

UNSOLVED MYSTERIES — PRODUCTION #1477-257  
"MARTIN LUTHER KING": INTERVIEW WITH JOE HESTER

[TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: CASSETTE SOUND QUALITY IS VERY "MUDDY" AND SOMEWHAT DISTORTED. ADDITIONALLY, THERE IS PRONOUNCED BACKGROUND NOISE—TRAFFIC SOUNDS, ETC.—OFF AND ON THROUGHOUT, THAT WILL BE NOTED WHEN IT IS OBVIOUSLY INTRUSIVE. WE'LL BE AS ACCURATE AS POOR SOUND PERMITS.]

"MARTIN LUTHER KING"—INTERVIEW, JOE HESTER—ROLL 1.

MARK.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER      Okay, Mister Hester, if you could, first, ah, just gimme your full name with the correct spelling.

J. HESTER          Joe Hester, H-E-S-T-E-R.

INTERVIEWER      Okay. Ah, and what was your position with the F.B.I.?

J. HESTER          I was a Special Agent. And—and on—[TAPE JUMP]—on the Martin Luther—[TAPE JUMP]—case, I was what the F.B.I. calls the case agent. [BACKGROUND NOISE]

INTERVIEWER      And what does the case agent do?

J. HESTER [BACKGROUND NOISE] Ah, ah, ah, the case agent is the fellow responsible for administration, ah—ah, ah, not necessarily makes all of the decisions but sees that all the decisions are carried out—sees that all the necessary investigation is conducted—ah, that it's reported—and, ah, generally keep up with the administration of the—of the case, as it goes along.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah— If you could, outline the initial steps of the investigation—what was the F.B.I.'s immediate response?

J. HESTER [BACKGROUND NOISE] The F.B.I.'s immediate response to this case—you have to—ah, in order to understand it, you have to bear in mind that, at the time the crime occurred, this was not a—a—an offense against federal law. This was strictly a—a—a violation of state law—not—not federal law. So Doctor King was killed sometime in the early evening, around dinnertime, and it was not for several hours later that, ah, the Attorney General, ah, Mister Ramsey Clark, called and—and, ah, ordered the F.B.I. to conduct an investigation to determine who had killed—or who had shot Doctor King. So the—ah, the first thing we did, ah, that, ah—ah, starting as late as we did—the first thing we did was: we went to the police department, and a policeman—officer—one or more of them had already found on the sidewalk, ah, the rifle and the personal possessions of—that we later discovered belonged to James Earl Ray. And these were laying on the sidewalk just outs—just beyond the entrance to the rooming house from where we're convinced the fatal shot was fired. Ah, the first thing we did was: we packaged up all the evidence and, ah, gave it to an agent and put him on an airplane and flew him to Washington. Ah, had the people in the F.B.I. laboratories standing by to—to, ah, examine all the evidence—see if there were any fingerprints and that sort a' thing. So that—that was the—that was the initial—our initial response, and then we began to interview the people who had been in Doctor King's party. Ah, for instance, ah, Ralph Abernathy and others who were—who were with Doctor King at the Lorraine Motel.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah, if you can st—just tell me in general what happened next, as far as the investigation went in identifying James Earl Ray.

J. HESTER Well, there were two or three things goin' on at the—at roughly the same time. I think James Earl Ray— We began to interview

the people that—that owned—ah, ah, the lady that handled the renting of the rooming house, and we interviewed the other occupants of the rooming house. Now, on the previous evening, ah, the police had already pretty well—they were fairly well convinced that the—that there was some significance to a white Mustang that was seem speeding out of the area, ah, where the—where the rooming house was located. Ah, we immediately began checking all the hotels and motels—checking the registration cards, ah, looking specifically for white Mustangs or white Fords. Ah, it's amazing, but you—we hit a number of 'em. [LAUGHS] A number of people—[TAPE JUMP]—had registered and indicated on a registration card that they were driving either a—ah, ah, a white Mustang or a—or a white Ford of some sort. And—[TAPE JUMP]—then we immediately set out leads for all the officers around the country to determine who these people were and to find out why they were in town and what their business was and what—what sort a' general reputation they had.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah— In your opinion, was James Earl Ray the lone assassin of Doctor King?

J. HESTER [SIGHS] Ah, m—m—as to whether or not James Earl Ray had any assistance in his—in the assassination— Ah, I believe, ah, m—b—ah, James Earl Ray now claims that he—I believe he now admits that he was in all of the places that we said he was—ah, I believe he now admits that he was in Memphis, and he was in Los Angeles, and he had been in Atlanta and Birmingham and all the places that we said he—ah, that we said he had been. He claims there was—that—I believe he claims the fatal shot was fired by a man known only as Raoul. Only God and James Earl Ray know whether or not there is a person named Raoul. [BACKGROUND NOISE] Nothin' was ever turned up in any of our investigation to indicate that, ah, there was such a person as Raoul. Like I say, I can't say that Raoul does not exist; I can only say that we found no evidence to indicate that Raoul was—that he—that he does exist.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Could we go back over that again because a' the—the clock? And—and you were very good on that; I wanna get that again. Ah, what you said about only James Earl Ray and God know if there was a Raoul. If you could go through that again...? For me.



