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# James Earl Ray: Waits in Solitary

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**JAMES EARL RAY**  
... in isolation

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Pallid, sunken-eyed, unshaven and markedly aged, convicted assassin James Earl Ray lolls in his underwear on the edge of his steel bunk.

He has lost weight, down from 170 pounds to 150. His skin hangs loosely on his 5-foot-10 frame. A two-day stubble darkens the pallor of his face. Except for occasional showers and brief walks to the administration building of the state penitentiary here, he has not been outside his 6-by-8-foot cell in 18 months.

"When you're in solitary," he said, "you get to be like one of those roaches that's out of the sunlight for a long time and gets kind of bleached out, you know, all white."

The man who pleaded guilty to the killing of Martin Luther King Jr. says the impact of isolation and denial is gradually weakening him physically and mentally.

Fresh from a federal appellate court victory that could win him a full trial in the murder of Dr. King, both Ray and his attorneys say they feel prison authorities, under pressure from state political bosses, subjected Ray to isolation in the fortress-like penitentiary here to impair his health and discourage him from continuing appeals in his case. Chief warden J. H. (Jim) Rose denies the charge, adding that Ray's isolation is in part "self-imposed." In a recent medical examination, he says, Ray was found to be in good health.

Now 45 years old, Ray is graying at the temples, and his once fleshy face has sharpened into a set of spare, almost aquiline features. His pale blue eyes peer restlessly from deep sockets. His mouth is a humorless thin line.

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## RAY, From A1

"It's all idle time here," he says in the flat unemotional drawl of his native southern Illinois. "It's more or less just marking time . . . I lie on my bunk or walk in my cell all day . . . I never sleep during the day . . . I get more or less irritated. I get headaches. It gets harder to concentrate on anything."

He says he feels weak and anemic and cuts in his skin are slow to heal.

The Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals recently ordered an evidentiary hearing into Ray's claim that he was coerced in 1969 by former defense attorney Percy Foreman into pleading guilty to killing Dr. King in exchange for a 99-year sentence on the pretext that he would receive the death penalty if convicted in a trial. Ray contends the true reason for the guilty plea was to avoid a full trial at which details of the King murder might have surfaced.

Ray's attorneys privately maintain that Ray was not the trigger man in the shooting, that a larger circle of conspirators was involved and that state officials want to keep the whole subject buried.

A favorable ruling for Ray in the evidentiary hearing ordered by the court of appeals could result in a full trial. The hearing, sought by Ray for more than four years, is still months away, and his present attorneys are concerned about his health in preparation for it. "I don't believe any state official would attempt in any way to impede his access to the courts," warden Rose said of Ray's claim of isolation and denial.

He acknowledged Ray has been held since August, 1972, in various forms of "administrative segregation," confinement in a special maximum security building separate from the general prison population, chiefly because he has a history of escape attempts.

Ray's attorney contends the convicted killer's form of captivity is unprecedented and want him returned to the general population. Rose counters that it is not unusual for inmates to be held in segregation for a year or more and that Ray gets the same consideration as other prisoners in a monthly classification review process.

Meanwhile, Ray continues to live alone in his dingy blue and white cell. There are about 170 other inmates in the building similarly segregated from the rest of the 1900-man general population. They are there for varying reasons, says Rose, some because they are violence-prone, some for their own protection, and a few, like Ray, because they are "high escape risks." All, including Ray, are treated alike, Ross asserted.

But at least a portion of Ray's isolation is "self-imposed," says Rose. He has turned down a janitorial job outside his cell during the day, Rose said, and refuses to take advantage of a 45-minute exercise privilege regularly used by the prison's designated "escape risks" in a small concrete yard adjacent to the administrative segregation building.

Ray acknowledges this but says the job, confined to the segregation unit, is a "farce," just a way of keeping me in the building."

He also refuses to exercise in the concrete yard, he says, "because there's nothing there and it's so small I can get just as much exercise walking in my own cell." A larger exercise yard also available to most segregation inmates is off-limits to Ray and the others reputed escape risks, according to Rose, because it is "less secure."

Ray won't specify the "politicized" who he says instructed prison officials to isolate him. But he claims their purpose is to "keep me down" so that "the state of Tennessee does not get any bad publicity"—such as a full dress airing of the King assassination and the circumstances surrounding it.

