

James Earl Ray—the

Not since John Wilkes Booth has an American political assassin been examined in such depth as in George McMillan's scrutiny of James Earl Ray, "The Making Of An Assassin." This is the first of a series of excerpts from the book.

By George McMillan

New York Times

James Earl Ray's situation was this: He was in a murderous rage at Martin Luther King and had constructed for himself a political ideology that gave him a justification, a logic, a context in which to make sense of his murderous intention. What's more, he had accumulated a considerable stash of money for himself outside the Missouri State Penitentiary at Jefferson City where he was serving a 20-year term for armed robbery.

Having reached an accommodation between his anger and his ideals, he could no longer bear to be locked up.

On the night of March 10, 1966, James Earl Ray tried to escape.

Ray was out of his cell for 27 hours, and charges were brought against him. This meant a court case, and Ray asked for a court-appointed lawyer who immediately, at Ray's direction, sought a mental examination for Ray. This was granted by the Jefferson City Circuit Court. On September 8, 1966, Ray was transferred to the state hospital in Fulton, Mo. On October 24, the Fulton staff made this report on Ray:

▶ "He is oriented for time, place and person. His memory is unimpaired for both recent and remote events. He is coherent, alert, relevant, and there are no hallucinations or delusions. He appeared to be somewhat tense and anxious and at times showed some mild depression but not of psychotic proportions. He has a good verbal assessment of reality but in the past he has used poor judgment. He has an IQ of 105, which places him within the average range of intellectual functioning. Tests showed no evidence of a psychosis . . .

"Diagnosis: Sociopathic personality, antisocial type with anxiety and depressive features."

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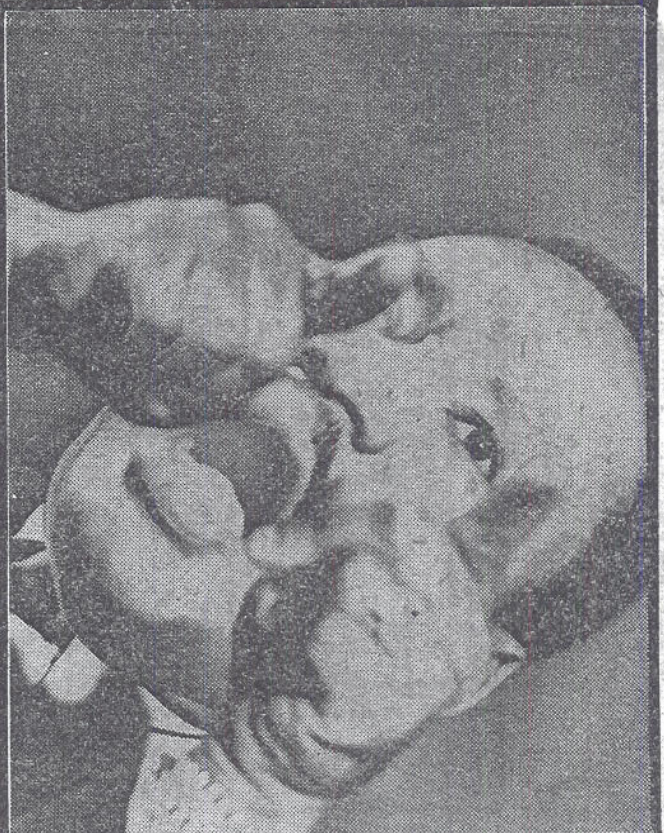
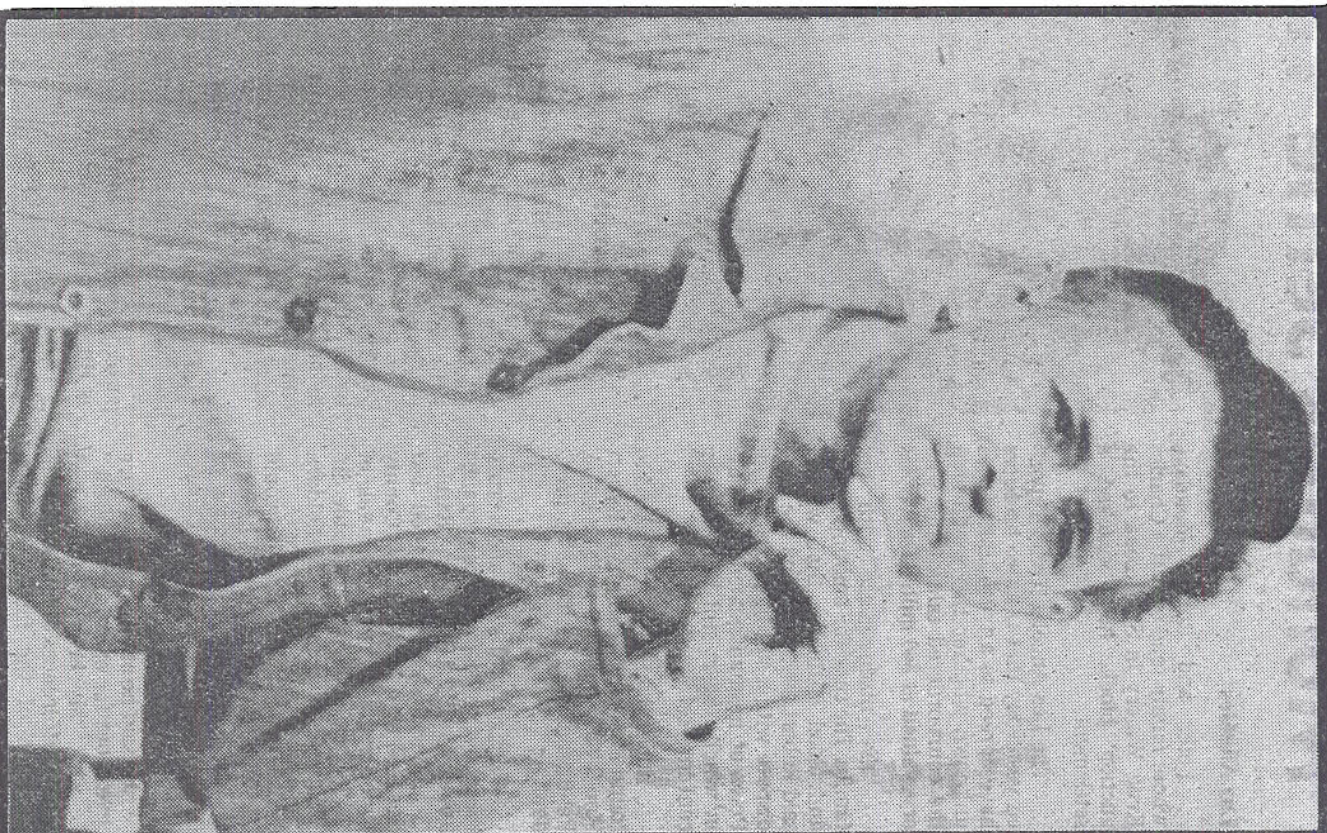
Making of an