J. HESTER [LAUGHS]

INTERVIEWER In your opinion, was James Earl Ray the lone assassin?

J. HESTER [CLEARS THROAT] As to the question of whether or not James Earl Ray was the lone assassin— Ah, I believe that James Earl Ray now says that he was in all the places that we said he was. I believe he subsequently had—has admitted in his book—I haven't read his book, but I think he has admitted that he was in Memphis and Los Angeles and Birmingham and Atlanta and [BACKGROUND NOISE] all the places that we said he was.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

TAKE 2.

MARK.

INTERVIEWER Okay, let me ask that question again. Ah, in your opinion was James Earl Ray the lone assassin of Doctor King?

J. HESTER Ah, as to whether or not James Earl Ray was acting alone in the murder of Doctor King— Ah, I believe now that James Earl Ray has written a book—I haven't read it, but I believe he says in his book that he was in Memphis and Los Angeles and Birmingham and Atlanta, ah, and, of course, Canada—I think he admits that he was in all the places we said he was, but I believe I've been told that he now claims there was [BACKGROUND NOISE] a mysterious individual named Raoul who actually was the trigger man. Only God and James Earl Ray know for sure whether or not there is such a person as Raoul. I can say without any hesitation whatsoever that we found nothin' in our investigation, ah, to solve this case—we found nothin' to indicate that James Earl Ray acted other than entirely alone. We have no reason to believe that he had any help whatsoever. \*

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah— Has your opinion on this changed at all over the years?

J. HESTER For twenty-five years, I have, ah, believed, ah, just, ah, the same thing that I believed at the conclusion of the investigation. James Earl Ray pled guilty, ah, received a ninety-nine-year sentence, and,

ah, nothin' has occurred in the last twenty-five years to make me think that he didn't do the right thing by pleading guilty.

INTERVIEWER Can you outline for me the basic case against James Earl Ray? What physical evidence was there to tie him to the crime?

J. HESTER Ah, the basic case against James Earl Ray arose from the articles that were found, ah, at, ah, or ju—at, ah—on the sidewalk literally, ah, just at the entrance to the rooming house. Ah, ah, I can remember, ah, specifically that there was a pair a' undershorts. The, ah—w—ah, we went to an enormous amount of—of trouble and investigative work to determine whose undershorts those were. They had a laundry mark in 'em. The first thing we had to do was go to the—to, ah, b—couple laundries to find out what kind a' machinery made that mark. Then, once we had determined wh—which kind a' machine, we had to go to the manufacturer and get a list of all the laundries in the country that used that machine. Then we contacted every one of those laundries, until we finally hit a laundry in Los Angeles that identified those, ah—ah, identified that particular mark as being his. And subsequently, this w—we were later able to positively identify that James Earl Ray was the customer of—of the laundry. Ah, w—of course, on the rifle and, I believe, on a beer can—there was a beer can in this, ah, bunch a' stuff—and, ah, the fingerprints on the rifle and the beer can, ah, ah, belonged to James Earl Ray—that was dis—determined through the F.B.I., ah, Identification Division. The, ah, bedspread that all of this was wadded up in, ah—ah, ah, as I recall, I think it had a—had a green, ah, fiber. Ah, the green fiber was later found, ah, t—to match fibers that were in the—

INTERVIEWER I'm sorry—we have—

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER —to—like, to cut and reload.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

ROLL 2, TAKE 3.

MARK.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER Okay, ah, if you could, again, for me—outline the—the basic case against James Earl Ray.

J. HESTER Ah, ah, the physical evidence in this case was, ah, really overwhelming in—in, ah, pointing the finger at James Earl Ray. Ah, ah, the stuff that—that, ah, ah, he threw down on—on the sidewalk just, ah, outside the rooming house—there was a rifle. There was a pair of undershorts. There were a pair a' binoculars. Ah, a beer can. Ah, the fingerprints were found on the rifle and—and the beer can that matched James Earl Ray. We found where he had purchased the binoculars—they identified James Earl Ray as the—as the purchaser. Ah, and there was even a—a small radio that had James Earl Ray's, ah, Missouri State Penitentiary number scratched into the radio, so, ah—ah, th—the evidence found that night was—ah, once it—once all of these things were identified, it was overwhelming, as far as I'm concerned.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah, now, there are some people who say that, ah, Ray either did not do it or did not do it alone, and they've raised a couple a' points, and I'd—I'd like to get your reaction to, ah—to these points. The first one was—they said that James Earl Ray was not a good enough marksman. To have shot Doctor King from the bathroom.

