

Conspiracy Swamps Swallow King Assassination

By PHILIP TERZIAN

Since a majority of Americans now endorse the Oliver Stone view of the death of John F. Kennedy—a conspiracy, probably a government plot, with probable CIA and FBI involvement—it is scarcely surprising to learn that the family of Martin Luther King Jr. recently concluded a deal with Oliver Stone to furnish materials for a movie on the death of Dr. King. The only thing more grotesque than this is the fact that Dr. King's survivors—notably his widow, Coretta, and younger son, Dexter—have publicly exonerated James Earl Ray, Dr. King's assassin, endorsed his version of events and demanded that the state of Tennessee grant a retrial for their new friend.

At long last, truth is slightly more peculiar than Oliver Stone's imagination. But the truth, of course, remains resolutely prosaic: Martin Luther King Jr., the only American apart from George Washington whose birthday is a national holiday, was killed by a single rifle round fired by a career petty criminal whose racist views and desire to cash in for murdering King were known long before he shot his victim in Memphis, 30 years ago tomorrow.

Chaos Is Disturbing

That Mrs. King and her entrepreneurial son have descended into the fever swamps of conspiracy theory is sad, to be sure, but not entirely surprising: Americans have a fondness for ready explanations and all-encompassing theories of history. As in nature, chaos is disturbing in civic life, and it's hard to concede that great lives, or the course of public events, are disrupted by otherwise inconsequential people such as Lee Harvey Oswald or James Earl Ray. The emotional vacuum created by violence is easily filled with conjecture, presumption, conviction and delusion. And thanks to the First Amendment, it only gets worse with time.

In one sense, there is a critical similarity between the Kennedy and King assassinations: In neither instance was there a definitive judicial resolution—no "closure," as Oprah would say. Oswald was murdered by a Dallas strip club owner, Jack Ruby, while in police custody; and Ray's lawyer, the flamboyant Percy Foreman of Houston, advised his client to plead guilty to avoid execution. So it is true, as the King family argues, that the case against Ray was never presented, or disputed, in a court of law. But that is scarcely evidence of Ray's innocence. And just as Lyndon Johnson sought to ease public concerns by assembling a committee of wise men to consider the evidence in the Kennedy assassination, Ray's prosecutors made their case in public at the time.

It is still wholly unassailable. Author Gerald Posner, who has made a career of exhaustively examining assassination conspiracy theories, is about to publish "Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.," a definitive dissection of the original criminal brief against Ray and the theories and alibis the King family finds persuasive. As Mr. Posner demonstrates, Ray had the motive and the means to commit his despicable act. He stalked Dr. King for several weeks before killing him. He occupied the flophouse room from which the fatal shot was fired. His fingerprints were found on the .30-06 Remington rifle, which he owned, that fired the shot. He fled Memphis on assassination night, and was ultimately arrested in London.

Mr. Posner has uncovered no evidence of the existence of the famous but elusive Latin hit man named Raoul, to whom Ray has always assigned the blame. (Ray's adviser/promoter/lawyer, William Pepper, argues that Raoul killed JFK as well.) Mr. Posner also demonstrates that there was no elite covert team of federal snipers called Alpha 184 following Dr. King in 1968, and that the claims of a onetime Memphis restaurant owner named Loyd Jowers to have murdered King are entirely spurious. Mr. Posner does reveal plenty of evidence that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover disliked and reviled Dr. King, but that was common knowledge when both Dr. King and Hoover were alive. And while Hoover's judgment about political dissidents is open to debate,



Dexter King announces his family's support for a new trial for James Earl Ray.

he was not in the habit of rubbing out people of whom he disapproved—a long list, not necessarily headed by Dr. King.

To be sure, we ought to be thankful for people like Mr. Posner, who spend countless years of scrupulous labor to demonstrate the obvious. But as Mr. Posner no doubt realizes, it is an uphill battle: A true conspiracy theorist believes that the energy expended to discredit his views is official confirmation that such views are valid. Does anyone believe that the Warren Commission settled public doubts about Oswald's guilt? Or that congressional inquiries have disabused true believers of the notion that the CIA introduced crack cocaine to South-Central Los Angeles? Of course not.

But in the King case, there is an interesting, and especially discouraging, aspect to all this. For the King family does not just think that James Earl Ray was unjustly convicted of murder; they believe that Martin Luther King was killed by the federal government, with the approval (if not the connivance) of then-President Johnson. Dr. King's increasingly radical views about the economy and the Vietnam War were so threatening to LBJ and the "power structure," as they call it, that he had to be eliminated.

The truth, alas, is slightly more melancholy. By the spring of 1968, far from menacing the establishment, Martin Luther King was essentially a spent force in American life. With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the political struggle against segregation was over; integration was the law of the land. In the civil rights movement, Dr. King had long since been subsumed by younger, considerably more incendiary figures such as H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael. To partisans of Black Power, King's doctrine of nonviolent resistance was not just old-fashioned but irrelevant.

No one was more aware of his predicament than Dr. King himself. His 1966 crusade to desegregate Chicago had been an embarrassing failure. He contemplated a retreat to academic life. At 39, he was depressed and uncertain about his future. His embrace of the antiwar movement was

equally an act of conscience and a shrewd career move. No doubt his increasingly strident opposition to the Vietnam War succeeded in irritating LBJ. But he was far from the war's most prominent critic, and Johnson had announced his retirement from the presidency the week before Dr. King was killed.

Retrospective Glow

Dr. King's assassination has cast a sort of retrospective glow that distorts reality. He was in Memphis to rekindle the past by supporting a failed garbage men's strike. The economic radicalism that his family believes was so menacing to American complacency took the form of the Poor People's Campaign, a planned march on Washington and occupation of the Mall. Yet even after Dr. King's death, this, too, was a catastrophe: The organizers built a shabby encampment called Resurrection City which, after months of rain, mud, crime and public indifference, was quietly abandoned.

The fact that Martin Luther King's public trajectory was headed downward when he died does not obviate the great achievements of his life. But his assassination had a natural effect on public perception: We celebrate his triumphs, disregard his failures and exaggerate his influence on the politics of his day. By fastening our gaze on details about his death, we overlook the truth about the world in which Dr. King lived—and breed the kind of lunacy that prompts his widow, and others who ought to know better, to embrace his killer.

Mr. Terzian writes a Washington column for the Providence Journal.

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