

To Jerry, Dave and Gerry. from Harold Weisberg

1/16/90

My attached conjecture relating to the 3/28/68 violence in Memphis.

As I think I mention in this memo, that matter came to mind when I was sitting and thinking about the "emphis chapter of Abernathy's book and when I wasn't feeling quite as up to snuff as my present norm. Which isn't all that good.

It may not be as clear as it could be but I hope it is clear enough to merely raise the conjecture. I now don't recall whether I considered it in the past but I may have and should have, I think.

It need not have any particular significance if by chance it reflects the actuality.

And I want to leave a record of this conjecture in the event someone in the future has a related interest.

I don't remember any FBI or police records relating to such a conjecture or suspicion but they may exist and I may have forgotten.

HW

1/15/90

Could the Memphis violence of March 28, 1968, which led to Dr. King's return there and his assassination, have been inspired?

Sitting and thinking today, the national holiday in his honor, the factual errors in Ralph Abernathy's "And the Walls Came Tumbling Down" fresh in mind because I'd been making copies of the memo I'd written about them, I was reminded that he was quite wrong in blaming the really unorganized group of young Memphis blacks who called themselves "The Invaders" for that violence.

Had the planned march gone peacefully, the probability is that Dr. King would not have returned to Memphis. Because it did not go peacefully he did return, his return was announced, and this gave anyone interested in killing him time to plan and a sort of cover for the crime, as involved in that controversy.

The FBI's files leave it without question that the Invaders were not involved in the violence and did not inspire it. They reflect Invaders' apprehension that there would be violence and if there were, the Invaders would be blamed, so they absented themselves. They were not part of the march. And the violence appears to have been caused by even younger blacks who began by using the sticks of their picket signs to break windows.

I am not suggesting that the violence was inspired by those who ultimately killed King and do not believe that was so. But I am wondering along a different line, whether there were those who wanted to embarrass King who saw how he could be seriously embarrassed if there were violence in his well-publicized non-violent march in support of the striking sanitation workers.

Those who could have had such an interest or seen such possibilities include the FBI, the local police and other public authority and possibly ^{NAACP or} racist groups. There is no indication in the disclosed FBI files that it had any such ~~backstage~~ "Conintepro" scheme in the works, even suggested, nor is there in the police reports included in the FBI's disclosure ~~of~~ of the police records. *Which are quite incomplete.*

Among the questions that occurred to me is why the Invaders, meaning some of them as individuals, suspected there would or might be violence. One answer is that they had heard there would be. I have somewhat of a problem seeing the Invaders as sophisticated enough and careful enough to have concluded there would or might be violence without some specific reason for so thinking. This makes me wonder if any of them had knowledge that there would or might be.

If a few kids had merely talked about ~~it~~ making some kind of fuss that word could have ^{got} gotten to some of the Invaders, who were close in age. If there had been such talk, it could have started with the kids themselves. Or it might have been suggested to the kids. It is this second possibility that can be provocative.

There is no way of knowing and I doubt there ever would be now. While, obviously,

this is the kind of possibility that could have and I think should have come up in the official investigations, there is no reason to believe it did because there never was any official intent, on any level, to conduct any real investigation of the crime itself and none was ever conducted. All that any element of public authority was interested in, particularly after Ray was captured, was making it appear that he and he alone did the job. The record on this is quite clear.

It is close to a fact, however, that had it not been for the violence in Memphis that day there is no reason to believe that Dr. King would have returned there to be assassinated there.

This does not mean and I am not suggesting that he would not have been assassinated. It also does not mean that those who did the job had not by then decided that the time for them to do it had not come and that the Memphis situation suggested it as the locale. Based on my examination of the official records and much thought about them and my own inquiries I believe that the decision to kill King had been reached not only before that violence but probably before it was known that King would be going to Memphis.

However, I do not think that there was much of a time gap between the decision to kill him and the knowledge that he would be going to Memphis to lead a peaceful march.

What I am suggesting is that separate from the assassination there was a scheme that loaned itself to the assassination, a scheme to cause violence when King was in Memphis to lead a peaceful march and to embarrass him and his whole program of non-violence by that violence. This could have encouraged those who were responsible for the assassination to pick Memphis as the place to do it. And to have it tied in official and public minds with the strike and related events.

There is nothing I know about Ray and his movements that is not consistent with this kind of scenario. He left the west coast about the middle of February, 1968, but did not leave until after there were contacts with him from the east coast. These contacts, little known but not really subject to question, were over a short period of time but I think that period, preceding his departure for the east, was before it was known that King was going to Memphis to support the strike.

However, my recollection on this, after all these years, may be incorrect. Perhaps there had been an announcement that King would go to Memphis and that was known to the assassins. If so they did not make any known attempt to use the March 28 violence as a cover for killing King and there was no known effort or even threat.

The House assassins committee made a big thing about Ray's story of how he got to Memphis and where he had been the immediately preceding days. In so many respects the House committee was so dishonest I don't ~~would~~ credit anything it did in that area. For example, it presented as its own work the records I'd ~~get~~ gotten from the FBI in my King FOIA litigation as its own investigatory products. *Not as what it was the FBI's.*

There are so many possibilities it did not consider and so many facts it ignored, even some I published and others of which I informed it early on, before I refused to have anything more to do with them. Without going into detail on them, there is the distinct probability that Ray was truthful about matters relating to the Piedmont Laundry. He didn't have to have left his laundry there in person but he did retrieve it in person. He did have much more time than he needed to get to Memphis and I was able to establish that he was in fact there a day before the official story has him there. There is no real reason not to believe that he left for Memphis from Birmingham. I see no reason for him to have lied about that.

The DJ's "investigation" of itself was close to a farce. It was by the so-called Office of Professional Responsibility, which is the in-house whitewasher, and it also ignored much.

Neither of these investigations had any interest in establishing what did happen and neither made any such efforts.

If I were to conjecture on paper, which I rarely do, about when the decision that King had to be killed was reached by those who ultimately did it, it would be about when they came to realize that he had begun to make himself the spokesman for all the needy, not just for blacks, and the full potential of his launching a campaign for all poor people, not merely for blacks and for civil rights. He could have had great influence on so many economic and political matters with a broadened base and wider appeal and that could have presented some interests with serious economic as well as political concerns. Any real organization of the nation's poor and those caring for the poor could and I think would have become a powerful force, one others may have seen as a threat to their selfish interests. So, assuming there is reason to credit any scenario like this, the time the decision to kill King was made is after it was realized that his shift from voting and similar ^{other political and} rights to economic matters in which he could have become a real leader and a real force. *(To say nothing of place.)*

I do not now recall whether any of this, not including what is immediately above but relating to whether or not the violence could have been or had been inspired, is in any of my earlier notes of whether I really thought of it years ago. My belief that King's decision to provide leadership and direction to poor people and his determination to make their plight and needs known figured in his assassination is an old belief.

Harold Weisberg