

An Irreplaceable Black Leader

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A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Many people will keep holiday tomorrow, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. They will not be of one race only. Dr. King had a huge white following when he was alive and has a larger one now, almost two years after his murder. If there are any future historians they may write that he was the most important public figure of his time so that men like John Kennedy, J. Edgar Hoover, Earl Warren and Bull Connor may be principally remembered for their connection with Dr. King.

He wasn't a man of original thought, not really creative, but he could recognize other people's new ideas and he wasn't too proud to pick them up and use them. He did this with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Taking up the ideas which it couldn't disseminate, he propagated them, incorporated them into his own work. SNICK saw the issues first and more clearly, but Dr. King could explain them to millions of people and persuade them to act.

He began as a black leader of black men and women; on the day of his death he was a black leader of people of all races, and on the question of the Vietnam war his following was principally white. It's only now that blacks in large number are starting to manifest opposition to the war.

Some people who admired him said that in a way it was a blessing he died when he did; they said he was slipping, that he was losing his hold on the masses and that he was too much a rural preacher to be effective in the Northern cities where the worst of the struggle had moved.

Dr. King had these dips in fortune before. His was a leadership that went in alternately bright and dim phases as events and the public mood fluctuated. This is to be expected of a man who wasn't ever able to organize a steady base and whose underlying message always had to overcome his considerable defects as a calculating player of political games.

For all that, he was irreplaceable. When he died his funeral pyre was the burning of 20 American cities.

When men such as Dr. King pass on, their work is uncompleted because what they desire to accomplish is so grandly large. They leave us, not so much with work unfinished, as with ideals clarified and strengthened. The greatest of these, perhaps, was nonviolence. Dr. King made nonviolence as manly, as courageous an ideal as gunslinging, although an ideal it remains, given the continued tempo of our murders.

The political murders are the worst. They destroy fidelity and trust like no other crimes. They're never forgotten and years after the victims have been buried people ruminate over them, feed their paranoia and grudges. Nothing anybody can do can allay such a reaction, but it helps a little if the crimes are as fully and completely explained as is humanly possible.

between Ray and various men who have acted for the defense. They counseled against it, and he kept wanting to take the risk."

The lawyers may have been right then, but the trial's over and Ray still wants to talk. He can't be tried again and he keeps saying from his maximum security cell that he has a story to tell. It may be that he's some kind of nut. Many people believe he just wants attention and fame. He's already got that. When his bullet struck Dr. King, at that second he got into the history books just as George Wallace did by trying to bar the highway from Selma to Montgomery.

This is all the more important when there appears to be some substance to the ruminations. Our political murders, at least those of the last decade, all have

blacks, liberals or radicals as their victims. Let's hope it's simply coincidence that Republicans, conservatives and reactionaries don't get killed, but still the situation is such that the very least that can be done is to put everything that is known about these crimes on the public record.

That hasn't happened with Dr. King. The suspicion persists that James Earl Ray was part of a conspiracy. People like Jack Anderson of the Washington Merry-Go-Round have tried to discourage the talk, saying it's circulated by Dr. King's collaborators in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to help them raise money, but such scoffing won't sell. The official explanation of how Dr. King was murdered can only be accepted by the gullible and those blessed with great faith in what politicians tell them.

From time to time officials connected with the case have said that Ray did it because he was a racist, but they haven't produced evidence to show he was more of a racist than a lot of other people who don't commit murder. What the record shows is a man who committed crimes for money, a burglar, a robber and a forger, not an ideologue.

The prosecution contended that this man broke out of the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1967, roamed about the country for a year making his living by crime and then made his way to Memphis where he stalked Dr. King and killed him. After the murder they say that he escaped to Atlanta, Montreal, London, Lisbon and then back to London and he did it all on money he'd either saved up from the profits of older crimes or by committing new ones the particulars of which they're rather vague on.

It may all be true. It's possible but it gives James Earl Ray a career profile different from that which most small-time crooks have. Usually this type doesn't make much from their crimes and what they make they spend.

Ray himself has persistently said there was a conspiracy. He said it when he pleaded guilty for the murder and he's said it since. Just because he says it doesn't make it so, but even if he did do it alone there are many questions about how he did it and how he escaped. It was not a simple case and before he pleaded guilty the prosecution had lined up 90 witnesses to testify to all its puzzling details.

Even the judge, the late W. Preston Battle, confessed there was much which needed explaining: "Like others I would truly like to know how Ray actually found the spot from which to fire. How did Ray know where Rev. King would be? How did he determine the type of weapon to be used? What are the details of the actual purchase and selection of the weapon? Was he alone in surveillance of the Lorraine Motel (where the murder took place)? Most puzzling of all is his escape from Memphis."

The judge wasn't sure that a trial would answer all these questions: "It is an error to assume that the prosecution would have had a chance to cross-examine Ray about his finances or how he escaped from the Missouri State Penitentiary, or about persons who gave him any aid before or after the slaying of Dr. King. That assumes Ray would have taken the stand. I doubt very seriously that defense counsel would have risked placing Ray in such a position. In fact, as I understand it, this all along has been one of the main problems"

Let a congressional committee subpoena Ray, or give him an opportunity to testify in a court by trying him for a lesser charge like violating Dr. King's civil rights or form another one of those commissions to take his story down while he stays in the penitentiary, but some way should be found before he's murdered. An administration like the one in office with such a fine nose for conspiracies should be up to the task of determining if there was one here.