

Was There Conspiracy?

THE JAMES RAY PUZZLE

Conspiracy Puzzle

Ray Case Details Mystery

By Jerry Lipson

MEMPHIS —(CDN)— Was James Earl Ray in a complex plot to kill the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King?

Or was he a lone gunman, impelled by racism to shoot the famed civil rights leader?

The pallid, soft-spoken farm boy from Quincy, Ill., wasn't saying today as he began serving a 99-year term in Tennessee State Prison at Nashville.

Defense attorney Percy Foreman said Ray acted alone; state prosecutors and Criminal Court Judge W. Preston Battle said there is no evidence of a conspiracy.

But the question hung like a sour smog over the nation.

Supporters of the Nobel Prize-winning King said he was the victim of a racist plot condoned by white society.

Others demanded to know at the very least, why was Ray permitted to "cop a plea" of guilty — and go to prison without the revealing trial all had expected?

The bulldog-visaged Battle probably grazed the bullseye when he said:

"The fact was recognized soon after this tragic murder took place that there was no possible conclusion to the case which would satisfy everybody."

When he entered the case last November, after Ray fired Birmingham attorney Arthur Hanes Sr., Foreman said, "Like everybody else," he at first believed "all this crap (about conspiracy) was true," but soon found he could verify none of it.

"I still think it was a conspiracy," said Ray's brother Jerry Ray. Asked why his brother agreed to the plea, he replied, "They were gonna burn him."

Foreman said it took him "about 30 days" to reach the conclusion, long held by attorney general Phil Canale

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and his prosecutors, that Ray was a lone killer.

He added in his opening statement to the jury that as long ago as last July, FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover and former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark had said the same thing.

RAISES DOUBT

But yesterday Ray himself raised the first murmur of doubt again, when he asked Battle for permission to speak.

While 40 newsmen and two dozen spectators, including Ray's brothers John and Jerry, held their collective breath, Ray said in a barely audible voice:

"I don't exactly accept the theories of Mr. Clark. I mean on the conspiracy thing. I don't want to add something onto it which I haven't agreed to in the past."

ADMITS GUILTY

Battle very carefully asked Ray a key question, vital to the plea:

"Are you pleading guilty to murder in the first degree in this case because you killed Dr. Martin Luther King under such circumstances that

would make you legally guilty of murder?"

Replied Ray: "Yes, sir. Make me guilty on that."

Foreman later told reporters Ray had said that only to keep the conspiracy notion alive, that it meant money to him for stories he could sell.

"He's got a gold mine in stories. He didn't want to kill the golden goose," the gravel-voiced attorney said.

Reports have circulated of

witnesses who said they saw a white man leap from some bushes below the bathroom and run away after the shot.

But two close friends of King said they were there, and they saw no one fleeing.

No Details

But not a word was uttered about how this fugitive who escaped from Missouri State Prison while serving a 20-year armed robbery term kept body and soul together during 13 months of freedom before he was nabbed June 9 at London Airport.

Canale later stressed that "every effort" had been made to track down conspiracy clues, with staff mem-

bers traveling thousands of miles domestically and abroad.

"As far as having any proof that King was the victim of a conspiracy . . . we have none," Canale said.

He noted that Alabama author William Bradford Huie, whose Look magazine articles pointed sharply to a plot, had testified for 2½ hours in secret before the Shelby County Grand Jury.

Proof Lacking

"Huie has certain theories about there being a conspiracy," Canale told newsmen, "but he has not been able to give us any information to substantiate that theory."

Asked for a motive if Ray were a lone killer, Canale replied "I think race had a lot to do with it. He was a racist."

Canale and Deputy Attorney General Robert K. Dwyer obviously felt they could not only convict Ray, but win a death sentence as well.

"We couldn't have raised a suspicion of anyone else through all the testimony," he said, adding that the state had not revealed all of its ev-

idence to the jury.

Ray's record of firing attorneys and writing his own petitions to courts has earned him a well-grounded reputation as a jailhouse lawyer.

Expects Appeal

There is nothing to prevent

him from seeking new legal action, possibly arguing that Foreman didn't represent him properly.

"I expect that," the silver-haired lawyer said.

Another factor is that Ray is an escape artist of some-

what dubious accomplishment.

Whether he was a lone gunman or the trigger-finger for a far-reaching conspiracy, it seemed clear the nation has not heard the last of James Earl Ray.



JAMES EARL RAY — ON HIS WAY TO A LIFE BEHIND BARS
Confessed killer of Dr. King walks to his maximum security jail cell

—AP Photo