

Search for Dr. King's Killer

Attorney General Ramsey Clark has once again expressed optimism that the assassin of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. will soon be captured. Certainly, the nation hopes this optimism is well founded. But, if there is doubt, it is understandable.

Since the civil rights leader was shot down by a sniper in Memphis four weeks ago, the information provided by the Justice Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Memphis police and other agencies has created a welter of contradiction.

Mr. Clark, for example, has said no less than four times that there is no significant evidence that two or more persons conspired to carry out the assassination. Yet, the F.B.I. has charged in a warrant that James Earl Ray, alias Eric Starvo Galt, and an "alleged brother" entered into such a conspiracy in Birmingham.

Descriptions given by the F.B.I., the Memphis police, other officials, witnesses and acquaintances point to the existence of not one Galt but four. In age he ranges from 20 to 40, in height from 5 feet 8 inches to 6 feet, in weight from 160 to 175 and in accent from "Southern" to "rural."

None who knew Ray in a seamy southside Birmingham boarding house recognizes the graduate bartender with the closed eyes and downturned mouth who seems to be the F.B.I.'s sole photographic link to its quarry. The same is true of the wardens and prisoners in the Missouri State Penitentiary, Ray's last non-transient address. These are by no means all the inconsistencies in this case.

No one would wish the Justice Department to release information that might jeopardize the hunt for Dr. King's assassin. Nor should the F.B.I. feel under pressure to bring a prisoner to the dock unless the evidence is sufficient to support charges against him. But, surely, the Attorney General and F.B.I. chief J. Edgar Hoover realize that they have a special responsibility in a matter of such national magnitude to keep the public as fully and accurately informed as is presently possible.

Mr. Clark and Mr. Hoover have a second responsibility of even greater importance. That is to take the precautions necessary to insure that the wanted man is brought in alive. The case of Lee Harvey Oswald bears no repetition.

But, of course, the most important responsibility of all so far as the Justice Department and the F.B.I. are concerned is to see that the killer is captured and brought to trial. Only then will optimism have any place in this sorry affair.