

Did Ray Get Aid In King Murder?

Prosecutor backing conspiracy theories

By Michael Dorman

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

South Kingstown, R.I. — The chief prosecutor in the James Earl Ray case said Friday it is "more likely than unlikely" that there was a conspiracy in the 1968 assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

It was the first such public statement by any high-ranking law-enforcement official directly involved in the Ray case. The prosecutor, Memphis Assistant District Attorney John Campbell, said in an interview that one or more conspirators might have helped Ray flee after the assassination. "They might or might not have played roles in the murder itself," he said.

Campbell, a veteran homicide prosecutor, was in Rhode Island to help oversee ballistics tests intended to determine whether a .30-06 rifle owned by Ray and bearing his fingerprint fired the bullet that killed King. The weapon was found after the assassination near the murder scene, but previous ballistic tests were unable to identify the rifle positively as the murder weapon.

"Even if there was a conspiracy, our position is that it doesn't change James Earl Ray's situation at all," Campbell said. "We believe he's where he belongs — in prison. He fired the shot that killed Dr. King."

Campbell said there is not sufficient evidence now — and may never be — to charge anyone with conspiracy. But the fresh attention brought to the case recently by defense lawyers' attempts to win Ray a full-scale trial and by the King family's support of Ray might bring new evidence to light, he said. "You never know what will come out of the woodwork," Campbell said.

He nonetheless described the defense's efforts — including the ballistics tests — as "stupid" because they will not clear Ray and will almost certainly not win him a trial. Ray pleaded guilty to the assassination in 1969 and is serving a 99-year sentence. But he asserted his innocence almost immediately after his plea.

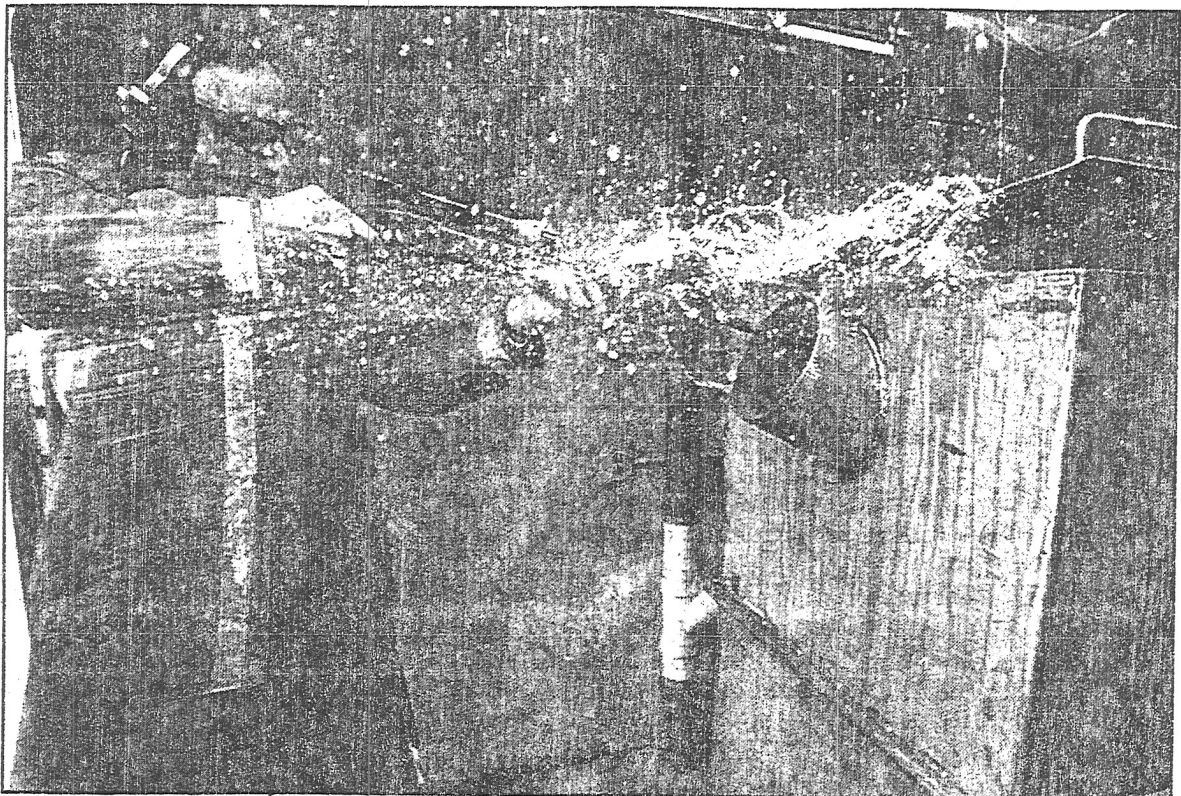
As for who might have been involved in a conspiracy, Campbell said two of Ray's brothers, Jerry and John, seemed logical prospects.

"Jerry has admitted he was in touch with James

while James was a fugitive," the prosecutor said. "Also, Jerry and John had a lot of canceled checks made out to cash while their brother was a fugitive. Those checks could have been used to obtain cash that was turned over to James Earl Ray. I've seen those checks. I can't recall what they totaled, but it was a substantial amount of money. The House Assassinations Committee questioned John and Jerry about the checks. Neither one could or would give a plausible explanation for them."

Jerry and John Ray have repeatedly denied any involvement in the assassination or in helping their brother flee. Conspiracy theorists have argued that Ray must have had help because his flight to Canada, then to England, where he was arrested, required more money than he was known to have. But law-enforcement officials have said that Ray pulled sever-

NEWSDAY, SATURDAY, MAY 17, 1997



AP Photo



Criminalist Robert Hathaway, above, fires James Earl Ray's rifle into a water tank during ballistics tests at the University of Rhode Island. Left, Memphis Assistant District Attorney John Campbell.

Photo by Anestis Diakopoulos

al holdups while a fugitive.

Campbell said Jerry and John Ray were known racists and thus had reasons for wanting King out of the way.

"They were close to George Wallace and J.B. Stoner," Campbell said. Stoner was a Georgia lawyer once imprisoned in the bombing of a black Alabama church. "They also knew about it when a cash bounty was put up by a group of St. Louis racists for Dr. King's murder," Campbell said. "They may have told James Earl Ray about that. And James Earl Ray was a racist himself. It's documented in black and white that while he was serving a federal prison sentence at Leavenworth, he rejected a transfer to a softer life on a prison farm because the dormitories there were desegregated."