

triumphant in death

James Earl Ray is laughing all the way to hell, thanks to the King family's preposterous belief that he didn't kill Martin Luther King Jr.

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BY DAVID J. GARROW | ATLANTA -- Very few people mourned the death last Thursday of James Earl Ray, the assassin of Martin Luther King Jr. Ray's brother Jerry, who for years worked for convicted church-bomber and professional anti-Semite J.B. Stoner, was one of the few. But Jerry had reasons to be thankful, too. His brother had never implicated him -- or their other brother John -- in any discussions or arrangements that preceded King's April 4, 1968, murder. What's more, James Earl's notoriety had allowed Jerry to garner considerable public attention as his imprisoned brother's primary spokesman. Rarely did any of the eager journalists raise the matter of Jerry's long, intimate relationship with the once-infamous Stoner.

But those who seemed to mourn Ray's death even more than Jerry were the widow and children of King himself. Coretta Scott King asserted that her family was "deeply saddened" by Ray's death, and proclaimed that it was "a tragedy not only for Mr. Ray and his family, but also for the entire nation."

Readers who recalled the awkwardly staged 1997 scene in which Dexter Scott King, King's younger son, shook Ray's very trigger hand and proclaimed the King family's belief in Ray's complete innocence should not have been shocked by Coretta King's peculiar expression of grief.

Coretta King declared that it was "regrettable that Mr. Ray was denied his day in court." King -- or her press agent -- had conveniently forgotten how Tennessee prosecutors in 1969 agreed to accept Ray's guilty plea, and forego a trial, only after receiving the King family's personal approval.

Since then, a bizarre susceptibility to outlandish claims of Ray's innocence has slowly spread throughout Martin Luther King's circle of aides and associates. The first to succumb was the mercurial and once-brilliant James Bevel, who began championing Ray in 1969 before moving on to subsequent alliances with Lyndon LaRouche, Rev. Sun Myung Moon and Louis Farrakhan.

Next came James M. Lawson, the Methodist minister who had invited King to Memphis in the spring of 1968 to help rally support for a city sanitation workers' strike. Lawson became Ray's pastor, and officiated at Ray's in-prison wedding to a media sketch artist, Anna Sandhu, who likewise believed in Ray's innocence. The couple later divorced after an argument during which, Sandhu reports, Ray angrily declared that of course he had killed King.

The most prominent and recent recruit to Ray's side has been former United Nations Ambassador Andrew Young, whose credulity is perhaps the most puzzling and disappointing of all. Unfortunately, it has nothing to do with any actual search for the truth. Young and the Kings have never taken the time to familiarize themselves with the rich portrait of the Ray brothers and their vituperative racism that was provided in George McMillan's landmark 1976 biography, ["The Making of an Assassin."](#) nor is it likely that any of them have sat down and read Gerald Posner's impressive new book on the King assassination, "Killing the Dream."

More importantly, neither Dexter King nor his mother has ever responded to the repeated offers that Memphis prosecutors have made in recent months to come to Atlanta to brief the King family in detail about the prosecutors' latest review of the overwhelming evidence against Ray. What that review demonstrated was the extent to which all of the supposedly "new" evidence cited by Ray's lawyer, William Pepper, amounts to nothing more than fabricated stories told by people motivated by the expectation of Hollywood movie riches and, in some instances, actual up-front cash payments.

Two figures loom over the way in which the Kings have succeeded in making themselves into national laughingstocks. The first is Pepper, Ray's lawyer, whose outlandish claims of government involvement in King's slaying have been disproven and destroyed by both ABC News' "Turning Point" and CBS News' "48 Hours." The Memphis district attorney's report highlights "the pervasive mention of monetary reward that key witnesses relied upon by Dr. Pepper refer to in their statements." In the current Time magazine, longtime civil rights journalist Jack E. White accurately characterizes Pepper as "either a credulous buffoon or a con artist." Most people who've seen Pepper's work up close would vote for the second.

The other figure is movie director Oliver Stone, whose forthcoming film, "Memphis," will be made in partial cooperation with the King family. If Pepper is little more than a con artist, Stone more accurately fits into White's category of the "credulous buffoon." Granted a personal interview with the now-deceased Ray, Stone came away just as wowed as Dexter King: Ray "looks you in the eye and there's just an honesty to the look," Stone endearingly declared. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised, after "JFK," that Oliver Stone would be the last person in America capable of seeing through Ray's self-serving lies.

In addition to the influence of Pepper and Stone, the King family is also motivated by a desire to remain in the public eye, and its embrace of the conspiracy theory certainly achieves that. But there is also something else, as one person close to the innermost circle for more than a generation hesitantly explains. "It's not rational," he says. "They've got to blame someone else more important [than Ray], no matter what the evidence." The unquenchable need to fill the lifelong gap left by King's murder has left them grasping at even the most outlandish claims, even at the price of destroying virtually all of their own individual credibility.

James Earl Ray's most successful crime was not his murder of Martin Luther King Jr., because for that crime he was imprisoned for life. No, Ray's most successful crime was the huge and grotesque historical scam that he triumphantly perpetrated upon the King family during the last year of his life. Having destroyed, irretrievably, the surviving family members' credibility, it remains to be seen whether King's own long-term legacy has also been harmed and diminished by the foolishness of his widow and children.

James Earl Ray no doubt was bemused by the King family's mourning of his fatal illness, but of one thing we can be absolutely sure: that Ray died a happy man. Not only has he gone down in history as the killer of one of America's greatest figures, but he also pulled off an even more unimaginable offense: convincing the victim's relatives to champion his own innocence and importance. No killer of historical import has ever come close.

There's much here to mourn, and none of it is for James Earl Ray.

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