

Weisberg discounts FBI papers indicating payoff in King murder

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Assassination investigator Harold Weisberg recently obtained through the Freedom of Information Act FBI documents indicating that a late Missouri businessman paid off James Earl Ray after the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King.

However, "there is no way of associating this with the crime," the Shookstown resident said. "Nobody has investigated its (the report's) importance."

The information is from an FBI agent's 1974 account of an informant's report to him in 1973. The informant is said to have gotten his information from Russell G. Byers, formerly a St. Louis auto parts dealer and now a witness before the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

FBI documents — which are censored — do not specify who Byers said made the payoff to Ray. But government sources have identified the man as the late John R. Kauffmann, a former stockbroker who died in 1974.

The FBI claims its documents concerning the informant's comments were "misfiled" in 1974, according to Weisberg. They surfaced last March.

Weisberg said he learned of their existence through a "leak" in the House Select Committee on Assassinations.

Weisberg in June 1976 secured what then was believed to be the FBI's entire file on King's assassination. It took him nearly 10 years of requests, citing Freedom of Information laws, and finally a court suit to obtain the file.

Weisberg said Thursday that when the latest King documents were found in March, the FBI then should have provided him a copy because they are part of the overall King file. But the FBI did not, and he was forced to seek court action again.

Asked why the FBI withheld the documents, Weisberg replied, "I don't know."

A federal District Court in D.C. in the last 10 days forced the FBI to relinquish the latest documents.

Weisberg, who has said there are doubts about James Earl Ray's guilt in the King assassination, discounted the latest documents.

"I must have records of more than 500" similar cases of reported payoffs,

he explained. "There were thousands of threats against Dr. King."

The FBI did not investigate the latest evidence or interview Kauffmann. FBI officials have said the report did not receive proper dissemination within the bureau.

But Weisberg said it was not probed because the information is of limited value. "If there was anything to it, don't you suppose the FBI would have investigated it?"

Weisberg described Byers as "a notoriously undependable source." And he labeled the House Select Committee on Assassinations inadequate. "The FBI is just feeding this kind of stuff to them, knowing they'll go haywire on it."

James Earl Ray is serving a 99-year sentence in a Tennessee prison after confessing to shooting the civil rights leader. He since has said he did not commit the assassination.

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On July 18 of this year, Byers told *The New York Times* he met with Kauffmann and John H. Sutherland, a patent lawyer from Imperial, Mo., in late 1966 or 1967 and that they offered him \$50,000 to kill King. He said he turned down the offer.

Byers did not tell *The Times* he believed that Kauffmann actually paid Ray for the crime.

Kauffmann and Sutherland both are dead. Their widows have said they do not believe their late husbands would have become involved in a plot to kill Dr. King.

The Times learned that Kauffmann was smuggling amphetamine powder into the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1966, where Ray was serving a robbery sentence and from which he escaped before King's death. According to some reports, Ray was receiving money from the sale of drugs in prison.

The House assassination committee staff now is trying to determine whether there was any connection between Kauffmann and Ray or members of his family.

Weisberg also discounted that notion, saying Ray was in the prison in which Kauffmann's alleged drug dealings

were taking place, but "with 4,000 or 5,000 other people . . ."

The House committee will use the newfound documents as a basis for questioning at public hearings scheduled for Aug. 14. Ray has been summoned as a witness for those upcoming proceedings.

The House committee's staff leader in the King assassination matter is Harold D. Leap. He is the same investigator who led drug agents for a conviction of Kauffmann in 1967.

Leap was mysteriously shot and wounded in September 1967, on a country road near St. Louis while investigating the Kauffmann case. No arrests have been made as a result of that incident.