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NATIONA

Probe: No Plot to Kill King

U.S. Inquiry Backs 1969 Ruling That Ray Shot Rights Leader

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The Justice Department said yesterday after an 18-month investigation that there is "no credible information to support allegations of any conspiracy" to kill the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. involving federal agents, the Memphis police department or a shadowy figure called "Raoul."

Concluding an inquiry that concentrated on belated allegations by a former FBI agent and a Memphis cafe owner, the lawyers who conducted it said they "found nothing to disturb the 1969 judicial determination" that James Earl Ray murdered King and nothing to support a Tennessee civil jury's finding last year that the cafe owner and others, including unspecified government agencies, took part in a conspiracy to assassinate the civil rights leader.

Ray, who pleaded guilty to King's 1968 murder and then attempted to withdraw the plea, contended until his death two years ago that he did not shoot King and that he was framed by a man he knew only as Raoul.

However, Barry Kowalski, the Justice Department civil rights litigator and prosecutor who headed the inquiry, said, "We've concluded that there is no Raoul, that he is the invention of James Earl Ray."

The department said in a 138-page report that it was also satisfied that there was no reliable evidence supporting involvement of a long list of other alleged conspirators such as figures involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, U.S. military personnel, the Mafia, "African American ministers close to King," or the now-dead cafe owner, Loyd Jowers.

Attorney General Janet Reno ordered the inquiry nearly two years ago in hopes of providing "answers to new questions . . . about a tragedy that still haunts our nation." Kowalski said he doubted the report would end the conspiracy theories, but it at least "puts something in the public domain that people can weigh allegations against."

William Pepper, the lawyer for King's family, whose requests triggered the inquiry, said he was disappointed but not surprised by the findings. He said the family had not studied the report in detail, but

they "stand behind the verdict that came out in Memphis after 30 days of trial" last December.

The jurors in that case, brought against Jowers by the King family, felt that "everyone from the CIA to the military had involvement," one of the jurors said. "Jowers was involved in it, we felt."

Pepper, who has been criticized by police and prosecutors as a publicity seeker, said the King family had wanted Reno to appoint a commission of independent citizens "so we wouldn't have a situation where the government was investigating itself."

The Justice Department said no one on its team or anyone supporting it was involved in any prior investigation of King's murder. The FBI was disqualified because of accusations that it played a role in the April 4, 1968, assassination at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The investigators said they interviewed more than 200 witnesses, most of them in person, and reviewed all available materials from four previous official investigations as well as court pleadings, discovery materials and other papers.

"Based on all the information we could find and our own extensive investigation, we are convinced of our conclusions, beyond a reasonable doubt," Kowalski said.

Jowers, who operated a tavern below the rooming house where Ray rented a room on April 4, 1968, did not claim any involvement in the assassination until 1993, when he appeared on ABC's "Prime Time Live." He said a Memphis produce dealer, who was involved with the Mafia, gave him \$100,000 to hire an assassin and assured him that police would not be at the scene of the shooting. Jowers said Ray did not shoot King and that "someone with a name sounding like Raoul" provided the murder weapon.

Jowers, however, never made those claims under oath, and on the one occasion when he was called to testify, in an early civil suit, he repudiated his own confession and, the report said, "contradicted himself on virtually every key point about the alleged conspiracy. For example, he not only identified two different people as the assassin, but also most recently claimed that he saw the assassin and did not recognize him."

According to friends and rela-

tives, the report added, Jowers, who died May 20 at age 73, hoped to make money from his account. "He refused to cooperate with our investigation," insisted on immunity from prosecution, and when told that would be considered, refused to produce the customary proffer outlining what he would say if immunity were granted.

Consequently, the department said, "we do not believe that Jowers, or those he accuses, participated in the assassination of Dr. King."

The other main set of allegations came from a former FBI agent, Donald Wilson, who asserted in March 1998 that he had been withholding evidence that might be relevant to the crime for 30 years. An FBI agent for less than a year when King was killed, he said he went to the scene where Ray's Ford Mustang had been abandoned in Atlanta, opened the door, and saw a small packet of papers fall out.

"According to Wilson," the report said, "he took the papers, hid them, and told no one about them for 30 years."

In contrast to Wilson's "varied claims," the report said photographic evidence and expert opinion showed the passenger-side door of the Mustang "was closed and locked when the FBI was at the scene, not ajar and unlocked as Wilson claimed." The investigators "found no evidence" that Wilson had been at the scene.

One of the documents Wilson produced was a torn page from a 1963 Dallas telephone directory with penciled notations, one showing the phone number of Jack Ruby, who killed Lee Harvey Oswald after the assassination of Kennedy, and another showing the name "Raoul" with a Dallas area code, 214 and dash, leaving the impression that Raoul's number had been torn off.

Scientific testing of the torn page showed that "Raoul 214-" was written at the top right of the page after it had been torn out of the phone book. "Thus," the report said, "contrary to the impression the document creates, the pre-torn, whole page from the telephone directory never contained the remainder of Raoul's telephone number. . . . We found no credible evidence that there is any connection between the two assassinations."

King Family 'Disappointed' by Outcome

Associated Press

ATLANTA, June 10—The son of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. says his family plans no further action to try to uncover a conspiracy in his father's 1968 assassination but rejects a Justice Department finding that there was no evidence of such a plot.

"We are disappointed, but this is certainly not something we did not expect," Martin Luther King III said Friday after the Justice Department released results of an 18-month investigation.

As in four earlier investigations, Justice

investigators "found no reliable evidence that Dr. King was killed by conspirators who framed James Earl Ray," the 150-page report said. "We found nothing to disturb the 1969 judicial determination that James Earl Ray murdered Dr. King."

The civil rights leader's son recalled that the family had sought an independent investigation "because we do not believe that in such a politically sensitive matter the government is capable of investigating itself."

King told an Atlanta news conference that his family stands by a Memphis civil jury's ruling that Memphis bar owner

Loyd Jowers and "others, including government agencies," conspired to assassinate his father.

But the new investigation found no credible evidence to support allegations in recent years from Jowers and former FBI agent Donald Wilson, and earlier from Ray himself, that a mysterious "Raoul"—later identified as "Raul"—or others, including federal agents, police or black ministers, participated in a plot to kill King and frame Ray.

The Justice Department recommended that no further investigation be conducted.

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In Smartt, Tenn., James Earl Ray's brother, Jerry, said, "The American public and the King family believe James was innocent, so it doesn't matter to me what the politicians say."

Although Ray pleaded guilty in 1969 to killing King, he claimed three days later—and until his death in prison in 1998—that he was framed, an account dismissed by the report.

Prodded by the King family's embrace of some conspiracy theories, Attorney General Janet Reno ordered the new probe Aug. 26, 1998, even though two Justice Department investigations, a House

committee and the Shelby County, Tenn., district attorney's office previously studied the murder.

In December a Memphis civil court jury ruled for the King family in its wrongful death lawsuit against Jowers and concluded Jowers and "others, including government agencies," plotted to kill King. The new Justice Department probe also rejected those findings, citing contradictory retellings by Jowers, a lack of physical evidence and some contradictory evidence.

In 1993 Jowers said he received \$100,000 to hire a hit man to kill King and said the gun came from Raoul.