

Abernathy: King's Death Political

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The Rev. Ralph Abernathy preached a sermon of conspiracy yesterday as the House Select Committee on Assassinations opened its first week of public testimony on the death of the Rev. Martin Luther King.

"I believe very firmly it (King's death) was a political assassination. I believe it was a conspiracy. I believe it was an attempt to kill the dream," he told a packed committee room after relating how the civil rights leader died in his arms in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Abernathy was the lead-off witness in a week that will be highlighted tomorrow by the appearance of James Earl Ray, who is serving a 99-year sentence for

King's murder in Brushy Mountain Prison at Petros.

The Atlanta preacher, who was King's lieutenant and successor in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, accused no one of conspiring with Ray, but he hinted broadly that the FBI harassment, wiretapping, and efforts to discredit King's position as the foremost black leader of the civil rights struggle.

He confirmed a story that has been hinted at in a television dramatization of King's life and death: that the FBI paid a group of young black militants called the Invaders to riot during a civil rights march in Memphis two weeks before King's death. King came to Memphis to lead the march in support of a garbage workers' strike, and Abernathy testified that he was horrified by the sound of glass shop windows being broken behind

him as the march went down Beale Street.

"Later we discovered that some of these young men were being paid by the FBI as informants and to discredit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference by acts of violence ... we were greatly concerned, because never before had we confronted a group that were paid informants of the FBI."

He said King was greatly agitated because it was the first demonstration he had ever led where violence was initiated by his followers, and that played a role in his determination to return to Memphis two weeks later on the trip that killed him. "We live in a racist society," Abernathy said in response to a question by Rep. Harold Ford, D-Tenn., as to whether King had reported threats on his life from

the FBI. "Oh yes, we reported them, but you take a racist white man and put an FBI badge on him, that does not change his heart ... it becomes very apparent that the FBI had no intention of doing anything about them ... also we knew of (J. Edgar) Hoover's feelings ... he had called Dr. King the most notorious liar in the country ... We would report, for the record, many of these threats, but we knew ... that no investigation took place."

Ford also brought out that the director of fire and police in Memphis at the time was Frank Holloman, a retired FBI agent who was close to Hoover personally and professionally.

Ray's attorney, Mark Lane, was in the audience as Abernathy testified, and told reporters afterward that Abernathy

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thy's recollection of how he and King happened to be staying at the Lorraine Motel, the scene of King's death, was incorrect.

Lane said that King's party stayed at the Rivermont Holiday Inn, a posh hotel away from the downtown area, but that an FBI memorandum went to the editors of Memphis newspapers, urging them to point out the apparent irony of King using expensive lodgings while supporting a poor people's campaign.

Lane also charged that a speech delivered on the Senate floor on March 29, 1968, by Sen. Robert F. Byrd, D-West Va., which chided King for staying at the Rivermont, was written by the FBI, in order to get him to move to the Lorraine.

Abernathy said the Lorraine was chosen because "We stayed where we felt welcome," and the Lorraine was black-owned and operated. "Plus they had a lot of catfish there (The Lorraine dining room) and Dr. King and I loved catfish."

The night before his death, King delivered a speech at the Mason Temple in Memphis, in which he spoke of his death. It has come to be known as his "I have been to the Moutaintop" speech, and Abernathy said he believes King had been warned that he might be assassinated before he delivered it.

"He was tired, and he asked me to give the speech that night," Abernathy told the committee. "(But) I knew they wanted to hear what the most peaceful warrior of the 20th Century had to say ... I don't think it was a premonition, I think he had received some word from some sources that he was going to be

assassinated."

Abernathy said he had stood on the third floor balcony outside the Lorraine motel room seconds before King's death, but had turned back inside the door "to put on some after-shave lotion ... and I heard what sounded like a firecracker ... the bullet was so powerful, it twisted his body. He fell back into the door.

"I stayed with him in the ambulance and into the operating room at St. Joseph Hospital ... they took his shirt off, and then I saw, there was a hole big enough in his body to put both of my fists ..."

He said King did not tell him of any threats before the mountaintop speech, but "He was a different person, very, very, jittery. He passed on to me certain information, he said he didn't want a long funeral ... 'Just say I wanted to be a drum major for justice and equality' ... He was worried, I would say frightened."

Today's testimony will be concerned with the medical aspect of King's death, setting the stage for Ray's appearance tomorrow.

Ray's attorney said he had to insist on his right to be present before the assassination committee staff would allow him a ticket to yesterday's hearing, and that they would not tell him where Ray is or when he will be brought to Washington. The details of Ray's arrival are a closely guarded secret, known only to a few United States marshals and high officials on the committee staff and the Justice Department.

"Don't be misled," Lane told reporters after yesterday's hearings. "This committee has already made up its mind that Ray acted alone. They don't want to hear any evidence about a conspiracy."