

The Washington Star
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SECTION F SUNDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1976

James Earl Ray: What Made Him Shoot King

With suspicions of a 1960s assassination conspiracy still very much in the air, a special House panel is about to take a fresh look at the King and Kennedy assassinations. Investigative reporter George McMillan feels that one reason for the persistence of conspiracy theories is that we keep trying to make sense of assassins. Assassins don't make sense; if they did, they wouldn't be assassins.

One of the stereotypes about the Martin Luther King assassination is that James Earl Ray was just a two-bit punk who had no special motive for killing King. But he did, McMillan reports. We all get our inner conflicts from our personal history; our culture gives us the choice of the ways to resolve, or try to resolve, these conflicts. That was true of Ray, as explained in this chapter from George McMillan's forthcoming book, The Making of an Assassin.

By George McMillan

James Earl Ray never did get better. He never did calm down at Jeff City. That librium Dr. Guhlman put him on did not help tranquilize Ray in the sixth year (1966) of his incarceration at the Missouri state penitentiary for armed robbery. People around him in prison were beginning to notice the change that was taking place in Ray. Jerry Ray became aware on his visits that Jimmy was getting "nervous." Miles, the convict who ran the libraries for Ray, could barely get a word out of him: "He got so there at the end he wouldn't talk to nobody."

What was happening to him became apparent in little ways. He had told Dr. Guhlman that he was afraid of what he might do, and what he did not tell Guhlman was that the idea of killing Martin Luther King had become a fierce, angry resolve.

After he was returned to Jeff City, Ray was not so aimless about where he would go when he made his next



attempt to escape. He began to talk to his brother Jack, when Jack came to visit him, about Ian Smith, about Rhodesia; about going there when he escaped. His ideas had come together, the idea of killing King, the idea of working for a new political structure in America, were one. The two ideas that had been separately forming and re-forming themselves in his reveries had come together in his head.

The idea of killing King had been given new layers of meaning for Ray by the realization that by killing King he could become himself an actor in the turbulent ideological drama of his

times, the drama he had heretofore only watched on a prison TV. He saw how King's assassination could serve a larger political purpose, how he could alter (or so he thought) the balance of political power by a single act performed by him. And he saw at the end of the road a hero's sanctuary, if he turned out to need a sanctuary, in several places, one of which was Rhodesia.

It had all come to have an appealing harmony to Ray — Ayn Rand, Goldwater, the rise of a new American conservative movement which would be abetted by him, by what he would do himself, by his killing the man he had begun to refer to as "Big Nigger."

Was this just another twisted dream cooked up by a stir-crazy con? Wasn't this a piece of audacity so zany it mocked itself, especially when it was conceived by a man who was locked solidly behind bars and would almost certainly be for another 14 years? Who was this little fella, this two-bit criminal — this little bungler — to sit in his cell and decide he would wipe out the life of a man many thousands of people loved, but whom thousands of other people had obviously hated? Martin Luther King had walked through the streets of the South for nearly a decade, presenting his body to his enemies since the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, and not one person had ever fired a shot at him.

Who was this man Ray, this ignominious little person, to dare embody within himself the passions of hundreds, thousands of others, and set his mind to do the deed none of them had dared to do?

What set him apart?

The decision itself.

By its very nature it set James Earl Ray apart. He was going to kill Martin Luther King because King stood for something to him. It takes an exceptional person to kill a symbol. It is true that Ray felt deeply about black people, but so did others

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who did not kill King. What's more, King had never presented to Ray the direct threat he had to hundreds of thousands of others. King had never come into Ray's hometown and raised up the blacks in demonstrations. Ray had no property or possessions threatened by the changes King was struggling to bring about. Besides, Ray had never met King or seen him in person, and almost all homicides are committed by people who know well, or are kin to, the people they murder. It is worth remembering that Ray had had few direct contacts with black people in his whole lifetime.

It is obvious then that the relationship that Ray saw as existing between himself and Martin Luther King was all inside Ray's head. The crime of assassination, when it is done by one person, grows out of a relationship between the assassin and the assassinee that exists solely within the mind of the assassin. This is what makes it so difficult to comprehend the "why" of assassinations; more often than not the assassin does not seem to have any reason for his act. There is seldom a motive in the usual criminal sense, and the reason is that the raw material out of which the assassin has constructed his motive is hidden deep within the recesses of his psyche, in his unconscious, so that he himself does not understand the reason — the reason he has murdered where other people have not.