Assassin

This medical finding on Ray was written at the time when murdering Martin Luther King was a predominant thought in Ray's mind. Thus the report raises a question with a significance beyond its and Ray's: can assassins be spotted in advance, even by people qualified to perceive and diagnose mental diseases? The simple answer is that assassins cannot be spotted in advance, not as assassins, or not unless they do something so overt as to write a threatening letter to the person they mean to kill, and by no means does every assassin do that.

By saying that Ray was not "psychotic," the report is only saying that Ray was not outright crazy, as the layman thinks of crazy. If he had been crazy, he would not have been capable of killing King. In saying that Ray was a "sociopathic personality," the report was saying that he was sick in his relationships with society: that described Ray exactly.

The purpose of the Fulton examination must be kept in mind. They were deciding whether Ray was capable of standing trial for



Martin Luther King Jr. during a speech in 1968

During his earlier days in prison, Ray was diagnosed as a 'sociopathic personality, antisocial type with anxiety and depressive features.'

James Earl Ray in 1973

the charge that would be brought against him for trying to escape. They obviously were also looking at Ray to see if he would create more difficulties inside Jefferson City than he would in a state mental institution. Was he too unstable to live the life of a prisoner?

Thus they were in reality faced with the very real and cruel limitations of state mental institutions. If in prisons there is no rehabilitation, in mental hospitals there is more often than not little or no therapy. Both are devoted to custodial care. It might be said with hindsight that almost any amount of money it took to "cure" James Earl Ray would have been well spent. The social chaos that resulted from King's death brought property damage in the uncounted millions of dollars. The state of Missouri could have built a new mental hospital and financed its operation for a decade on what Ray's act was to cost.

