found Jowers liable for supposedly hiring a Memphis police officer to kill King.

The jury's finding notwithstanding, Jowers' latest account is utterly unbelievable. The owner of a cafe on the ground floor of the Memphis rooming house where Ray stayed, Jowers has given investigators several different accounts over the years. In most versions, he said he had nothing to do with King's death. Jowers did not even appear at the trial for cross-examination. His testimony was given in earlier deposi-

tions or unsworn video and audio tapes.

But let's assume, for the sake of argument, that Jowers is telling the unvarnished truth. It would in no way alter the accomplishments of King's life. The demented hatred of an assassin(s) could never overwhelm the power of King's dream. And a grand conspiracy involving the Army, the FBI, the CIA and the White House of Lyndon Johnson — a fanciful notion that the King family finds credible — could not give King more nobility and stature than he already has.

The details of King's death matter, of course — to history, to his family and friends, to those of us who remember that fateful day, April 4, 1968. But those details may always elude us. After a three-year investigation, a congressional committee concluded that Ray (who confessed but quickly recanted the confession) was the sole triggerman. If there was a conspiracy, the committee decided, it was likely a plot among small-town racists. Ray's initial guilty plea was upheld several times by state and federal courts.

It did not take a plot among high-ranking military and White House officials to kill King. Part of his broad appeal was his accessibility, anyway. When the bullet struck him that day, he was standing on the balcony of a Memphis hotel with the Rev. Billy Kyles, his host for the evening's dinner, chatting with aides in the courtyard below. No police, no bodyguards, no bulletproof vest.

In the end, it is King's life — selfless, visionary, and dedicated to freedom and justice for all — that we celebrate. His legacy lives on, no matter who killed him.

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Cynthia Tucker is editorial page editor of the Atlanta Constitution.