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NATION

Black leaders await 'the truth'

Ray's deathbed may hold keys to King mysteries

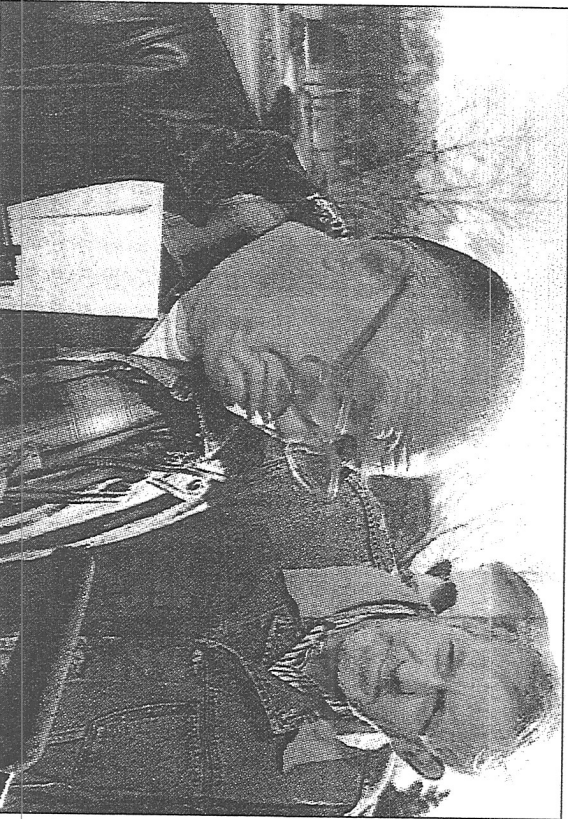
By **TIM CHAVEZ and JON YATES**

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The truth will not die with James Earl Ray.

That's the assertion of people who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., carried his legacy into elected office and investigated his assassination. That's their hope on learning that Ray, King's convicted murderer, lies dying in Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital.

"The politics of the assassinations of the '60s changed America forever," said the Rev. James Lawson, a civil rights activist from Los Angeles who has pushed for Ray's release from prison. "That will haunt the nation until the truth comes out. That will haunt the nation and slow-



Jerry Ray, left, says his brother James Earl Ray hasn't much longer to live. At right is Lionel Barrett, formerly an attorney for Ray. Story on 16A.

REX PERRY/STAFF

ly destroy the fabric of the nation. "The case will never be closed." Lawson, expelled from Vanderbilt Divinity School for leading civil

rights protests in the 1960s, believes Ray did not assassinate King himself, but was a "pawn" in a larger conspiracy.

The belief of a larger conspiracy is shared by many others who marched with King, including Walter E. Fauntroy, the former delegate to Congress from the District of Columbia. Fauntroy, the director of the Washington bureau of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the 1960s, chaired the select committee of the U.S. House of Representatives that investigated the assassination of Dr. King.

"I do not believe the truth will die with James Earl Ray," said Fauntroy, pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church in Washington.

"I'm just satisfied that the truth will emerge and no efforts to stifle it will succeed. I believe I know the truth; it will come out in the decades ahead. ... People who were responsible for it are not ready for it."

Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., who led student sit-ins in Nashville to force integration of downtown stores and lunch counters during the early

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Truth won't die with Ray, black leaders say

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1960s and was with King when he was shot, said even a generation later the truth would benefit society, and added federal and Tennessee authorities should use Ray's death as a reason to reopen the King case.

"With his [Ray's] death, I do not see this as an end to a very dark period in our history. It is my hope, people who may still be alive who had some knowledge of what happened, or that James Earl Ray told, will come forward.

"It's important for people to know, so maybe we can prevent the same thing from happening again, when it appears there was a conspiracy to remove political and social leaders who may be different from the norm."

Like others, Lewis said he never accepted the idea that Ray acted alone. But he differs from some in believing Ray probably pulled the trigger.

"He was a player; he was one of the actors. I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was a conspiracy to kill Dr. Martin Luther King."

The work of Fauntroy's panel in the late 1970s, subsequent books, 1993 reporting in *The Observer* of London and the mock retrial of Ray in an HBO special have fueled doubts about Ray's conviction.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson said he visited Ray once in prison. That convinced him that Ray had help.

"It appears to me that James Earl Ray was a small cog in a big wheel."

There is one certainty in the case of James Earl Ray: If he dies, more people will come forward to write books, said the Rev. James Thomas, pastor of Jefferson Street Missionary Baptist Church.

"You will get some crumbs come out," said Thomas, who met King during a Nashville rally at Tennessee State University in 1964. "One thing about justice in America: Even though Black America has problems and even though justice is slow, it will come."

To Lawson, finding the truth is paramount to the well-being of the country.

"Great nations never die with a bang. They always die with slow decay. Fundamental decay is rooted in the nation's unwillingness to face itself." ■