

## Ex-King Probe Chief Tells Ray's Version

Washington

James Earl Ray, convicted assassin of Martin Luther King Jr., has told House investigators that he was aided by other persons before and after the slaying of the civil rights leader, former House Assassination Committee chief counsel Richard A. Sprague said yesterday.

Sprague, who interviewed Ray at the Brushy Mountain State Prison in Tennessee last month, said Ray talked about several accomplices but did not identify them.

"All of this suggests that this (Ray) was a person who did not act alone," Sprague said.

Sprague called a press conference to give his version of the events that led to his resigning as the Assassination Committee's chief of staff March 30.

Sprague conceded that he was unable, before his resignation, to develop information that might prove or disprove Ray's claim of receiving assistance. But he said the words of Ray, who pleaded guilty of the 1968 slaying and is serving a 99-year prison sentence, provided leads that should be explored.

Ray has been trying for years to withdraw his guilty plea and win a full trial. In a number of recent statements, he has maintained that King was killed by a mysterious Latin whom Ray knew only as "Raoul." Ray has said he purchased the rifle that apparently was the murder weapon but gave it to Raoul to further what he thought was a gun-running operation.

Sprague told the press conference that Ray said he was helped by individuals other than his two brothers or Raoul. Sprague said Ray told him the aid came on at least three occasions: at the time Ray escaped from the Missouri State Prison about a year before the King murder, at the time he left

the United States briefly before the assassination, and immediately after King was slain.

A Justice Department task force recently concluded there was no evidence that Ray was part of a conspiracy although the report said the source of Ray's funds "remains a mystery."

Ray has said in public that he obtained money from Raoul. But Sprague said he concluded, after talking with Ray, that the Raoul story was a fabrication.

Sprague was bitter about his experience as a congressional investigator. He said he had just begun a long-range report to win James Earl Ray's confidence when he was asked to resign to appease critics in the House.

Sprague, a former Philadelphia prosecutor, said his effort to conduct a patient investigation was hampered by pressure from the committee's membership to produce sensational revelations to "tittle the public."

"The Congress of the United States is not the proper agency nor the proper branch of government to conduct an investigation of any crime, not just these crimes," Sprague said.

"Can you imagine what it is like to try to interview people when you have to fight off members of the committee who want to sit in on the interviews because they think it will get them into the limelight?" he said.

Sprague urged President Carter to name a special prosecutor who could hire an independent staff and conduct an investigation of the King and John Kennedy murders — a procedure resembling the one that President Johnson followed in naming the Warren Commission to investigate Kennedy's death.

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