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Ray's case came up for routine hearing by the Missouri State Board of Pardon and Parole. The board assigned its psychiatric consultant, Dr. Henry V. Guhlman Jr., to interview Ray. Guhlman made this report:

"Ray is an interesting and rather complicated individual. He reports that within the last year he has had considerable difficulties from a physical point of view, involving a number of somatic complaints . . . On certain days, he has rather severe head pains but this is only intermittent. He is now

on Librium and works intermittently on a construction job . . .

"At the present time, there is no evidence of delusions, hallucinations or paranoid ideas. He is not psychotic but severely neurotic . . . At the present time, it is doubtful that he is in need of psychiatric help. He is becoming increasingly concerned with himself."

Ray was returned to prison to fester. He never did get better. The Librium that Dr. Guhlman put him on did not help tranquilize Ray in the sixth year of his incarceration at the Missouri State Penitentiary. People around him in prison were beginning to notice the change that was taking place in Ray. Jerry Ray became aware on his visits to his brother that Jimmy was getting "nervous."

He began to talk to his brother Jack, when Jack came to visit him, about Ian Smith, about Rhodesia, about going there when he escaped. His ideas had come together. The idea of killing King, the idea of working for a new political structure in America, were one. The two ideas that had been separately forming and re-forming themselves in his reveries had merged in his head.

The idea of killing King had been given new layers of meaning for Ray by the realization that by killing King he could become himself an actor in the turbulent ideological drama of his times, the drama he had heretofore only

watched on the cellblock TV. He saw how King's assassination could serve a larger political purpose, how he could alter (or so he thought) the balance of political power by a single act performed by him. And he saw at the end of the road a hero's sanctuary, if he turned out to need a sanctuary, in several places, one of which was Rhodesia.

It had all come to have an appealing harmony to Ray — the rise of a new American conservative movement that would be abetted by him, by what he would do himself, by his killing the man he had begun to refer to as "Big Nigger."

But wasn't this just another twisted dream cooked up by a stir-crazy man? Wasn't this a piece of audacity so zany it mocked itself, especially when it was conceived by a man who was locked solidly

behind bars and would almost certainly be for another 14 years? Who was this little fella, this two-bit criminal, this little bungler to sit in his cell and decide he would wipe out the life of the man thousands of other people had obviously hated? Martin Luther King had walked through the streets of the South for nearly a decade, presenting his body to his enemies since the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955, and not one person had ever fired a shot at him.

Who was this ignominious little person to dare embody within himself the passions of hundreds, thousands of others, and set his mind to do the deed none of them had dared to do?

What set him apart?

The decision itself.

By its very nature it set James Earl Ray apart. He was going to kill

Martin Luther King because King stood for something to him. It takes an exceptional person to kill a symbol. It is true that Ray felt deeply about black people, but so did others who did not kill King.

What's more, King had never presented to Ray the direct threat he had to hundreds of thousands of others. King had never come into Ray's hometown and raised up the blacks in demonstrations. Ray had no property or possessions threatened by the changes King was struggling to bring about. Besides, Ray had never met King or seen him in person, and almost all homicides are committed by people who know well, or are kin to, the people they murder. It is worth remembering that Ray had had few direct contacts with black people in his whole lifetime.

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It is obvious then that the relationship that Ray saw as existing between himself and Martin Luther King was all inside Ray's head. The crime of assassination, when it is done by one person, grows out of a relationship between the assassin and the assassinee that exists solely within the mind of the assassin. This is what makes it so difficult to comprehend the "why" of assassinations; more often than not the assassin does not seem to have any reason for his act.

In fact, in the assassin's mind, the relationship between the assassin and his victim is close. It is passionate, loaded with feeling, and those passions have found their genesis in the qualities he has attributed to the other person. You don't need to know another person to feel passionately about him, or her.

Love at first sight is a common experience. So is puppy love. And the qualities we attribute to the loved one are obviously in our minds because we don't really know the other person.

The qualities a man like Ray attributed to Martin Luther King are not in the reality of King but in Ray's construction of that reality. The materials for that construction grow out of Ray's emotional preparation for the perception of the other person, and James Earl Ray's life was a preparation for the act of King's assassination. In this sense, there was a conspiracy, a conspiracy of the influences on Ray as an individual to lead him to make his decision; in this sense his decision to kill King was an over-determined act.

Tomorrow: Ray's sympathy with children versus his antipathy for others.