

Killer of Martin Luther King Turned Down in Parole Bid

Ray Says He Was Pressured to Plead Guilty

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, May 25—James Earl Ray lost his bid for parole today as the Parole Board brushed aside claims he did not kill the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and that he was pressured into pleading guilty.

At his first parole hearing in 25 years, Ray claimed his lawyer convinced him he already had been convicted by the news media and that pleading guilty in return for 99 years in prison was better than risking a trial and possible death sentence.

"First, I didn't kill Dr. King," Ray said. "I wasn't involved in any type of collusive activity."

King was shot April 4, 1968, as he stood on a motel balcony in Memphis, where he had come to support a strike by sanitation workers.

"You had a choice," said Parole Board Member Rose Hill said of the plea.

"I did not have a choice," the 66-year-old Ray said.

The vote was 3 to 0 against parole. Ray needed four votes. One of the seven board members investigated King's assassination and disqualified himself. The remaining three decided not to vote when it became clear Ray had lost his bid.

Ray's next parole hearing will be in July 1999. Two who voted today

said they would favor granting parole then.

"That is full service for the crime you committed," Board Chairman Charles Traughber said.

The parole hearing was separate from Ray's legal efforts to win a trial in Memphis, where a judge last week gave permission to test-fire the rifle believed used in King's assassination. Previous ballistics tests were ruled inconclusive because the fatal slug was too badly damaged to make comparisons.

Today's hearing was administrative rather than judicial and dealt with Ray's record as a prisoner, which included a 54-hour escape in 1977 and a 1981 attack in which he was stabbed 22 times.

King's slaying sparked race riots in more than 100 cities and set off one of the largest manhunts in U.S. history before Scotland Yard detectives captured Ray at London's Heathrow Airport.

Ray was returned to Memphis, where he pleaded guilty to murder in 1969. Three days later, he recanted.

The House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1978 after a two-year investigation there had been a conspiracy to kill King. The panel said Ray shot King, but a St. Louis-based conspiracy of racial bigots was behind the slaying.