J. HESTER Ah, as to whether or not James Earl Ray was a good enough shot to have hit, ah, Doctor King from the distance— You have to bear in mind that, from the window of the rooming house to the balcony where Doctor King was killed was less than a hundred yards. That means it was less than the length of a football field. Ah, ah, the rifle that he used had a—had a telescopic sight on it. With that sight, ah, at that distance, ah, the most inept marksman in the country, ah—ah, I don't think—I don't think he could've even missed Doctor King, if he had tried. It was—it was the easiest shot, ah, in the world—there are probably thousands of people in this country who could've killed Doctor King with a handgun from that distance.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER Okay, cut—we'll cut for a second.



TAKE 4.

MARK.

INTERVIEWER Okay, again, critics have raised several points, and one—they say that James Earl Ray was not a good enough marksman to have done the shooting.

J. HESTER As to the question of whether or not James Earl Ray was a good enough marksman to have hit Doctor King from that distance— You have to first bear in mind that the distance from the window in the rooming house to the balcony where Doctor King was standing—the distance is less than a hundred yards—in other words, less than the length of a football field. The rifle that was the murder weapon, ah, was fitted with a telescopic sight. Ah, ah, ah, with a telescopic sight at such a short distance, almost anyone in the world could have—could have, ah, killed Doctor King. It—it really required no great marksmanship whatsoever. In fact, there are thousands a' people in this country could've used a handgun and, ah, could've killed Doctor King at that distance.

INTERVIEWER Okay. The second point, ah, that they raise is that there were witnesses who saw a man in the bushes. Ah, Solomon Jones, who is Doctor King's chauffeur, and Earl Caldwell both reported that they saw, ah, a man in the bushes. Underneath the rooming house. And they claimed that the shot might've been fired from there. Did the F.B.I. investigate these witness reportings?

J. HESTER Ah, ah, regarding the man-in-the-bushes claim—ah, this was a claim that haunted us during the in—the initial investigation a' this case. We investigated everything that we could, ah, to determine—and we never were sure that there was a man in the bushes; and if there was a man in the bushes, we think he had absolutely nothin' to do with the murder. Ah, we, ah—we were—we were then—and I still am, ah, totally convinced that the fatal shot came from the window of the rooming house.

INTERVIEWER Ah, what explanation would there be for the man in the bushes?

J. HESTER I'm not even sure there was a man in the bushes; but if there was, who knows—Doctor King attracted a large crowd a' people. There were—you know, he d—his—his being in this city at that

time—ah, there were lots of—lots of—lots of his own people, ah, lots of his followers and—and, ah, ah, people a' that sort. [BACKGROUND NOISE] Ah, who knows? Maybe one of them might've been—might have thought that was a vantage point from which to see Doctor King. I don't know, but we—we—we were then—and st—I still am convinced that, ah, the man-in-the-bushes, ah, theory had absolutely nothin' to do with this case.

INTERVIEWER Okay. There was, ah, an alleged eyewitness—Charles Stevens—who saw James Earl Ray—who claimed to've seen James Earl Ray leaving the rooming house, running down the hallway. Ah, what did the F.B.I. think of his story?

J. HESTER [SIGHS] Ah, Charlie Stevens was not exactly the world's greatest eyewitness, because—ah, my recollection is that Stevens only got a—only saw him from the rear. I don't think Stevens ever got a real good, ah, ah, view of—of Ray's face. But the—when you put all of the activities together—the sound of the shot, the man running down the—down the, ah, hallway and then down the stairs out to the street, ah, the—the rifle and all the other evidence found on the street—ah, ah, Charlie Stevens' testimony in—in the light of all a' that becomes really less and less important.

INTERVIEWER There were other people in the rooming house who said that Stevens was drunk, ah, at the time. Is that what the F.B.I. found out in their investigation, as well?

J. HESTER Ah, I'm—I feel reasonably sure that Stevens was sober when—when our people interviewed him, but, ah, ah, th—I really don't know—I—I'm at a loss to know what Stevens' condition was at the time the shot was fired.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah— Ah, these critics have also claimed that the dropping of all of the evidence in the bundle outside the Knipe Amusement Company, where—right where the rooming house was—they say that this looks like a setup—that someone was setting James Earl Ray up. Ah, why did Ray drop the bundle?

J. HESTER Ah, you— Ah, as to why the bundle was ja—dropped on the street, ah, just outside the rooming house—you have to remember, now, that the City a' Memphis at that time was, ah, ah, in a real mess because of the sanitation workers' strike. The National



Guard had been called out. Ah, there were police officers and National Guardsmen, ah, riding together in—in, ah, police cars all over the city. As a matter of fact, ah, just, ah, a—just a few yards down from the rooming house, there's a fire station. And one of these—they called 'em tac squads—the—was located at that fire station. The minute that shot was fired, there were policemen and National Guardsmen all up and down the streets. It's my th—my guess—ah, my best guess is that, when James Earl Ray ran out a' the rooming house, he probably saw a policeman coming in his direction. Ah, and, ah, whether it was James Earl Ray or Raoul—but whoever was carrying that bundle, ah, threw the bundle on the sidewalk rather than be, ah, ah, found with it; because, if a policeman found you out there with a rifle, you'd be in real trouble.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah, James Earl Ray has given an alibi. He says that he was at a gas station, ah, a little bit away from the rooming house when the shot was fired, ah, and that he was driving back to the rooming house and saw all of the police cars outside; and that is when he fled, because he was a fugitive. Did the F.B.I. investigate this gas-station alibi? And, if so, did you find any witness that could have corroborated it?