In fact, in the assassin's mind, the relationship between the assassin and his victim is close. It is passionate, loaded with feeling, and those passions have found their genesis in the qualities he has attributed to the other person. You don't need to know another person to feel passionately about him or her. Love at first sight is a common experience. So is puppy love. And the qualities we attribute to

the loved ones are obviously in our minds for we don't really know the other person.

The qualities a man like Ray attributed to Martin Luther King are not in the reality of King but in Ray's construction of that reality. The materials for that construction grow out of Ray's emotional preparation for the perception of the other person, and James Earl Ray's life was a preparation for the act of King's assassination. In this sense there was a conspiracy, a conspiracy of the influences on Ray as an individual to lead him to make his decision; in this sense his decision to kill King was an over-determined act.

We all know that there is an unconscious life. We know that our mind goes on working when we are not conscious, because we all dream, day and night. However insubstantial they are, these dreams, these fanta-

George McMillan, a freelance who has written magazine articles on Southern race problems, spent seven years preparing this new book on James Earl Ray. He gained the confidence of members of the Ray family to help with the research.

This article is excerpted, by permission, from McMillan's The Making of an Assassin: The Life of James Earl Ray, to be published this month by Little Brown & Company. Copyright © 1976 by George McMillan.

sies, these reveries are the substance of the unconscious and the gateway into it.

James Earl Ray did have fantasies. He had them in Jeff City, and they were not quite the usual criminal daydreams. One of his most persistent daydreams was so unexpected that Curtis, a convict friend to whom he often talked about it, remembers it vividly.

Ray's dream — an incredible one for a man convicted as a habitual criminal — was to start an orphan asylum. "When I pull a job," Ray used to tell Curtis, "I'm gonna take that money and start an orphans' home. If people didn't want their kids, I'll take them, just go pick them up myself and take them to this orphans' home in the country. I'm going to pick the doctors and the nurses myself. I won't let anybody else do that. Don't worry, I'll keep the place going! I'll do a job or two now and then."

This was a curious dream for a man who seemed not to have any close relationships at all, a loner. And yet there was more evidence that the plight of children, neglected children, struck some profound chord in him.

Once Curtis and Ray were watching a documentary on India on TV.

Some bloated-bellied, starving children were shown. "That's a disgrace," Ray said angrily, "with all the money there is in the world."

Oddly, Ray's sympathy did not extend to adults. He seemed to hate them as much as he sympathized with children. When starving Indian adults appeared on the TV tube, Ray said: "I don't give a damn about those niggers." When the news program showed a crippled man fleeing on crutches from a burning Vietnamese building, Ray spat out: "Why, that sorry son-of-a-bitch! All he wants is sympathy." To a radio item about a man who had been burned to death, Ray said: "He got what he deserved."

There were the fantasies about children, about adults, and then there were fantasies of violence — of violence as an end in itself. Ray used to talk admiringly about a man he called "Kirk Ponger," who was, Ray believed, "the top torture man in the Communist Party." Ray would describe about how Ponger would "take a man's testicles and hold them right up to electricity." At other times, he would brag about what he would do if he were surrounded by cops, when and if he did his next job.

"If the cops had me pinned down," Ray said, "I'd pretend to give up, I'd throw my gun down. Then when they stepped up to take me, I'd take them with me. I'd do it with maybe two ounces, maybe four ounces of nitroglycerin."

What do these reveries mean, what do they reveal about Ray and his inner life, his unconscious, and do they tell about the motives that led to his conscious acts? His concern for children and his hatred of adults, the way that either seemed to set off explosions of feeling in him, show that his passions came from his own childhood, more exactly from his infant experiences.

It's perfectly plausible when you think about it why the first relationship one has in life is so important. The nourishment you get from your mother is your first exchange with another human being. As the months pass, if all goes well, you are less and less dependent on a direct physical contact with your mother, and eventually, if your emotions develop as they should, you are able to sustain the pleasure and reassurance you felt when you were with your mother, when she is no longer around. The feelings you have learned from her are now a part of you; you have "internalized" them.

But if your mother hasn't met the needs of her infant, if she is erratic or barren of tenderness, the result is devastating for you. You haven't seen any consistent cause-and-effect pattern in your emotional world. You learn that you cannot trust your

mother, and you conclude that you cannot trust anyone, or life itself.

As an infant, James Earl Ray suffered from this loss. Ceal, a mute, raw-boned woman, had never been able to give affection, and Speedy, his father, was a wary, suspicious man. Of all things, he was wariest of emotions.

