

A thorn in the side of 'conspiracies'

By JEFF GUINN
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Although Gerald Posner is the author of award-winning books about Nazi war leaders ("Hitler's Children"), the heroin trade ("The Warlords of Crimes") and Ross Perot ("Citizen Perot"), he made his biggest splash in 1993 with "Case Closed," an exhaustive examination of President John F. Kennedy's assassination that concluded Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

Undaunted by conspiracy buffs, Posner now turns his attention to the April 4, 1968, killing of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis.

Thirty years after James Earl Ray's arrest in that crime, Posner's "Killing the Dream" (Random House, \$25) has earned him the enmity of those who believe that King's death resulted from a complex plot that may have involved the U.S. government. King's survivors have called for the case to be reopened; they have declared their newfound belief that Ray, who died April 23, did not act alone and that he may not even have fired the fatal shot. Posner couldn't agree less. "Killing the Dream" is exhaustively researched and meticulously footnoted. In an interview, Posner explained why he is certain that Ray, a thug who spent much of his life behind bars, either acted alone or was part of "a small-time, redneck plot." There was absolutely no government complicity in King's killing, Posner insisted. He questioned the motives of conspiracy buffs and even the King family for insisting otherwise.

Q: Let's begin with the most obvious question: Did James Earl Ray fire the shot that

killed Martin Luther King, and was the U.S. government in any way involved in the assassination?

A: There is no question Ray was the shooter. That's how I see the evidence, how anybody objective has to see the evidence. Ray was looking to cash in on a bounty, probably one he'd heard about concerning someone in St. Louis who offered \$50,000 to anyone who killed Doctor King. For someone like Ray, \$50,000 would have been like hitting the lotto. That much money had to be enough of a motive.

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Gerald Posner

Posner/He fears effects

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Q. If it's obvious Ray wasn't part of a Byzantine scheme, why do so many people believe otherwise?

A. The murders of Martin Luther King and John Kennedy did not do justice to the status of the victims. Many people want something meatier to lend extra weight to how they died. In each case, a conspiracy does that nicely. Look, the facts are that King and Kennedy were killed by sociopathic losers. It's almost the equivalent of these two great men tripping on curbs and dying because they accidentally hit their heads. There were no intricate assassination plots.

Q. Your critics suggest you discount possible conspiracies because you want your books to prove "lone gunman" theories. They say you've got your mind made up before you even begin to write, let alone begin to investigate.



Martin Luther King

People who claim I print what I do just to make money don't understand the nature of investigative journalism. Look — if I wanted to sell the most books ever, I'd want to write that there was incontrovertible evidence (that) J. Edgar Hoover ordered Martin Luther King assassinated. I'd really sell a lot more books then.

And I'm very careful to document everything in my books: every interview, every excerpt from something somebody else has written. My wife is my chief

A. That particular criticism I find irksome. I'm very proud I am able to sign book deals without my knowing, without my publisher knowing, where I'll come out a few years down the road.

researcher. It has to be that way. If I write something happened at a specific time, and it actually happened one minute later, then the conspiracy people will say I didn't account for what could have happened in that extra 60 seconds.

Q. That still doesn't explain why your critics are so negative about your motives, besides disagreeing with your conclusions.

A. OK. What I'm doing is, I'm popping bubbles here. I'm doing something more aggravating to them than attacking them personally. I'm destroying their livelihoods as conspiracy theorists.

Q. Doctor King's widow and children say they now believe there was some sort of government plot, that Ray didn't act alone.

A. It's almost surreal to see Dexter King shaking the

of King family involvement

trigger hand of the man who killed his father. I now have mixed feelings about the King family. They have plenty of reason to be suspicious of the government. J. Edgar Hoover did carry out a war against King, tapping his phone and so forth. I feel in part they were duped by James Earl Ray's legal team.

But the things the family is doing now could hurt the King legacy. They are the first family of civil rights. If their new position is proved false, if it's shown they had the naivete to buy into the theories of the Ray legal team, that could leave a negative taste in many people's mouths about the King family.

You see, part one, the Kings have sold the film rights about Doctor King's last days to Oliver Stone. (Stone's film about the JFK assassination embraced a conspiracy theory.) Part two, William Pepper, Ray's last attorney, wrote a hardcover book back when he first took the case,

called "Orders to Kill." It did not sell well. But it's being reissued by Time Warner, and now it's got a foreword by Dexter King. Poor Dexter. In that foreword, he gets his own age wrong by two years. However, the copyright to the book is now half owned by Pepper and half by a management company representing the Kings. The Kings should not have allowed themselves to have a financial interest in anybody else's particular theories.

Q. John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, even Princess Diana — is it inevitable that every time a beloved public figure dies violently, we're going to be inundated with conspiracy theories?

A. If you'd asked me this before Diana's death, I would have said "no." Now I believe conspiracy theories will be part and parcel of famous deaths. In particular, the King and John Kennedy murders were accom-

plished with long-range rifle shots and the assassin got away, at least for a little while. It wasn't like with Hinckley, Squeaky Fromme, Sirhan Sirhan, where the gun person was tackled right on the scene. James Earl Ray got away for a while. That lends itself to the conspiracy types.

Q. In "Killing the Dream," you spend much, even most, of the book examining Ray's life prior to the assassination. Yet you never spoke to him in person. Doesn't that potentially weaken your conclusion, which you base on his involvement in the assassination being perfectly in character?

A. Ray refused to talk to me. I did not expect, if he had talked to me, that I'd ask something and he'd say: "OK, you got me. I did it." But you always like to look the person you're writing about in the eye. But I used every other available avenue of research.