J. HESTER [SIGHS] Ah, R—Ray's alibi that he was at a gas station—ah, I don't believe that—I don't think that was even—ah, my recollection is that was not even known, ah, in 1968; I think that's somethin' that has— Ah, I believe that may've been part of Ray's book that he's written. But I—I don't recall that, ah—that we had any indication that James Earl Ray was, ah, at a gas station when the shot was fired.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah, now, the—going back to the points that these critics have made—they say that there were, ah, no prints—no fingerprints of James Earl Ray's found in either his room or the bathroom. Ah, why do you think this is?

J. HESTER Ah, ah, ah, it's not usual that, ah, you—you don't find a person's fingerprints. You can go in a hotel room where a man has been for, ah, two or three days, and you may or may not find a single fingerprint that is actually a good enough fingerprint to—to make a positive identification. So I—I don't think it's—and, ah, certainly in a place like a rooming house, I don't think it's—I don't think it's the least bit surprising that Ray's fingerprints were not, ah, in the

rooming house. But, again, ah, I think—now I think James Earl Ray has—has positively admitted in his book—ah, and I could be wrong, but I think he's admitted being in the rooming house.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

ROLL 3, TAKE 5.

MARK.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER Ah, were any of James Earl Ray's fingerprints found in the rooming house in either his room or the bathroom? And why not?

J. HESTER It's my recollection that, ah, James Earl Ray's fingerprints were not found in the rooming house. But that's not—ah, you know, that's not really strange, ah— I've worked, ah, any number a' cases, where you—where you don't find fingerprints when you think you should. Ah, you may find a lot a' smudges and smears, but you won't find a fingerprint that's—that, in itself, is—is complete enough to make a positive identification. And a—ah, I also think that—you know, in recent years, I think James Earl Ray has admitted to having been in the rooming house; I don't think that's really at question.

INTERVIEWER Ah, this story of Raoul, ah, that Ray has come out with—ah, this came out before his trial and before his guilty plea. Ah, did the F.E.—F.B.I. investigate it at all at that time?

J. HESTER Ah, ah, the question of Raoul—ah, I—as I remember it, the first we heard of it was—I—I think—and, bear in mind, it's been twenty-five years—but I think the first we knew of Raoul were—was in, ah, some articles that William Bradford Huey wrote for *Look* magazine. Ah, ah, that was the first inkling we had of Raoul. But, ah, even then, we had really nothing to go on, and at no point in—in any of our investigation had we found anything to confirm that there was a Raoul or that James Earl Ray was—was involved in gun running or anything a' the sort that—that would've involved Raoul. So, ah, with—without anything at all to go on, ah, ah, it's—it's very difficult. Also bear in mind that, after—after Ray was convicted and taken off to the penitentiary, ah, three of us went up to the penitentiary and attempted to

interview James Earl Ray. And he refused to talk to us. Now, if James Earl Ray knew anything about Raoul, that was the time to tell us and to come clean with us and to help us locate Raoul; and since—since he didn't show any indic—any—any interest in doin' that, then I have to conclude that Raoul is, ah, somebody's imagination.

INTERVIEWER Ah, did you investigate Ray's, ah, contacts that he had with individuals prior to the assassination?

J. HESTER Ah, ah, ah, ah, the contact Ray had with—with individuals prior to the assassination— Ah— Ah, these people were identified in the course of trying to identify who Ray was. Ah, for instance, the—the laundry mark on the, ah, undershorts took us to Los Angeles, and we found a number a' people out there that Ray had been associated with. And naturally we interviewed every—every single one of those. Ah, and tracked Ray's movements as best we could. Ah, ah, a vagabond that's—that has no permanent residence—that—that moves here, there and wherever at—you know, at—at his own whim—ah, ah, it's pretty difficult to—to, ah, find out a great deal about a person like that. [BACKGROUND NOISE]

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

ROLL 3, TAKE 6.

MARK.

INTERVIEWER Okay, I wanna—

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER —pick up on—on this again. About the, ah, associations that Ray had. Were there any associations that he had prior to the assassination that you found that you considered might have been of a suspicious—suspicious nature?

J. HESTER We found, ah, none of Ray's associates, ah, that—ah, none that we were a—ah, were—were eb—ever able to identify—we found none, ah, that appeared to have anything to do with—with, ah—even with Ray's escape or with the assassination or with gun running or anything a' that sort. The people that we found out



that Ray had associated with [STOMACH NOISE] appeared to be totally innocent of any involvement and anything that Ray was doing.

