

Beyond a Shadow of a Doubt

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KILLING THE DREAM

James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.
By Gerald Posner.
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By Anthony Lewis

ON March 10, 1969, I was in Memphis to assist Martin Waldron of The New York Times in covering the prosecution of James Earl Ray for the murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We went to court that morning for what we thought was going to be a preliminary phase of the prosecution. Instead, Ray's lawyer, Percy Foreman, entered a plea of guilty. Questioned by the judge, Ray confirmed the plea.

The case was over. So we thought. We were wrong.

Three days later Ray fired Foreman and wrote the judge to ask for a new hearing; in April he hired a leading racist, J. B. Stoner, to represent him. In the years since, with the help of many different lawyers, Ray has insisted on his innocence. He and his lawyers and others have written books offering conspiracy theories of the assassination. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and other members of the King family have declared Ray innocent. Oliver Stone, whose vicious travesty "J.F.K." convinced millions that President John F. Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy, is planning a movie about the King assassination.

Gerald Posner, who tackled the Kennedy conspiracy myths in "Case Closed," now takes on the claims advanced by James Earl Ray and his supporters. With "Killing the Dream," he has written a superb book: a model of investigation, meticulous in its discovery and presentation of evidence, unbiased in its exploration of every claim. And it is a wonderfully readable book, as gripping as a first-class detective story.

An example of Posner's method is his treatment of "Raoul," the figure who plays a central role in the various stories told by Ray about what led him to Memphis on April 4, 1968, the day King was shot. Ray said he was in Montreal in July 1967 when he met a blond Latin man named Raoul. Raoul, he said, promised to get him travel documents (he had no passport) in return for smuggling things into the United States.

In a number of conflicting versions offered by Ray, Raoul was with him — or instructed him — when he bought a high-powered rifle in Bessemer, Ala., on March 29, 1968. Raoul told him a few days later to go to Memphis with the rifle. There he gave the rifle to Raoul, and never saw him again. Or, in another version, he was waiting in a car outside the boardinghouse from which the fatal shot

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It's very simple: James Earl Ray killed Martin Luther King.

was fired when Raoul ran out, jumped into the car and covered himself with a white sheet.

Posner looks at each statement about Raoul and demonstrates its falsity. When Ray says Raoul stayed at a motel in Mississippi, every motel in the region is checked and no trace of anyone matching Raoul's description is found. Or Posner simply gives us all the things Ray has said on each point in the Raoul story; the conflicts in Ray's own statements leave no doubt that he is an inveterate liar. No fair-minded reader will end up believing in the existence of Raoul.

Ray's most recent lawyer, William Pepper — who wrote a book on the case called "Orders to Kill" — came up with

genuinely seeking the truth. This is what Raul said:

"They have turned my life upside down. . . . I cannot go outside my own house without worrying that someone is there with a long-range camera to take my picture. . . . I didn't think this could happen in America. When Dexter King said that I had been found, my wife and I were shocked. This will never end for me, I fear. . . . Doesn't the truth matter anymore in this country?"

The truth is that James Earl Ray killed Martin Luther King. The evidence against him is overwhelming. He hated black people. "We ought to kill them, kill them all," a friend quoted him as saying. In prison he was offered a move to an honor farm but turned it down because



James Earl Ray at 30 in 1959, under arrest for robbing supermarkets.

a new version of Raoul in 1997. He was a Spaniard named Raoul who smuggled arms and confided to a woman friend that he had killed King. Conspiracy investigators found a Raoul in New York in 1994 and got his picture; Ray picked it out as his "Raoul." "Raoul has been found," King's son Dexter said.

But Raoul in New York was easily shown to have nothing to do with the King assassination. He had been with the same employer for 30 years and was at work on the day of the killing. Until 1980 he had never gone anywhere else in the United States except for one trip to Portland, Ore. He has never been in Tennessee.

Raul was in fact a retired middle-class man who greatly valued privacy — a privacy he had lost as a result of harassment by the Ray conspiracists. He agreed to meet Posner only after many talks between his lawyer and Posner convinced the lawyer that Posner was

the dormitories were racially integrated. He was a career criminal, an armed robber, a man who showed no awareness of the difference between right and wrong. He was a good shot with a rifle.

Ray stalked King for days before the murder. He went to Memphis when the newspapers reported that King was going there. When the papers said King would be staying at the Lorraine Motel, Ray took a room in a boardinghouse that overlooked the Lorraine. The rifle found near the boardinghouse after the shooting was the one Ray had bought and had his fingerprints on it. (Because a soft-nosed bullet was used, tests could not show whether the one that killed King had been fired from that gun.)

Ray's lawyer, Pepper, has come up with a substitute villain, even more remarkable than Raoul or Raul. He said a covert team of Green Beret snipers was in Memphis that day and had King in their sights when someone else,

probably another military sniper, shot him. He named Capt. Billy R. Eidson as the leader of the sniper team and said Eidson was dead. But Eidson was not dead. To Pepper's embarrassment, he appeared and denounced the story as the fake it was. Supposed military orders produced by Pepper were also fake.

The ABC television show "Turning Point" described the Green Beret tale on June 19, 1997. Dexter King, his mother, a brother and two sisters were on the program. Forrest Sawyer asked whom they held responsible for the assassination. Dexter King answered, "Army Intelligence, C.I.A., F.B.I." Sawyer: "Do you believe that Lyndon Johnson was part of the plot to kill your father?" Dexter King: "I do." Sawyer then asked whether all the King family members there agreed that Ray "not only did not pull the trigger, he didn't know there was going to be a murder that day." "Absolutely," Martin Luther King 3d said.

The involvement of the King family in the sordid maneuverings of Ray and his supporters is sad. It is also understandable. In life, King was the target of genuine conspiracies, including official ones. J. Edgar Hoover, driven by racial and sexual paranoia, bugged his home and hotel rooms — and had an audiotape of apparent sexual encounters mailed to King with the suggestion that he commit suicide. Posner reports that a segregationist lawyer in St. Louis, John Sutherland, offered a bounty of \$50,000 for King's murder — and that Ray may well have known about the offer.

Posner does not exclude the possibility that someone as yet unknown financed Ray. He regrets the judge's decision to accept the guilty plea. A trial, he believes, might have brought out the facts so conclusively that we would have avoided the decades of conspiracy-mongering that have followed. I am less optimistic. Americans nowadays seem addicted to conspiracy theories.

THE King family has its reasons for suspecting the worst. But to deny the fact that James Earl Ray killed Martin Luther King is to defy reason. So Posner demonstrates, beyond a reasonable or any doubt. For those who promote conspiracy theories in the teeth of the evidence, there can be nothing but contempt. Raul's question to Posner is really to all of us: "Doesn't the truth matter anymore in this country?"

After noting those words, Posner quotes one of the conspiracy promoters, Kenny Herman. "The Oliver Stone film will be the last big thing done on this case," he says. "And you know how they are in Hollywood. Hell, they aren't interested in the facts, they just are looking for the best story. I actually don't know whether Ray did it or not. But I know the whole case has changed as a result of what we have uncovered. We have one hell of a story for 'em out in Hollywood." □