

JAMES EARL RAY SHOULD GET A TRIAL

WASHINGTON — James Earl Ray, the two-bit thief imprisoned for the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., has always deserved a full-fledged trial. His incarceration has always smelled of suppression of ugly truths, making it an ugly episode in our system of criminal justice.



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There is a mountain of evidence that the dimwitted Ray was just a patsy in a conspiracy to kill King, who was widely hated for his civil rights activities and for his opposition to the war in Vietnam.

So I am pleased that King's widow, Coretta, and his children are supporting the request of Ray, now 68 and reportedly dying of liver disease, for the full-fledged courtroom trial that he never got.

Ray was imprisoned for 99 years on the basis of a confession he gave after his lawyer warned him to confess or die in the electric chair. His recantation of that confession was ignored during some weird legal maneuvers that seemed aimed at ensuring that he would never say in court what he knew about who might really have ordered the assassination or fired the bullet that snuffed out King's life almost 29 years ago.

Six years ago, after being allowed to study thousands of FBI documents, I wrote the following in my book *Breaking Barriers*: "Nothing will ever end the suspicion, the speculation, about who really killed Dr. King. I



Ray (shown here in 1974) might testify there was a conspiracy to murder Martin Luther King Jr.

shall go to my grave believing that (J. Edgar) Hoover, (William) Sullivan, and others in the FBI had a role in silencing the black man they professed to fear, but surely hated."

One of the jurists in the strange lockup of Ray, Judge W. Preston Battle Jr., once expressed open doubt that, confession notwithstanding, Ray acted alone. The FBI documents convinced me beyond a whisper of doubt that Ray got sophisticated help from some agents of the U. S. government in getting from Memphis, site of the murder, to Atlanta, Cincinnati, Detroit and the Canadian cities of Windsor and Toronto, and then to London, Lisbon and back to London's Heath-

row Airport, where he was arrested. The not-very-smart Ray clearly had help in getting phony passports and the money needed to escape for more than a month one of the greatest manhunts in FBI history.

The King family's hope is that during a trial Ray might testify to facts that will enlighten the world about a possible conspiracy to kill King. In a Memphis courtroom this past Thursday, Judge Joseph Brown turned down the eighth request for a new trial by Ray's lawyers. The judge lifted the strange lid of suppression only to the extent of asking a court of appeals to permit sophisticated new tests to determine if the bullet that killed King really was fired from a gun taken to Memphis by Ray.

Even if this new technology indicates the fatal bullet was fired from another weapon, there is no assurance that Ray would get a new trial. And even if he gets a new trial, it probably would not produce the shocking facts and evidence that the King family hopes for.

The FBI documents that I read suggested that Ray has no idea how he got suckered into a murder plot and became the stooge who has paid with his freedom. Ray apparently has no idea who arranged for him to get a Canadian passport under the name of "Ramon George Sneya," or who ponied up the money for his flight to Europe.

Still, it would be good to feel that the U. S. judicial system is not part of an elaborate cover-up of a dastardly act of social-political murder.

Years ago, the judges should have said, "Let's put everything everyone has on the table and see if we can fix blame for this crime." With Ray holding on to life, it is still not too late.

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