

Family Forgiveness

Martin Luther King's son meets his father's convicted killer, giving new life to wild theories

By JACK E. WHITE

WHAT A STRANGE MOMENT. IN A meeting room in a Nashville, Tennessee, prison hospital, the youngest son of Martin Luther King Jr. sat face to face with James Earl Ray, the man serving 99 years for murdering the civil rights leader. It could have been in a movie. And maybe it will be.

"I just want to ask you for the record," said Dexter King as CNN cameras homed in on his face. "Did you kill my father?"

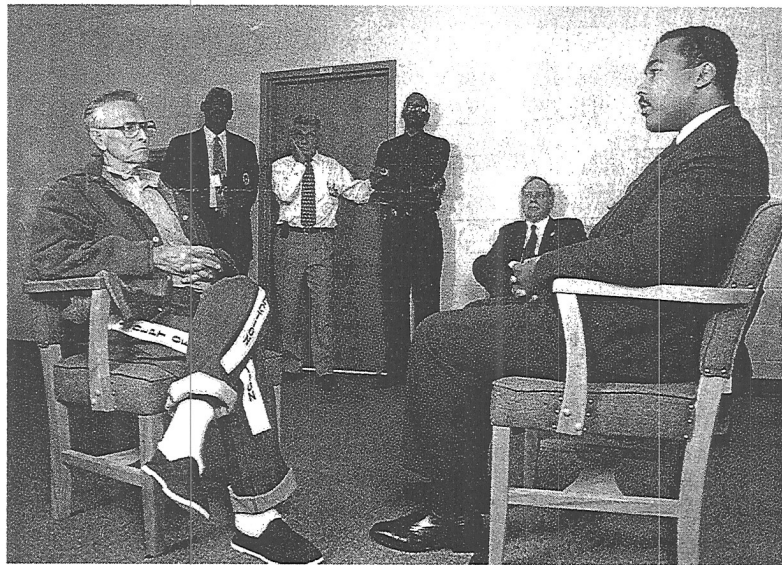
"No, I didn't, no," replied Ray in a quavering voice. Then he added, "But like I say, sometimes these questions are difficult to answer."

You bet they are—and of all the difficult questions that have swirled around King's murder for the past 29 years, none is more perplexing than why his heirs have become the chief boosters of the bid by Ray to exonerate himself before he dies from liver disease. In February, both Dexter and his mother Coretta Scott King testified in a court hearing in Memphis, Tennessee, that Ray should be given the full-fledged trial he never had because he pleaded guilty to the killing, before recanting three days later. Last week, after listening to Ray's up-close and personal protestations that he had "nothing to do with" the murder, Dexter declared, "I believe you, and my family believes you." Never before had the King family put itself so firmly in Ray's camp.

Which is odd, given the overwhelming evidence that Ray at the very least had something to do with the shooting: he has admitted purchasing the high-powered rifle that the FBI says was the murder weapon, renting the room from which the shot was allegedly fired and being in Memphis when the killing occurred. Dexter King's credulity suggests the Kings have fallen under the hypnotic spell of William F. Pepper, Ray's current lawyer and the architect of a breathtakingly convoluted conspiracy theory about the assassina-

tion. They should step back from the brink.

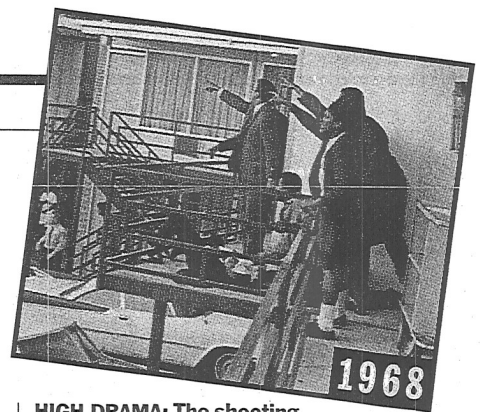
In his book *Orders to Kill: The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King*, Pepper delivers a turgid blend of proved fact, hearsay and wild speculation. He claims that Ray was merely a fall guy in an intricate plot woven by U.S. Army intelligence units in which dozens, maybe even hundreds, of Mafia dons, government agents, white racists and small-time crooks were involved. He writes that he pieced together evidence of this vast conspiracy during a courageous 18-year investigation that ranged over several continents. But some of his most unsettling charges were



FACE TO FACE: James Earl Ray denied killing King, and Dexter King believed him

lifted straight out of newspaper stories, then stretched beyond recognition.

For example, Pepper got the idea that clandestine Army units were stalking King from a sensational series of articles by former Memphis *Commercial Appeal* reporter Steven G. Tompkins, who now serves as a spokesman for Georgia Governor Zell Miller. In 1993 Tompkins wrote, "On April 3 [the day before the killing], King returned to Memphis. Army agents from the 111th Military Intelligence Group shadowed his movements and monitored radio traffic from a sedan crammed with electronic equipment. Eight Green Beret soldiers from an 'Operation Detachment Alpha 184 Team' were also in Memphis carrying out an unknown mission." Although Tompkins



HIGH DRAMA: The shooting at the Lorraine Motel is good movie material

wrote that he had "uncovered no hard evidence that Army Intelligence played any role in King's assassination," Pepper takes the tale to the races. Pepper writes that the soldiers were in Memphis to shoot King—and his deputy Andrew Young—if the hired civilian gunman who actually fired the fatal shot had missed. All of the witnesses Pepper claims can back up this story are dead, in hiding or unwilling to come forward—so there is no way for anyone else to question them.

And then there is what Pepper says about Merrell McCullough, ostensibly a Memphis undercover cop who infiltrated the Invaders, a militant black-youth organization that had allied itself with King's movement. McCullough's real mission, Pepper maintains, was to report to the 111th Military Intelligence Group headquartered at Camp McPherson, Georgia, on King's movements and plans. Pepper even includes in his book a photograph of McCullough kneeling over King's body moments after the shooting, "apparently checking him for life signs." But the man in the photograph is Earl Caldwell, then a New

York Times reporter. Pepper told TIME last week that he believed the man in the picture was McCullough because he was so identified in Mark Lane and Dick Gregory's 1976 book about the assassination.

A Tennessee appellate court is considering whether to allow new ballistics tests that Pepper says will prove Ray's rifle was not the murder weapon. If they do, Ray might eventually get the real-life day in court he has been demanding for 29 years. And even if they don't, all the new wrinkles touted by Pepper make the King case sound more like a movie from Oliver Stone, who happens to be negotiating a deal with the King family associate who owns the rights to the story. It would make a heck of a movie, all right: MLK, not JFK. ■