

# Jury: King Murder Was a Conspiracy

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A Memphis jury ruled in a civil lawsuit yesterday that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was the victim of a murder conspiracy rather than a lone assassin.

It was the first time in the 31 years since the assassination any jury has made such a ruling, although a House assassinations committee concluded in 1978 that confessed assassin James Earl Ray might have had help before or after the murder. Ray's guilty plea in the case, which he later recanted, was upheld eight times in state and federal courts.

Yesterday's ruling came in a wrongful-death suit filed by King's family against Loyd Jowers, a retired Memphis restaurateur who claimed six years ago that he paid someone other than Ray to kill King. Jowers' story has been discredited by Tennessee and federal authorities, but jurors in the current trial said outside court that they believed there was a conspiracy. The Kings, who asked for unspecified damages from Jowers, were awarded \$100.

John Campbell, the Memphis prosecutor who handled appeals of Ray's conviction, said: "I didn't hear anything new in this case. We've checked out all the information that came out in this case and we never found anything credible in it. If all you are going to hear is one side and not focus on inconsistencies, there is not much we can do about it."

One juror, David Murphy, said he thought the assassination was too complex to have been carried out by one person. William Pepper, a London-based lawyer who previously represented Ray but now represents the

King family, had said before the trial that he hoped to use the case as a vehicle to make the latest in a series of attempts to prove a conspiracy theory. In his argument to the jurors, Pepper said they could rewrite history with a conspiracy verdict.

Murphy said: "We all thought it was kind of a cut-and-dried case, with the evidence that Pepper brought forth that there were a lot of people involved, everyone from the CIA, military involvement in it. Jowers was involved in it, we felt."

Jowers' lawyer, Lewis Garrison, told the jurors that, although they could well conclude King was the victim of a conspiracy, his client's role was minor at best.

Pepper has charged for years that the CIA and the military were involved in the assassination. He has participated in book and television projects promoting such theories. But this is the first time they have received any sort of official support.

Jowers said on a 1993 television show that he had hired someone to kill King as a favor to an underworld figure who was a friend. He did not say that person necessarily carried out the assassination. Jowers never repeated the statement. He was sick for much of the just-concluded trial and did not testify. At the time of the assassination, Jowers owned a small restaurant across the street from the Lorraine Motel, where King was killed.

Ray died from liver disease last year while serving a 99-year prison term, and while still protesting his innocence. The Memphis district attorney's office concluded last year, after a comprehensive review of the case, that Ray fired the fatal bullet. It left open the possibility that someone might have helped him flee after the murder.

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