INTERVIEWER Were there—did you find any contacts that Ray had prior to the assassination that may have been suspicious—suspicious that you investigated and were not able to completely run down?

J. HESTER Ah, to my—to the best a' my recollection, the—we—we had—really had no doubts about, ah, any of Ray's associates. I don't recall that there were any, ah, ah, loose ends or anything else that—that concerned Ray's associates.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah, this swab test—ah, the documents have shown that the F.B.I. lab did a swab test on the rifle that was returned to the Aeromarine Supply Company, but apparently a swab test was not done on the thirty-aught-six, which was suspected to be the—the murder weapon. Ah, why not?

J. HESTER Ah, as regards the, ah, swab test or the failure to, ah, perform a swab test on the thirty-aught-six rifle that was the murder weapon— Ah, ah, I really have absolutely no—ah, I'm not the least bit familiar with laboratory, ah, procedures or requirements or anything a' the sort, and I'm really not in any position to—to answer any question as to whether or not a swab test should have been performed or was performed or anything a' that sort.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Some of the critics have said that, ah, they believe a swab test was done, and it showed negative, meaning that the rifle wasn't fired, which is why the F.B.I. lab would not admit to doing a swab test. What do you say to that?

J. HESTER [SIGHS] Ah, the thirty-aught-six that was taken to the lab— Ah, my recollection is that it had a spent shell—in other words, it had—it had what's left of a shell after—after the rifle has been fired—that was in the chamber. So common sense would tell you that someone had fired that rifle—ah, I don't know anybody who's ever opened up a—a rife [LAUGHS] and put a—put a spent cartridge in the—in the chamber a' the rifle and then closed the bolt action back again. Ah, ah, I would—if—if you showed me a rifle, and it had a spent shell in the chamber, my logical assumption would be that the rifle had been fired.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

TAKE 7.

MARK.

INTERVIEWER Okay, Robert Blakey and the House Select on Assassinations have been critical of the F.B.I. for doing only a shooter investigation. What's your response?

J. HESTER I understand we've been criticized—that, ah—for doing a shooter investigation rather than a conspiracy investigation. Ah, I don't put much stock in that—to begin with, you have to do a shooter investigation—a successful shooter investigation—before you can even, ah, consider doin' a conspiracy investigation. In the course of doing the shooter investigation, if you don't come up with anything, ah, ah, to indicate there was a conspiracy, then where do you go? You can't take two-hundred-and-fifty-million people and eliminate 'em one by one and—ah, until you've decided that none a' these people conspired with—with James Earl Ray. And besides which, the, ah, House Committee on, ah—or the—the House Assassination Committee spent an awful lot a' money, ah, and spent an awful lot a' time; and, as far as I know, they never came up with any—with any credible, ah, indication that there was any kind of a conspiracy. So I didn't believe there was a conspiracy then; I don't believe it now; and if there was, then the House Committee should have come up with somethin'.

INTERVIEWER Okay, I wanna just go back one more time and have you reiterate your feelings regarding Ray's story of Raoul and, ah, the whole allegation that there was a conspiracy. What do you think of those allegations?

J. HESTER Ah, as to the—to the whole idea of the conspiracy and the involvement of Raoul— Ah, ah, my personal thought is that there was no Raoul, and there was no conspiracy. And, ah, I can s—say without any doubt that we s—we turned up nothin' in our investigation to identify, ah, Ray and to find out what he did and where and when. We turned up nothin' to indicate that there was either a Raoul or anything other conspirator involved in this crime.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah, let me go back one other point. Ah, Charles Stevens. Ah— Witnesses have alleged that he was drunk—that he didn't

see anything. Ah, did the F.B.I. thoroughly check out his story?  
And what did you come up with?

J. HESTER

Regarding Charlie Stevens and, ah, his degree of sobriety at the time of the—of the murder— Ah, as I said earlier, I really think that, ah, ah, taken—ah, taking all of the, ah, evidence that we had—ah, the people that heard the shot, the people that heard running down the hall—ah, when you put all a' this together, Charlie Stevens' testimony, ah, ah, ah, really amounts to very little, and I think the case would be just as strong, if Charlie Stevens hadn't seen anything—if Charlie Stevens had been sound asleep, I don't think it would've—would've affected the strength of our case.

INTERVIEWER

Okay.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER

Ah—

ROLL 4, TAKE 8.

MARK.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER

Okay. Ah, these documents regarding James Hardin—

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember if the F.B.I. thoroughly investigated this man?

J. HESTER

Ah, ah, you've shown me some documents regarding James Hardin, that, ah, frankly, I don't even recall. Ah, I—I feel, ah, satisfied that we did whatever we felt was necessary at the time, but I honestly have no recollection of James Hardin whatsoever at this point.

INTERVIEWER

Ah, what do you think could be the significance of the documents, if any?