Ray, in keeping with previous practice, would not discuss details of the King shooting in a 2-hour interview with this reporter. The interview, attended by one of Ray's attorneys, James Lesar of Washington, was limited to a discussion of Ray's prison conditions.

As litigation of his case continues in the courts, Ray idles away the long penitentiary days in the seclusion of his cell. He has repeatedly asked to be returned to the general prison population, contending he poses no security threat.

Ray's cell is deeply recessed in concrete and heavy steel, part of a tier of cells perched three floors above ground level and encompassed by a caged catwalk for the guards. Inside his cell, a steel double bunk occupies almost half the space. Ray sleeps on the bottom bunk and uses the top one for shelf space. There is no chair or table.

He uses a typewriter given him by one of his brothers, Jerry, by placing it on the concrete floor and hunkering over it. He also has a fan, a television set (which he says he rarely watches), a radio, a dozen law books and a Bible sent to him unsolicited by a Memphis preacher.

On a shelf above the sink and commode lie a hair brush, plastic shampoo bottle, toothpaste and toothbrush. There are no pictures or other decorations on the wall. A single 60-watt bulb lights the cell.

The air is stuffy. A low throbbing din of machines in the building drowns conversation among inmates attempting to talk from cell to cell.

Ray's daily regimen begins with breakfast at about 6:30 a.m. The food is often cold scrambled eggs and bread served on a plastic plate and showed through a slot in the base of his blue latticed steel door.

Then come 15 waking hours of ennui and inactivity interrupted only by lunch at 11 a.m. (meatloaf, stew or pork, beans, bread, a cup of milk and pudding) and supper at about 5 p.m. (more of the same). The food, brought in vats from the main prison mess hall, is bland and frequently cold, Ray says. There are few condiments or spices.

Fresh fruit is uncommon, Ray said, and he is not able to purchase even canned fruit at the prison commissary because administrative segregation inmates are barred from having any kind of tin cans (for fashioning homemade weapons) in their cells.

Ray says he is allowed to take a five-minute shower three or four times a week, and he shaves about twice a

week, using a razor with locked-in blade passed from prisoner to prisoner on his tier by the guards.

"If you're the last one to get the razor that morning," he said, "I can tell you, you don't get the world's best shave."

Ray estimates he spends \$6 to \$7 a month, "mostly on newspapers and (postage) stamps." He receives and reads the Nashville Tennessee newspaper every morning and is a frequent letter writer.

Since he has no prison job, he earns no money, but he says his brother, Jerry, who lives in suburban Chicago, sends him "a little bit each month." The money is converted to specially minted prison coins, which



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he gives to guards to make commissary purchases for him.

Ray may not leave his cell to go to the commissary, prison library or chapel. He leaves the cell only to take a shower and to see occasional visitors.

Ray has lived in this manner since August, 1972, when he was transferred from the now-closed Brushy Mountain satellite prison in eastern Tennessee. He lived in the general prison population there much of the time, but it was also there that he was caught in two escape attempts.

Hence, he is now in segregation, says warden Rose. He discounted earlier assertions of prison officials that Ray also had to be kept in

isolation to protect him from black militant prisoners. "I've seen no evidence of hostility toward him here," he said.

Rose also discounted Ray's claim of declining health. "He just had a complete physical exam within the last month," he said. "X rays, blood tests, the whole work-up . . . The doctor found a slight sprain in his back . . . But otherwise he was in good general health."

He acknowledged that Ray's extreme pallor results from his prolonged stay in segregation, "but a lot of that is by his own choice."

Ray is "just trying to generate enough public support to force us to put him in the general population," Rose said.

In the slow hours and days that he continues to live in his cell, Ray says he thinks almost exclusively about his case and "how I got maneuvered into it."

"If you don't have anything to do, you think about your case an awful lot," he said.

"In the old days, they [prison authorities] used to come in and knock you around some if they didn't like you," he mused, "and you'd be sore for three or four days, but then you'd come out in the sunshine and get some fresh air."

"Nowadays," he said with a tight, cold smile, "with their new 'humane' way of doing it, they just lock you up in solitary and let you sit there."