One clue that this background had its effect is the fact that from the earliest time anybody seems to remember him, James Earl Ray had an uncontrollable temper, quick flashes of anger, rage beyond any explicable provocation. Another clue is his reaction to the TV movie on India. To Ray there are no "good" adults; "adult" stands for people who don't take care of children. The intensity of his rage directed at these adults who stand to him for parents has its explanation in the fact that Ray was deprived of parental love and affection at the moment when he was utterly dependent on his parents, on adults, for warmth.

To Ray all children are people who have not received their due, who have been treated unjustly; infancy and childhood stand to him as periods of unhappiness. His daydream of starting an orphan asylum shows that he felt unloved and unwanted in some way that was important to him.

It all goes back to Ceal (for whom we cannot have enough compassion): a woman who, as the lives of her children prove, had little to give them; married to Speedy, a man who gave her and the children nothing. It was not the economic poverty of Ray's infancy and childhood that seared his psyche; it was the poverty of warmth, of affection, that created within him his murderous feeling of deprivation.

But why did Martin Luther King magnetize and become the focal object of these emotions?

Martin Luther King stirred Ray's feelings by being a figure who offered love and warmth to thousands of people. King reminded Ray in a pointedly bitter way of how he had not been taken care of. In this sense, King became, in the symbolic functions of the mind, the mother Ray had not had; King performed the functions that Ceal did not.

What made King an even more highly charged figure was that he made up for the vacancies of Speedy, too. King was not effeminate. He may have had the loving capacities of a mother, but he had also combined the love and strong dependable affections of a father. Ray's focus on King points to Speedy's failure just as much as it points to Ceal's. In the symbolic sense; Ray's decision to murder King was a parent-i-cide, a revenge for the withholding, unloving aspects of both his actual parents.

The degree of feeling Ray brought to King as a symbol showed in his violent reveries. It showed in his fic-

tional enactment of his capture, of how he would kill the cops and himself, too. It is an axiom of behavior that every murder is a suicide, and every suicide is a murder. If he took King's life, he would, in an emotionally real sense, be taking his own. The depth of his passion can be measured by the price he was willing to pay.

No matter how abstract these concepts seem, King was murdered out of their force and intensity, out of their emotional actuality. They are as real as the fact that King is dead today when he might, but for them, be alive.

Don't we need to know more? Is it enough to say what has been said in the foregoing pages? Don't we need a clinical description? Was Ray neurotic? Was he obsessive compulsive? Was he paranoid? Was he manic depressive? Was he schizophrenic? Was he a sociopath? A psychopath?

The truth is that he possessed some of the symptoms of all of these diagnostic descriptions. Ray's behavior was across the border into the field of abnormal psychology; no doubt about that. But to be "abnormal" is only to exaggerate normal behavior. That is why, when we read case histories, say in a book on psychology, we always see something of ourselves.

Besides, the clinical terms are not all that exact. They describe, at best, loose constellations of behavior. They overlap. The experts themselves do not agree always on the definitions. That is why psychiatrists so often run into trouble in the courtroom; their labels are not precise enough to withstand hostile cross-examination.

It would be possible to take all the phenomena of Ray's behavior, and break them down, event by event, act by act, into compartments, drop some into Obsessive, some into Compulsive, some Paranoid, and some

Schizophrenic. But what we would have when we finished would be a file, not a person.

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A truck from the Renz honor prison farm backed up to the Jeff City prison platform on Sunday morning, April 23, 1967. Because it was Sunday, the truck was driven by a relief man. He did not notice that something was a little unusual that day. One of the boxes in which the bread was shipped was already sitting on the lip of the platform. The usual practice was to wheel the boxes out when the truck arrived. Each box held 60 loaves; they were four feet long, three feet wide, and three feet deep. The truck was covered, but open at the back.

There was a reason that box was out there ahead of time. The people who had put it there wanted to make sure that it got into the load that day. It contained a special cargo, the living body of James Earl Ray.

Ray had made detailed plans for his escape, some of them with his brother Jack who had visited him just the day before, on Saturday, when they set up a rendezvous.

Ray had access to the bakery. He worked there, was that day, Sunday, on the 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. shift. He ate breakfast at 8 a.m.

"I ate a good breakfast of about six eggs," Ray has written, in describing his escape, "since I knew this might be my last meal for a while." Then he went to the ground floor where someone loaded him into one of the boxes, covered him with loaves of fresh bread and rolled him out onto the platform.

The truck came on schedule, Ray's box was rolled into it, and it drove out through the Jeff City walls. Somewhere out there, Ray unloaded himself and hit the road, a free man.

