

Escape or an abduction by 'conspirators'?

Examiner News Services

"I would say he is going to be destroyed, as so many others have."—Rev. Ralph Abernathy

WASHINGTON — James Earl Ray's lawyer said yesterday he fears his client was abducted from prison by people who don't want him to talk about the murder of Martin Luther King Jr.

He thinks Ray may be killed.

Similar fears were expressed by the Rev. Ralph Abernathy, who succeeded King as head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and by John Lewis, a King associate.

Members of the House Assassinations Committee, whose investigators have interrogated Ray several times in recent months, say they are reserving judgment on the escape conspiracy.

Jack Kershaw, Ray's Nashville, Tenn., attorney, said in an interview he is convinced his client did not leave prison willingly. He said he talked to Ray by phone Wednesday and detected no rumblings of discontent.

"In fact," Kershaw said, "his conversations with me and his letters to me—I received a letter within the last few days—also indicated confidence in his chances for a new trial, and I had no information that

he was contemplating an escape.

"This leads me to believe we may not be dealing with an escape but an abduction. The fact that he did escape with such a large group of men leads me to think that he was taken out."

But author William Huie says he warned the House committee that Ray was planning to escape.

Huie, who wrote a book about the King murder case, said he told the committee that it would get nothing out of Ray about a conspiracy "because there wasn't one."

He said conspiracy theories were instigated by Mark Lane, a New Yorker he said had made \$80,000 last year lecturing on college campuses.

"All damn lies," Huie commented in a phone interview from his home in Hartselle, Ala. "Everything he says is untrue."

He agreed with George MacMillan, author of "The Making of an Assassin," a biography of Ray, that it was "damned nonsense" to say Ray had outside help in his escape.

Attorney Percy Foreman, who once represented Ray, also rejected suggestions that the escape was part of a widespread conspiracy either to help or to destroy him.

Foreman said Ray probably just took advantage of plans by one of the five other prisoners.

Foreman, who shortened Ray's 1969 Memphis trial with a guilty plea but has had no direct contact with him since, dismissed conspiracy theories as fiction.

"It's consistent with all the other lies that have been printed about Ray. It makes beautiful writing to say, 'Oh, H. L. Hunt probably came back to life and helped him out.' But I will not spend my time analyzing manure."

Abernathy, however, said he was "firmly convinced" the escape was a move to set Ray up to be killed.

"There is a scheme in this country to destroy an individual who has the information and the facts and has come to the point now where he is willing to tell those facts, and I would say he is going to be destroyed as so many others have been destroyed."

Lewis, recently named associate director of the Federal Action program, noted that several other key assassination figures have died violently.

"I just don't want to see another Oswald-Ruby thing," he said, referring to the view of some conspiracy theorists that Lee Harvey Oswald and his killer, Jack Ruby, were both murdered to keep them

from telling what they knew about John Kennedy's assassination.

District of Columbia congressional delegate Walter Fauntroy, another former King associate, who heads the House panel looking into King's death, said he thought it unusual that as celebrated a prisoner as Ray could escape from a maximum-security prison.

Investigators for the committee have talked five times with Ray in recent months.

King's father, the Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., declined comment.

Coretta King, widow of the civil-rights leader, could not be reached for comment.

State Sen. Julian Bond of Atlanta, president of the Southern Poverty Law Center, called Ray's escape "terrifying." "A madman is on the loose," said Bond.

In Chicago, Jesse Jackson, a close associate of King's who is now director of People United to Save Humanity, said the escape "could divert attention away from the real issue."

"Ray never did act alone," Jackson said. "The real issue is to find out who was behind him."