

DEATH OF MLK STILL A MYSTERY

Published in *The Athens Observer*, p. 1 (April 2, 1987).

Author: Donald E. Wilkes, Jr., Professor of Law, University of Georgia School of Law.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the great civil rights leader, humanitarian, American hero and recipient of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, was assassinated in Memphis, Tenn., April 4, 1968. On that infamous Thursday, Dr. King and his party were staying at the Lorraine Motel. While standing on an open balcony in front of Room 306, his room on the second floor, Dr. King was shot once at 6:01 p.m. The single rifle bullet, fired from Dr. King's front and right, struck Dr. King on the right chin and neck, inflicting fearful injuries, including a severing of the spinal cord. Although he did not die immediately, Dr. King could not have survived his wounds. Rushed to nearby St. Joseph Hospital, Dr. King was pronounced dead at 7:05 p.m.

The fatal shot was allegedly fired from a second floor bathroom window at the rear of a rooming house located near the Lorraine Motel. The alleged murder weapon, a high-power .30-06 cal. Remington Gamemaster pump action rifle, equipped with a scope, was found within minutes near the scene of the crime.

Dr. King's alleged assassin, James Earl Ray, was indicted for the murder by a Tennessee grand jury on May 7, 1968. Ray was alleged by FBI and local police investigators to be the sole assassin. After a worldwide manhunt, Ray was arrested on June 8, 1968, at an airport in London, England, while trying to fly to Brussels using a false passport.

Ray, a lifelong criminal, had been in prison for much of his life, and at the time was a prison escapee, having broken out of the Missouri State Penitentiary in April 1967. Ray was extradited to the United States on July 19, 1968. On March 10, 1969, Ray appeared in a Tennessee court with counsel and pleaded guilty to murdering Dr. King. Ray was immediately sentenced to 99 years, and is now serving that sentence.

Because of dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the original investigation of Dr. King's murder, in 1978 the House of Representative of the United States established a Select Committee on Assassinations to reinvestigate the case. (The Committee also reinvestigated the assassination of President Kennedy.) In 1979, after completing its work, the House Assassinations Committee issued a Final Report on Dr. King's assassination, and published 13 volumes of evidence and information.

In its final report, the Assassinations Committee found James Earl Ray had, in fact, fired the single shot that killed Dr. King. But the Committee did not believe that Ray acted alone. Instead, to quote its own words, the Committee "concluded that there was a likelihood of conspiracy in the assassination of Dr. King."

Who, in addition to James Earl Ray, were the members of the conspiracy? According to the committee, Ray was a man with significant criminal connections; he was by no means a loner. One or both of Ray's brothers, John and Jerry, were deemed most likely to have been involved in the conspiracy. The Committee was unsure whether there might have been additional

conspirators. The Committee did believe that before Dr. King's death the three Ray brothers, all from Missouri, might have heard of "a standing offer" made in the mid-'60s by another conspiracy--consisting of right-wing extremist St. Louis businessmen, now dead--to pay a large cash reward to anyone who would kill Dr. King.

Thus, the House Select Committee on Assassinations found not one but two conspiracies possibly behind Dr. King's death--the St. Louis-based conspiracy, and the Ray conspiracy. The Committee also found that some of the evidence it had uncovered--information on the St. Louis-based conspiracy, for example--had not been followed up by investigating officers.

The Committee also believed, based on the evidence available, and with the exception of the St. Louis and Ray conspiracies, that no governmental or private organizations were involved in murdering Dr. King. Still, it is not unfair to ask this question: are there any possible Georgia connections to the assassination? Interestingly, the answer to this question is yes.

The first involves the alleged presence of the killer in Atlanta on the morning after the assassination. According to the Select Committee, the assassin, James Earl Ray, immediately after the shooting fled Memphis in his white 1966 Mustang and then drove all night to Atlanta, where he left the car in the parking lot of a housing project and simply walked away, probably before 9 a.m. Around mid-day he boarded a bus at the Atlanta bus station, heading for Canada.

Furthermore, according to other evidence before the Committee, James Earl Ray, using the alias "Eric Galt," picked up his laundry at the cleaners in Atlanta on that morning after the assassination. According to the records of the Piedmont Laundry, an "Eric Galt" left his dirty laundry there on April 1; the laundry was picked up, apparently by "Galt," around 8:30 a.m. on April 5.

But the possible Georgia connections to Dr. King's death are not limited to evidence that the assassin fled to Georgia, picked up his clean linen in Atlanta, and got rid of his car there, and then took the bus out of town. There is, for example, the saga of J. B. Stoner, the notorious opponent of civil rights and racial equality.

Stoner testified before the Select Committee in 1978 that a man named William Hugh Morris had offered him \$25,000 in the late '50s to locate a skilled marksman to assassinate Dr. King. Stoner, described by the Committee as "a Georgia attorney and virulent segregationist," and "founder of the fanatically anti-Black and anti-Semitic National States Rights Party," was later convicted in Alabama in 1979 of conspiring to bomb a black church back in 1958.

Following that conviction Stoner was imprisoned (he was recently paroled) and disbarred. According to the Committee, "Stoner believed the offer [by Morris] was part of an FBI plot to entrap him." Apparently Stoner also thought the FBI killed Dr. King.

When interviewed by the Committee, Morris vigorously denied Stoner's claim. The Committee was unable to confirm Stoner's story, but did discover some evidence that at a 1961 Klan meeting Morris had expressed the view that "problems" could be "eliminated" by slaying Dr. King.

The Committee concluded: "The committee uncovered no evidence to support Stoner's allegation against Morris and concluded that Morris was not involved in the assassination of Dr. King." The fact remains that the Committee did not positively disprove Stoner's story, which is not inherently incredible, and the Committee did locate some evidence linking Morris with threats against King.