

Death of King may be 'great unknown'

1/20/98
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The country might never know why the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was killed, or who pulled the trigger, a Hood College professor said on the day set aside to remember the slain civil rights leader.

"I don't think the official story holds," Dr. Gerald McKnight said. "In my mind, it's a great unknown, a great question."

Dr. King was killed on April 4, 1968, as he stood on the balcony of his room at a Memphis motel. He was 39. James Earl Ray pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 99 years.

Ray, who is near death, later claimed he was innocent.

"He is our Dreyfus, in a sense," Dr. McKnight said, referring to a late 19th century case in France where Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of betraying his country with scant evidence. Dreyfus, imprisoned on Devil's Island, was pardoned and later found innocent.

Dr. McKnight acknowledged that his opinions don't represent the consensus of historians. But to him, the King case had two great tragedies. The first was the assassination itself and the second was how Ray was denied adequate representation by his lawyers.

"Neither of them did anything to examine the facts of the case," Dr. McKnight said. Both, however, had contracts to give a writer access to

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Ray for a book, he said.

At the time of the assassination, Dr. King had become more than a civil rights leader. By 1967 and 1968, he had begun to challenge publicly the U.S. government's foreign policy.

"No longer is he a preacher marching for poor people. He's confronting the power structure," Dr. McKnight said. Dr. McKnight said Dr. King could be considered the most prominent man of the 20th century. In some circles, though, he had become the most dangerous radical in the United States.

"The government campaign against King was a fearsome and awesome thing," Dr. McKnight said. "King was the most surveilled, harassed private citizen in the republic, at least up to this time. There wasn't a thing he did that they didn't have a record of it."

Dr. McKnight offered no theories on who was behind the assassination. It could have been a powerful racist who paid for the slaying. "But that's just idle speculation. I don't know."

He said he was certain more than one person was involved. But connecting the King assassination to the killings of John and Robert Kennedy is implausible, he said. "That's really high-tech fiction."

All three of them, though, were killed at a time when they began to question Cold War foreign policy. There is evidence that John Kennedy might have wanted political solutions to Vietnam and Cuba. Robert Kennedy and Dr. King both called for ending the Vietnam War.

"All three of them were examining what our national objectives should be," Dr. McKnight said.