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TV: Dept. of Government Conspiracies

By DOROTHY RABINOWITZ

It isn't often that a conspiracy theory blows up before the eyes of a national television audience—not, at any rate, in the way that ABC's "Turning Point" succeeded, last week, in exploding the story now being put about by the family of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., about the government-arranged assassination of the civil rights leader.

This isn't, all in all, the best of times for the hawkers of government conspiracies—of whom we have, to be sure, an inexhaustible supply. It is hard, for instance, to imagine an event more damaging to the conspiracy business than the recent trial of Timothy McVeigh. That trial exposed a furious nation to the grief of bereaved parents, and of children recalling their murdered mothers and fathers; after which disbelieving millions heard defense lawyers argue that we were, all of us, partly responsible for the Oklahoma bombing. We were all responsible, the argument went, because the nation had not seen to the pursuit of justice in the Waco affair: a failure that so moved the patriot Tim McVeigh that he was compelled to blow up the Murrah Building.

Before and during McVeigh's trial, like-minded patriots brought varying news about government plots in regard to Oklahoma City. There were, we were assured, witnesses—there is hardly a government conspiracy not teeming with alleged eyewitnesses—who saw FBI teams in the building just before the bombing. Whether the government had a direct hand in the bombing, as some suggest, or whether its agents knew of the intended assault in advance is a matter of some uncertainty within this particular quarter of the conspiracy network.

Those hawking the King plot scenario, on the other hand, are nothing if not united in certainty as to the motives and the perpetrators. Not only did the plot involve, as King's son Dexter told anchor Forrest Sawyer, "part and parcel Army intelligence . . . CIA, FBI"—the plan to kill King originated higher up the chain of government command. Did he believe Lyndon Johnson was part of the plot to kill his father, Mr. Sawyer asked Dexter King.

"I do," came the prompt reply. Mr. King has by this time in the program announced his belief, shared, as they make clear, by all members of the King family, that James Earl Ray—against whom the evidence of guilt is overwhelming—is an innocent man. Dexter King's brother, Martin Luther King III—evidently wracked by indignation on Ray's behalf—in turn announces that Ray is a man who has "sat there [in prison] 29 years" and who had "basically nothing to do with this assassination." A wonderful spectacle to behold,

that. So is the effort of an uneasy Andrew Young, former U.N. ambassador, who has signed on to the plot theory. Does he in his heart of hearts believe James Earl Ray innocent, Mr. Sawyer asks him.

Answer: ". . . only because, you know, he's such a tragic, pitiful man. He couldn't have done all these things by himself."

Indeed, 29 years in prison and advanced liver disease can manage to produce quite a frail-looking specimen. The lean and tough escaped convict James Earl Ray—whose fingerprints were all over the murder weapon, who had bought a rifle fitted with a scope six days before the assassination, and who suddenly had the money, immediately after, to run to Canada, Portugal and London—looked decidedly less pitiful three decades ago.



Martin L. King Jr.

Mr. Young had nothing to say about the King family's view that Lyndon Johnson colluded in the scheme to murder King. Lyndon Johnson: who used every iota of power at his command to get the Civil Rights Bill and Voting Rights Act passed. This now makes two assassination plots in which Lyndon Johnson is supposed to have had a hand—the first having been, of course, that of John F. Kennedy, as revealed by Oliver Stone in "JFK." Mr. Stone can always say, and he has, that he was only making a movie. The King family and William Pepper, chief author of their conspiracy script, aren't, needless to say, in the movie business.

There are times, to be sure, when this script resembles nothing so much as one of Mr. Stone's fictionalized histories with their casts of sinister agents, cabals of military assassins, and perpetrators killed off by higher-ups to silence them. All the more reason to value the dispatch with which the ever-civil Mr. Sawyer cuts short the magical mystery ride and gets to the point—a combination interrogator and Greek Chorus, saying what cries out to be said. His most dramatic interventions came toward the end of a segment in which Mr. Pepper (Ray's attorney) jabbered confidently on about his secret sources, and, particularly, about one Capt. Eidson, killed off, supposedly because he had headed the assassination team that dispatched King.

The next faces we see are the military adviser to the 20th Special Forces and an outraged general prepared with documentation to prove that the Pepper story is a lie. Mr. Pepper did not, it appears, trouble himself to interview anyone in the military group accused. Fact-checking is, of course, a pursuit inimical to the interests of con-

spiracy theorists. The moment that everyone—Mr. Pepper not least—is likely to remember came next, when Mr. Sawyer inquired languidly if he might play something for his guest.

In short order, on a TV screen, and then, live and in person, Mr. Pepper and the rest of us see the same Capt. Eidson, allegedly head of the assassination team and also, allegedly, dead. It was a hard case for lawyer Pepper, all told, as he stumbled through the introductions, explaining he would never have mentioned the man if he had known he was alive. "But thinking he was dead you were willing to mention his name," noted Mr. Sawyer without missing a beat.

At the end of it all, a viewer is left to ponder the King family's eager embrace of Mr. Pepper's scenario. We learn, in an afterword, that Mr. Pepper has found nothing to shake his conviction as regards his theory. The King family continues to believe in Ray's innocence and in the government conspiracy. The King family and Andrew Young, furthermore, want a commission of inquiry with federal funding to find out what happened, and, as Mr. Young says, to purge the soul of America.

Mr. Young and the King family notwithstanding, the nation is, as it happens, not particularly riven by doubts as to who killed Martin Luther King—nor is it in particular need of purging on this score. If anyone needs purging it is the subscribers to Mr. Pepper's absurd charges regarding a plot by the president and the military. We know who killed Martin Luther King—if not every fact about his accomplices. Viewers who missed this chapter of "Turning Point" should keep an eye out for a re-run, which the network should arrange soon as a public service.