

Ray Tells Dexter King He's Not Assassin

Son of Slain Civil Rights Leader Convinced of Convict's Innocence

By Pat Harris
Reuter

NASHVILLE, Tenn., March 27—The son of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. left his first meeting with James Earl Ray today convinced that his father's confessed assassin was innocent.

"I just want to ask you for the record, did you kill my father?" Dexter King asked the frail, 69-year-old Ray.

"No, no, no, I didn't, no," Ray responded, to which King replied: "I want you to know that I believe you and my family believes you and we are going to do everything in our power to try and make sure that justice will prevail."

The two men met and shook hands for the first time in a conference room at the Lois DeBerry Special Needs Facility in Nashville, where the ailing Ray has been held off and on since suffering near-fatal liver failure over the past three months.

Ray, wearing a faded blue prison outfit and trembling slightly, entered the room in a wheelchair but insisted on moving to a chair opposite King.

"I know this is a difficult period for you. We want to bring what has occurred in the dark into the light," King told Ray, who is serving a 99-year prison sentence for the murder.

After spending a few minutes together in front of cameras and jail guards, the two men met in private for 20 minutes.

King said he and Ray briefly discussed the prevailing view among conspiracy theorists that Ray was "an unknowing patsy" for government-led plotters. Among the mo-

tives cited for killing King were his growing opposition to the Vietnam War.

King said Ray told him he feared being viewed as a con artist who had drawn the King family into the controversy.

"There are many ironies in this case, but in some strange way, our destinies are entwined. We are working together for a common goal, which is to achieve a trial," King said. "Having met with James Earl Ray, I believe and my family believes this man is innocent. This visit has long been anticipated. This visit for me was a spiritual experience."

King and his mother, Coretta Scott King, testified last month on Ray's behalf at a Memphis court hearing in which Ray's lawyers took the first step in securing a trial. Ray has persistently argued that his confession was coerced by his lawyers so as to avoid the death penalty, and that the real killer was an arms smuggler he had met named "Raoul."

A Tennessee criminal appeals court panel was considering whether to drop a 1994 stay in Ray's case and grant a request to retest the rifle and the remnants of the fatal bullet with a sophisticated electron microscope.

Several examinations of the rifle markings never conclusively proved it fired the bullet into King's face in 1968, but a 1978 congressional investigation concluded Ray, a petty criminal with a history of incompetence, acted alone.

Meanwhile, Ray and his family have sought publicity in the hope of securing a liver transplant, without which Ray will die before the end of the year, according to his doctors. Ray's younger brother, Jerry, said

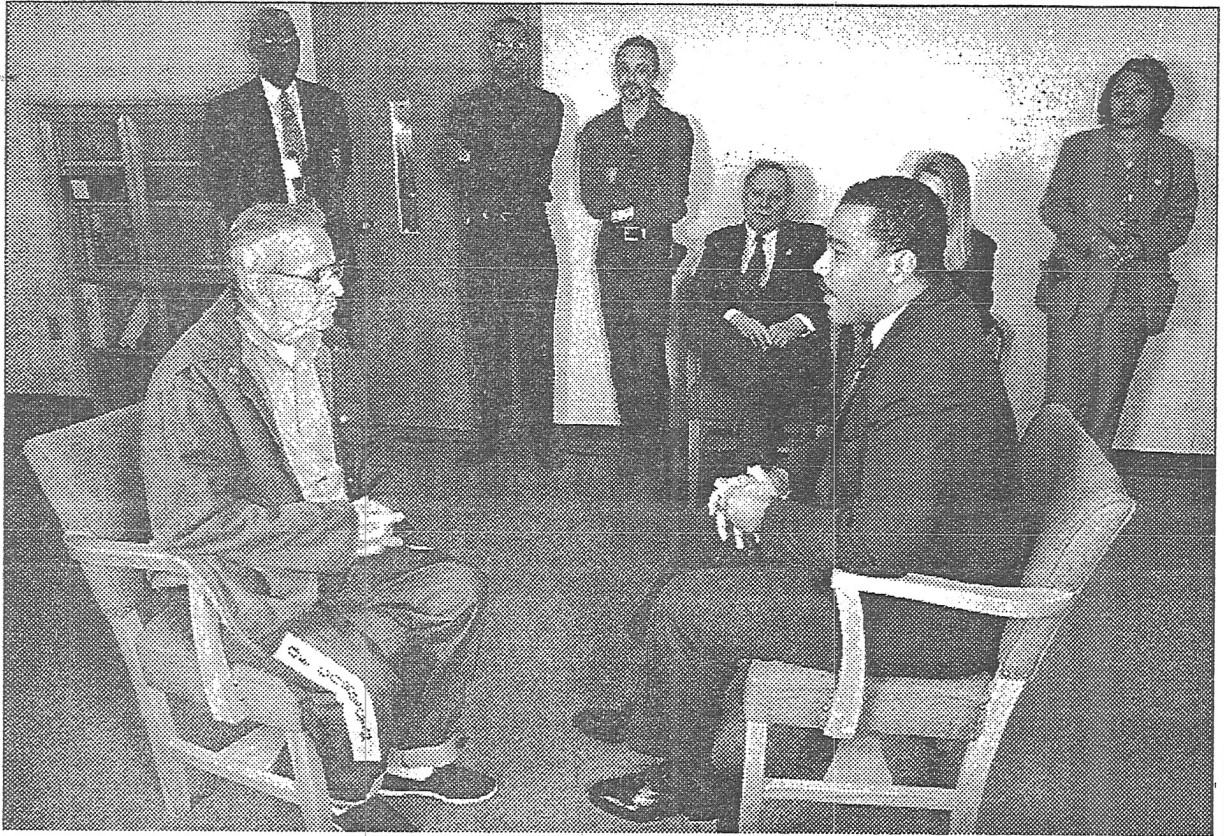
outside the prison that a Tennessee convict named Joe Trevino, who was scheduled to be executed May 6, had offered to donate his liver to Ray, who is not on an organ-transplant waiting list.

In his halting conversation with King, Ray suggested that a committee be formed to review records in the case, many of which are under seal until well into the next century.

"I had nothing to do with shooting your father, but you'll have to make your own evaluation on that," Ray said.

Until this year the King family had avoided getting involved in Ray's repeated appeals, a decision that Dexter King said he regretted.

City



James Earl Ray, left, meets with Dexter King. "I had nothing to do with shooting your father," Ray told King.

BY EARL WARREN—ASSOCIATED PRESS