

LES PAYNE

Ray's Racism Shouldn't Muddy the Case



THE NEW FBI director laughed, but the pro-
tester was not joking. The dreaded J. Edgar
Hoover had died the previous year and the
man picketing the FBI headquarters was testing
the new winds of openness.

"Mr. Director," the young civil rights demonstra-
tor reportedly told Hoover's successor, "I know the
FBI conducted electronic surveillance on Dr. King. I
want to save the bureau some film. So I'll tell you
right now, I like women."

Clarence M. Kelley assured the bold philanderer
that unlike Hoover he was mindful that guaranteed
civil liberties extended to all Americans. Kelley, a
St. Bernard of a police chief from Kansas City,
maintained this distance between himself and Hoo-
ver in public as well as in private. "I don't believe in
such activities as police roundups or vigilantes," he
said after his confirmation in 1973. "Society has to
place some restrictions on the police. Police, after
all, are constantly depriving people of their liberty."
The death of Clarence Kelley, at age 85, last week
brought back a 1977 interview I had with him over
the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

First I implied that by covering its tracks the FBI
was, itself, implicated in the King case. With Hoover
waging warfare against King and the civil rights
movement, the FBI appeared to have been an abettor
and possibly even a co-conspirator in the affair.

I pressed with Kelley the possibility that James

Earl Ray, who had withdrawn his guilty plea and
professed innocence, might have been a patsy. The
death bullet, I argued from my own findings, could
not be linked conclusively to James Earl Ray's rifle;
the rifle barrel could not be linked to the window sill
from which it was allegedly fired; Ray could not be
positively placed in the bathroom of the flophouse
from which the shot was allegedly fired, and it could
not be established that the bullet was even fired
from the window, as the FBI had concluded.

Kelley, fully briefed by his agents, listened to all
this, and said simply, "We don't have an unbroken
chain of evidence." He insisted that the "circum-
stantial" case against James Earl Ray was solid, but
he was not cocksure.

The case against Ray flared anew recently when
King's son Dexter visited the convict and declared,
incredibly, that the man serving 99 years for killing
his father is innocent. Furthermore, Dexter King
said that Ray and his hardscrabble family raised on
the Missouri steep in the teeth of the Great Depres-
sion was not racist.

Laying aside the assassination issue, it is baffling
that Dexter King could ignore Ray's racial record.

I recently questioned Gerry Ray on national TV
about his statement that his brother James has been
wild all his life on the issue of "politics and niggers."
A knowing grin froze Ray's face as he began his
evasive and quibbling. I reminded him that in addi-

tion to his being quoted in a book by William Brad-
ford Huie, writer Mike Dorman had also heard
Gerry's account of James Earl Ray's hatred of blacks.
Gerry Ray: Who is Mike Dorman?
Q: A writer out of New York. Are you saying that
you never spoke to Mike Dorman?

Gerry Ray: I can't say definitely 'cause I don't
remember his name. But I know definitely I didn't
tell him nothing like that and he's a damn liar if he
said I did.

It turns out that Mike Dorman has spoken to
Gerry Ray a half dozen times over the last year.
"The last time I called him, I said, 'This is Mike
Dorman and Gerry said, 'I know, I recognized your
voice right away,' " Dorman recalled.

Dorman, who has written about the King case for
Newsday and is the author of a book about Ray's key
lawyer, Percy Foreman, was surprised Gerry Ray
had denied knowing him. He was even more sur-
prised that Ray had denied verifying his previous
account of James Earl Ray's racism.

To say James Earl Ray is a racist is not to prove
that he killed King. However, the evidence against
him is as clear as the fact that he did not pull off the
assassination and the two-month escape alone.

The King family is correct in demanding a full
investigation. However, an intelligent probe does
not start with the false premise that James Earl Ray
had nothing to do with the murder.