

FBI Plot On King Denied

By William Chapman
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Aides to the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. deny that he was taunted by the FBI into moving to the black-owned motel in Memphis where he was murdered by a sniper in 1968.

"It's a false lead," said Rep. Andrew Young (D-Ga.) of the recent speculation that an FBI plot to embarrass King caused him to move to the motel room where he was killed by a rifle bullet fired from across the street.

King was shot on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel, which catered almost exclusively to blacks, on April 4, 1968, while participating in a strike against the city by garbage workers.

A week earlier, King and two aides had spent several hours in another, white-owned motel, the Holiday Inn-Rivermont, overlooking the Mississippi River.

King's reason for changing motels has been scrutinized by the Justice Department and other assassination investigators in recent weeks because of an FBI memorandum unearthed by the Senate intelligence committee.

The memo, dated March 23, 1968, detailed a plan to portray King publicly as a "hypocrite" for staying in a white motel, the Rivermont, while he was leading a black protest aimed at boycotting white merchants in Memphis.

The memo suggested using a friendly media source in Memphis to publicize where King was staying, apparently to cause disillusionment among his black followers.

A Justice Department source said recently that there is no evidence that the FBI ever put the scheme into effect.

Whether it was or not, the

plan had nothing to do with King's change of lodgings, according to his former aides interviewed in Atlanta this week.

Bernard Lee, now executive vice president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, recalled that there never was any plan for King to stay at the Rivermont.

He said that he, King and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy wound up at the Rivermont March 28 simply because it was the safest place to find shelter when their protest march that day erupted into violence, looting and clashes with Memphis police.

In the confusion, Lee said, they flagged down either a police car or a private automobile and at someone's suggestion—he has forgotten whose—fled to the Rivermont. They remained there a few hours before flying to Atlanta, having announced preparations to return the next week for a renewed protest march.

In the interim, Andrew Young, then a top aide to King, moved with other staff members into Memphis and set up headquarters in the Lorraine.

Young said this week that it was "natural" for them to choose the Lorraine. In any city, King and his staff customarily stayed either in black-owned motels or with friends in the black community, he said.

When King returned to Memphis on April 3, Young said, it was natural for him to stay in rooms of the motel where his staff had set up headquarters.

"The FBI may have tried to exploit it (King's brief sojourn in the white motel)," Young added. "But there was nothing suspicious about Martin's staying in the Lorraine. It was natural."

James Earl Ray pleaded guilty in 1969 to killing King. However, he denied at the time that he had acted alone, and has since claimed that he did not fire the fatal shot. His petition for a trial is now before the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.