J. HESTER

Ah, ah, I'm not even sure that these documents have any particular significance. Th—the—the whole idea of—of a conspir-



acy, ah, appeals to all of the conspiracy buffs runnin' all the way back to, ah, the people who were convinced that President Kennedy was killed by, ah, a man acting within—as part of some humongous, ah, conspiracy. There was nothin' about James Earl Ray's conduct that we discovered prior to the assassination that indicated to us that he ever r—received any sizeable amount a' money at any one time. Now, ah, there were bank robberies that we suspected that James Earl Ray might have been involved in; and we were never able to solve the bank robberies, so we don't know 'til this day if—if Ray was involved in a bank robbery. But we do know that he was—had been, I believe, previously sentenced for armed robbery, and so the—there's no problem for a guy like that as to how he makes it from day to day. But if somebody had paid James Earl Ray forty- or fifty-thousand dollars, ah, I don't think that it would have been possible for him to have avoided, ah, spending some a' that money in a fairly flashy manner. Nothin' about James Earl's conduct ever indicated to us that he had come into any sizeable amount a' money at one time, and I—I just don't buy the conspiracy theory. Whatever—ah, for whatever reason, I think the person that killed Doctor King was acting entirely alone. [BACKGROUND NOISE]

INTERVIEWER Now, what would James Earl Ray's motive have been for the assassination?

J. HESTER [BACKGROUND NOISE] As to motive, ah, I don't really have any idea; the best I could do would—would guess, and my guess is no better than anybody else's guess out in the—ah, in the rest of the world. Ah, I have no idea. But people do strange things without having any motive that makes much sense to anyone else. Ah, why did that—why did that young man, ah, shoot, ah, President Reagan? Ah, ah, wh—what—ah, you know, that—the motive that—that was—that came out in the newspaper didn't make much sense to me. Why did the man shoot George Wallace? Ah, why did Sirhan Sirhan kill Robert Kennedy? None of these, ah—none of these motives, ah, ah, are good enough to explain why you would take somebody's life. And I definitely don't [BACKGROUND NOISE] have any idea why James Earl Ray might've wanted to kill Doctor King.

INTERVIEWER Ah, the F.B.I. and the House Select Committee on Assassinations have both said that, ah, there was absolutely no evidence corroborating Ray's Raoul story. The critics would argue that

this—these Hardin documents are—could be considered corroboration. There is a witness who says that he say James Earl Ray meeting with a man just a few weeks before the assassination. How do you respond to that?

J. HESTER

Ah, the people who hang onto the—to the idea that Hardin was some sort of a conspirator, ah, ah, ah, ah, should be able to figure out some way to explain here, twenty-five years later, if Hardin did have any information regarding this crime, he could write the biggest best seller that anybody has ever come up—up with—I'm sure that one of the book publishing companies would, ah, probably give him a half-million-dollar, ah, advance fee to write to the book. And the same goes for—for Hardin or for Raoul. If anyone really had any concrete information, ah, ah, after twenty-five years, they'd be lookin' to sell it. They'd be doin' their best to—to make it public. I don't—I just don't buy the conspiracy theory.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that—[TAPE JUMP]—at the time of the invest—  
[TAPE JUMP]—when this Hardin lead became available—was it the kind of lead that should have been pursued?

J. HESTER

Ah, as I—ah, ah, regarding the Hardin, ah, matter, again, ah, as I've, ah, said before, I—I really don't have any—any person recollection of that phase of the investigation that had anything to do with Hardin. I'm sure—if it should've been pursued, I'm sure we did; we left no—ah, no stone unturned in—in the course of this investigation; this was conducted with the same thoroughness that we conducted the—the, ah, investigation to determine who killed President Kennedy. \*

INTERVIEWER

Ah—

J. HESTER

[CLEARS THROAT]

INTERVIEWER

Again, not to be argumentative, but to play devil's advocate—the—the documents that have been released by the F.B.I. showed that the lead was not pursued and that Hardin was never found—was never discounted as having met with Ray or—ah, he was never discounted as possibly being involved in it. Ah, how would you respond to that? If the F.B.I. didn't follow the lead—if they didn't pursue it all the way out, what reason could there be for that?

J. HESTER As to the allegation that—that the F.B.I., ah, did not follow the Hardin lead, ah, sufficiently— [CLEARS THROAT] I can only say that, ah, ah, I have no—[LAUGHS]—ah, I am not sure that we didn't, and, ah, I certainly wouldn't have any justification, if we did—if we failed to, I don't have any way of justifying it, but I'm not even sure that we—that we did drop the ball on that.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Ah, one more time. Ah—  
[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

J. HESTER Can I cough?  
[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

J. HESTER [CLEARS THROAT] No, I think I'm all right now.  
[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

J. HESTER [LAUGHS] No, I'm all right.  
[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER Well, looking back on it, is it the—the kind of lead, if you were doing the investigation today—is it the kind of lead that would pop out to you and say: Here's something important we should follow up?

