

Pointing toward a plot: King's allies wonder if his assassin really acted alone
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FOR YEARS IT'S SEEMED THE MOST clear-cut assassination of the 1960s: James Earl Ray, a racist ex-con, killed Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968. One year later, faced with a possible death sentence, Ray pleaded guilty before trial in exchange for life imprisonment. Within days he changed his mind, but the courts refused to grant him a trial. Aside from one brief jailbreak, Ray has spent the last 28 years in prison. Now 68, Ray is near death, suffering from liver disease-but he still wants a trial. In Ray's mind, prosecutors could not now prove his guilt. And in an odd twist, a growing number of King's own relatives and former aides agree that Ray should now be given the hearing he knowingly refused in 1969 largely because they think there may have been a government conspiracy to kill King.

It is, to say the least, an unusual alliance: Ray, the King family and the slain civil-rights leader's closest lieutenants. Some, like King's son Dexter, claim only that such a proceeding might shed new light on the killing. Others, like the Rev. Joseph E. Lowery, are endorsing Ray's petition out of their deeply held belief that something larger than a small-time criminal like James Earl Ray must lie behind a tragedy as enormous as King's assassination.

Ray had just turned 40 when he began stalking King from city to city in late March 1968. A drifter and racist--he'd been a Nazi sympathizer while serving in the army in Germany after World War II--Ray had been in and out of prison for almost 20 years. He was free to stalk King only because of his successful April 1967 escape from a Missouri penitentiary. According to the 1979 House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA), one or two of Ray's younger brothers had helped him in the jailbreak, a summer bank robbery in Alton, Ill., then netted the Ray brothers enough cash to stake James to an exploratory trip to Canada; once he managed to shoot King, Canada looked like the best international escape route toward a safe haven like white-ruled Rhodesia. And in fact, after Ray shot King, that Canadian route--and what was left of the Alton take--enabled him to reach Europe (but not Africa) before the FBI finally closed in on him.

In later years--after the full story of J. Edgar Hoover's personal hatred of King was revealed--the FBI itself became the favorite suspect among King's lieutenants and followers. (Ray has never said the Feds helped him.) The loyalists were unwilling to accept that a two-bit crook like Ray could have pulled off King's killing without official assistance.

The truth is probably much more mundane. It has been clear since 1968 that Ray has something to hide, and the greatest likelihood--as the HSCA concluded two decades ago--is that he's covering for one or more of his brothers. (They have denied it.) He may have received significant logistical help in pulling off the assassination; Ray himself suggests that someone advised him on choice of weapon. But Ray admits renting the flophouse bedroom that gave the killer a close-up view of the Lorraine Motel balcony on which King was grazed down, and the Remington 30.06 found near the scene bore his fingerprints--and no one else's. Still, Ray has long insisted that he was simply a "patsy" whose presence at the scene had been arranged by mysterious "others." The HSCA found that Ray's "persistent refusals to identify his co-conspirators ... would be most easily understood if his evidence implicated family members."

It seems most likely that a combination of racist ideology and greed led to King's death. The House committee traced the Ray brothers' connections within a St. Louis-area web of arch-segregationists who may have promised Ray cash if his aim proved perfect. (The HSCA concluded that James Earl Ray's "predominant motive lay in an expectation of monetary gain.")

Money could still be made off the case--Oliver Stone has an active interest in the story. King's allies are understandably eager to get to the bottom of what they believe is a more convoluted--and government-aided-conspiracy. But history seems to have already delivered a decisive verdict on James Earl Ray.

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