

NY Times

Justice Dept. Plans Limited Review of King Assassination

By DAVID JOHNSTON

WASHINGTON, Aug. 26 — Attorney General Janet Reno announced today that the Justice Department would conduct a limited examination of recently uncovered information in the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Ms. Reno, who has labored for months to reach a decision, authorized a much narrower inquiry than the full review sought by Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, and other members of the King family who had urged the Clinton Administration to create a national fact-finding commission.

The accusations to be reviewed by the department's civil rights division include those by Lloyd Jowers, a former Memphis bar owner, and Donald Wilson, a former agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Both suggested that there might have been a conspiracy to kill Dr. King involving people in addition to James Earl Ray, the only person convicted of the murder.

"We hope this review will provide answers to new questions that have been raised about a tragedy that still haunts our nation," Ms. Reno said in a statement, in which she also promised a report on the findings.

"The evidence gathered by the inquiry will be followed wherever it may lead," she said. But Ms. Reno warned that some actions might not be prosecuted because some Federal statutes of limitations had lapsed long ago.

Justice Department officials said that although investigators would impartially re-examine the accusations of a conspiracy, they said they had no reason to believe that Mr. Ray was wrongly convicted of the murder or that he was part of a wider plot.

The issue has posed a political problem for Ms. Reno. Justice Department officials have been reluctant to raise expectations about a case that most regard as closed. At the same time, the officials have worried about offending a powerful

family with strong ties to the White House.

Most investigators and historians who have reviewed the case in the 30 years after Dr. King's death have concluded that Mr. Ray fatally shot Dr. King as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. Mr. Ray, who used a deer rifle, was said to have been motivated by racial hatred.

After his arrest he confessed and pleaded guilty, but he soon recanted his confession. Until his death in April he hinted at a conspiracy, but

never offered any evidence to support his claim. Mr. Ray was serving a 99-year sentence for the shooting when he died.

The killing has aroused such deep passions that the Government has never fully succeeded in bringing the case to a convincing close. Mr. Ray's repeated, though unavailing, efforts to win a trial helped keep the case alive. So did jailhouse interviews in which he said he took orders from a shadowy figure named Raoul, or Raul, who has never been identified.

Earlier this year, Mr. Wilson, the

retired F.B.I. agent, said that after the killing he had found two slips of paper in Mr. Ray's car that he said bore the name "Raul." In response, F.B.I. officials said Mr. Wilson was not part of the search team that examined Mr. Ray's car and dismissed Mr. Wilson's evidence as a "total fabrication."

Questions have also been raised about a recent account by Mr. Jowers, the bar owner. In 1968, Mr. Jowers ran Jim's Grill, a cafe across the street from the Lorraine Motel. The cafe was a few doors down from

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the rooming house from which, the authorities have said, Mr. Ray fired the single shot that killed Dr. King.

Mr. Jowers said in an interview on ABC's "Primetime Live" in 1993 that he had hired Dr. King's killer and that the man was not Mr. Ray. Mr. Jowers said he hired the man for a Memphis produce dealer connected to organized crime, who is now dead.

Since the interview, Mr. Jowers has been unwilling to comment further. His lawyers have said that he has moved out of state. Earlier this year, a seven-month investigation by Bill Gibbons, the Memphis District Attorney General, concluded that Mr. Ray acted alone.

The most searching review of the

case was conducted by the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978 and 1979. The panel found that Mr. Ray had fired the fatal shot and that if conspirators existed, they were probably members of Mr. Ray's family and a few extremists in St. Louis who were said to have put a bounty on Dr. King's life.

A recent book on the King case "Killing the Dream" by Gerald Posner, regarded by reviewers as an authoritative examination of the subject, found no evidence to support Mr. Ray's contention that he was maneuvered into a conspiracy, or that the F.B.I. or the Central Intelligence Agency had covered up evidence in the case.