J. HESTER Th—ah, I—I don't think that—if I were doin' the investigation today, I don't know that this lead would—would, ah, jump up at me and indicate to me that it was that terribly important. Ah, ah, from the documents I've seen today, I, ah—I don't see anything there that really captures my imagination.

INTERVIEWER But—now, here—here is a man who allegedly—

J. HESTER [CLEARS THROAT]

INTERVIEWER —had contact with the assassin—

J. HESTER [CLEARS THROAT]

INTERVIEWER —three weeks before the shooting.



J. HESTER Widow, bring me the glass a' water, would you?

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

TAKE 9.

MARK.

INTERVIEWER Do you think that there is any significance to this Hardin lead? Ah, is it something that should have been followed up? Ah, is it something you would follow up if you were doing the investigation today?

J. HESTER Ah, I—I don't really think there's any great significance in the Hardin information. [BACKGROUND NOISE] Ah, if I were doin' the investigation today, ah, and I knew nothin' else, and all I had was Hardin and the fact that some guy had tried to get in touch with—some guy, ah, ah, claiming to be named Hardin had tried to get in touch with—with Eric Gault—if I knew nothin' else, then, ah, ah—[TAPE JUMP]—I would probably—[TAPE JUMP]—to death; but if I already know who Eric Gault is—I already have him identified—I'm—I'm, ah, sure at this point that—that he is the—the killer—I've seen nothin' to indicate—ah, anywhere in this investigation, I've seen absolutely nothin' to indicate that—that this is a conspiracy, or that anybody, ah, you know, even remotely involved with—with, ah, James Earl Ray, ah, is involved win—in the killing of Doctor King. Plus, you gotta remember that James Earl Ray was involved in a—in a great many other things—bartending school, dance lessons, ah, locksmithing school, ah—ah, I—I don't find it terribly sinister that somebody would try to call him on the telephone. And, ah, I can't—I cannot conclude that everybody was in touch with James Earl Ray was some sort of a co-conspirator, ah, involved in the murder of Doctor King. \*

INTERVIEWER The documents seem to indicate that the F.B.I. pursued this lead rather vigorously until Ray was arrested, and then it was dropped. Why?

J. HESTER [BACKGROUND NOISE] If this was pursued, ah—ah, if this was pursued vigorously, ah, my—ah, I'm not the least bit surprised; I just don't have any personal recollection, ah— Ah, and I—I'm—ah, you—you tell me that it—that some a' the critics have said that we dropped it as soon as Ray, ah, was arrested. I'm not

aware of that. I just—I take your word for it—that—that, ah, that happened, but I can't confirm that, because, frankly, I have no—no recollection whatsoever of these Hardin documents.

INTERVIEWER In general, were the—was the conspiracy investigation stopped once R—Ray was arrested?

J. HESTER As to whether or not the conspiracy investigation was stopped when he was arrested— Ah, I don't know that there was ever—ah, it—there was—ah, I don't rem—I don't recall that anybody ever thought in terms of two different investigations. We didn't think in terms of a shooter investigation—

INTERVIEWER I'm sorry—we have to stop.

ROLL 5, TAKE 10.


MARK.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER Did the F.B.I. investigation change at all after James Earl Ray was arrested?

J. HESTER As to whether or not the investigation changed after, ah, Ray was in—ah, was arrested—I, ah—I—I don't recall that it did. Ah, w—we didn't think of the investigation as—ah, we didn't think of—of the investigation as being either a shooter investigation or a conspiracy investigation. It was all one investigation; and in the course of identifying the shooter, we never came up with anything to indicate to us that there was a conspiracy. And the House Committee on Assassinations didn't do any better job than we did, and I feel certain they spent a great deal more money, ah, in their investigation and subpoenaed a great many more people to Washington than we ever did. So I—I'd, ah—again, I don't—I don't buy the conspiracy theory.

INTERVIEWER Is it fair to say that the investigation, though, was significantly downscaled once Ray was arrested?

J. HESTER [SIGHS] As to whether or not the investigation was downscaled after Ray's arrest— Ah, I would say, yes, it probably was; by—at that point, we had—we had served our purpose. We had 



identified the man who we—we felt was—was the, ah—ah, the murderer, and, ah, he had been arrested and—and was then to be brought back to state court for trial in state court. Ah, yes, I would say—[TAPE JUMP]—say that—that—[TAPE JUMP]—I don't—I don't even remember that—at that point, that we had any—I don't remember that we had any loose ends hanging, ah—ah, that anything still needed to be done. Whatever—if we'd had any, I—I feel sure we would've done 'em; but I don't remember that—by that time—by the time he was brought back here from England, I don't remember that we had anything in particular that—that we were still curious about.

INTERVIEWER Ah, let me just get you to take me through the investigation briefly and generally as to how it started and then kind of how it stopped. You can just take me through that whole lifeline of it. Just briefly, though.

INTERVIEWER [BACKGROUND NOISE] Yeah—I'm not sure that I can take you through the entire investigation after these twenty-five years. Ah— It started with the—I guess the first big break we—we got, of course, was the recovery of all a' the stuff that was dropped on the street. Ah, ah, then we, ah—then we identified the white Mustang, ah, that was—was listed on a registration card at the Rebel Motel here in Memphis. Ah, we found that car abandoned in Atlanta. The, ah, undershorts indicate that this man has been living—Eric Gault has been living in Los Angeles. Ah, so we get into a whole new phase of—of activities that all occurred prior to the assassination but, nevertheless, gave us some insight into, ah, what—ah, ah, who this guy was that was callin' himself Eric Gault. Then ultimately we—the fingerprints are identified at the F.B.I. Identification Division as belonging to an escaped federal prisoner named James Earl Ray. And from that point, it was just a matter, really, of—of attempting to locate James Earl Ray and, ah—and covering a—a—a thousand other leads that had come in from, ah, all over the country—people saying: I think this guy could've been the one that killed Doctor King. Or: This guy could've been the one that killed Doctor King. Ah, w—we covered—ah, we covered thousands of those leads, knowing, ah, in our hearts that, ah—you know, that—that we already had the—the killer identified. So it—it was not—you know, we—ah, we didn't s—concen—we didn't, ah, ah, ah, eliminate everything except James Earl Ray and concentrate on him only; but, never-



theless, once w—once we had his—ah, had his fingerprints identified, we felt certain that we were goin' in the right direction.

INTERVIEWER What did you investigate then after Ray was arrested?

J. HESTER As to—as—after he was arrested, I don't remember—I don't recall that the investigation, ah— Ah, ah, the—I—I s—I think there was some investigation in Europe. Ah, attempting to determine exactly where he had been and what he had been doing. And as I recall now, I think that we were able to track him, ah, from England to, ah—ah, to Belgium to Portugal, ah, back to—back to England— There was investigation being conducted along that line as to what—what had James Earl Ray been doing in Europe and where had he gone.

INTERVIEWER After Ray was arrested, was there any investigation in the U.S. to determine any possible co-conspirators?

J. HESTER [BACKGROUND NOISE] I'll be honest with you—I—I cannot remember at—that there was, ah, much investigation done after he was arrested. Ah— And as—as for the—the—as for investigation conducted to id—identify co-conspirators—ah, the best I can say is that we attempted to interview James Earl Ray in the Tennessee State Penitentiary. I think on about the second or third day after he was removed there by the court. And he refused to talk to us. And if we were ever gonna be able to successfully mount a conspiracy investigation, it had to be almost with the cooperation of James Earl Ray. But an investigation is—is very much like a p—jigsaw puzzle. You start off with one piece, and then you get another piece, and then you get another piece, and then you get another piece. And at the—at the end of it, the jigsaw puzzle is gonna make some sort of a picture. Ah, if you got a picture of the Mona Lisa, then, chances are, you're not gonna have a picture a' the Eiffel Tower. And if you got a—if the puzzle works out to be a picture of the Eiffel Tower, ah, unless you see the Mona Lisa's smile somewhere in there, you're not gonna—you're not gonna find, ah, anything more than—than what the puzzle started out to be in the—in the first place. And I think the—I think the—the murder of Doctor King—I think the puzzle was pret—pretty well put together, and I don't think there were any pieces left over.

INTERVIEWER Okay, cut.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

TAKE 11.

MARK.

INTERVIEWER Some people might suggest that, ah, James Hardin could be Raoul. And that finally here's evidence that could corroborate Ray's story of Raoul. What do you think?

J. HESTER Ah, ah, as to the—to the supposition that James Hardin might have been Raoul— Ah— I—I don't know. Perhaps we ought a' ask James Earl Ray; he's written a book. And I don't know if he mentioned Hardin in his book, ah— Maybe Ray doesn't even know who Hardin was. I—I—I really don't know. I don't, and— and, as I've said before, I don't place any great significance on the fact that some man claiming to be named Hardin, ah, tried to get in touch with James Earl Ray.

INTERVIEWER So you don't think that Hardin could be, ah, Raoul.

J. HESTER I don't have any reason to believe that Hardin could be Raoul, because I don't really have any reason to believe that Raoul is Raoul. I'm not convinced that there is anybody named Raoul involved in this case. \*

INTERVIEWER And this evidence wouldn't change your mind on that at all.

J. HESTER Wouldn't change my mind in the least.

INTERVIEWER Could you rephrase that for me—just—

J. HESTER Ah, and, ah—and the Hardin evidence would not change my mind in the least as to whether or not there is anybody named Raoul. After twenty-five years, if there were such a person as Raoul, we would've heard from him—or—or, better still, you would have heard from him, and he would a' been tryin' to sell you his information, so that you could put it on American television. That would be worth a lot more money to him than any guns that he and James Earl Ray might have ever run, had they ever run any guns.

INTERVIEWER Okay. Cut.

[BACKGROUND CONVERSATION]

INTERVIEWER I think that's it.

[END OF INTERVIEW WITH JOE HESTER.]