

MLK Day: Who Killed Martin Luther King? The Cover-Up of the Century

By [Asad Ismi](#)

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"The United States government is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world."- Martin Luther King

On December 8, 1999, a jury in Memphis, Tennessee, reached the verdict that Martin Luther King Jr. was killed as a result of a conspiracy involving the FBI, CIA, U.S. Army, Memphis police and the Mafia.

After a five week trial which presented 70 witnesses, the jury (made up of six blacks and six whites) rejected the official position that the civil rights titan was shot by a lone assassin, James Earl Ray, who was jailed for 99 years for the crime and died in 1998. The verdict concluded a wrongful death civil lawsuit brought by the King family against Loyd Jowers, owner of Jim's Grill, a Memphis cafe located next to the scene of the shooting when it took place on April 4, 1968.

The jury found Jowers guilty as one part of a large conspiracy created by government agencies. Jowers admitted his role but insisted that he did not know the identity of the target.

Coretta Scott King, Martin's widow, hailed the verdict as "a great victory for justice and truth." She added: "there is abundant evidence of a major high level conspiracy in the assassination of my husband and the civil court's unanimous verdict has validated our belief." Dexter King, one of Martin's four children, said that his father was killed "because he challenged the establishment." He called the official investigation into Martin's murder, "the most incredible cover-up of the century."

The case for conspiracy and the inadequacy of the lone assassin theory seem obvious. The state had no significant evidence implicating Ray. According to the official version, Ray shot King from the bathroom window of a rooming house located next to the Lorraine Motel where the civil rights leader was staying. King was on the motel's second floor balcony at 6:01 pm on April 4, 1968, when a bullet struck his chin, knocking him to the ground. He died in hospital an hour later.

The authorities never matched the bullet that killed King to the rifle they claim Ray used. Charles Stephens, the state's only eye witness who claimed to have seen Ray leave the rooming house soon after the shot, was too drunk to even stand up at the time. There was a tree branch between the bathroom window and the balcony that made a clear shot impossible. Ray was not a trained marksman and the scope on the rifle was not sighted

which means that it could not have hit any target. Six witnesses claimed that the shot came from bushes behind the rooming house. Jim's Grill was located under the rooming house and its back door opened on to the bushes. Ray was jailed not due to evidence but because he pleaded guilty. He recanted 3 days later and spent the rest of his life trying to get a trial. Under Tennessee law Ray had the right to a trial but this was consistently denied. Ray claimed that his guilty plea was coerced by Percy Foreman, his lawyer at the time, who threatened him with the death penalty.

Ray was a petty criminal who had bungled almost every robbery he committed. In the King murder, he claimed to have been set up by a man named Raul (of Portuguese origin) who, he said, directed his movements after Ray escaped from prison in April 1967. Ray first met Raul in Montreal in August and agreed to work for him after he was promised travel papers. Raul was a gunrunner with links to Carlos Marcello, the Mafia boss of New Orleans. Raul had Ray smuggling contraband across the U.S.-Canadian border and going to different U.S. cities to make deliveries. On April 3, 1968, Raul met Ray in Memphis. Raul had already asked Ray to buy a Remington 30.06 rifle with a telescopic sight. Ray was then told to get accommodation at the rooming house next to the Lorraine Motel and leave the rifle there. On the afternoon of April 4, Raul asked Ray to "go to the movies" for three hours. After 6:01 pm, Ray heard on his car radio that King had been shot and the police were looking for a white man in a white Mustang (the make of his car). Ray escaped to Toronto and then flew to London (England) where he was caught. Sidney Carthew, a seaman, testified that he met Ray and Raul together in Montreal's Neptune Bar in the summer of 1967.

Jowers also identified Raul. According to him, King's assassination was planned by three Memphis Police Department (MPD) officers in Jim's Grill over 2 days. The officers were Earl Clark, Johnny Barger and Marrell McCollough. Jowers was asked to help in the plot by Frank Liberto, a produce dealer with Mafia connections to whom he owed money. Liberto told Jowers to hold \$100,000 for him. Minutes after the bullet hit King on April 4, Jowers was handed a smoking rifle at the back door of Jim's Grill by Earl Clark, the MPD's best marksman. Jowers believes Clark killed King. Raul picked up the rifle and the money the next day, according to Jowers.

William Pepper, the King family's lawyer, actually found Raul living in Yonkers, New York. He was asked to appear in court but refused. Barbara Reis, journalist for "Publico", the main newspaper in Portugal, testified that a source connected to Raul's family told her that agents of the U.S. government had visited them three times. The source added that the government was "protecting" the family and monitoring their phone.

One of the main indicators of conspiracy was the removal of all security for King in Memphis during April 3- 4. A detail made up of black police officers assigned to King on previous visits to Memphis was not deployed this time. Similarly, two black firemen were removed from the fire station overlooking the Lorraine Motel on April 3, as was black detective Ed Redditt who was surveilling King from there. Police emergency tactical units were also pulled back from around the motel giving the assassin lots of room to escape. All police personnel disappeared from the motel an hour before the murder. After the shooting, no All Points Bulletin describing the suspect was issued nor was a "Signal Y" which would block off exits from the city. Both of these are standard police procedures. A door-to-door investigation in the Lorraine Motel area was never carried out by authorities and many witnesses were not questioned. By order of the police the bush area from where, according to six witnesses, the shot came, was cut down the next day. This destroyed the crime scene.

The state also claimed that Ray was driven by racism to kill King but there is no record of Ray displaying racist or violent behaviour. He had no motive to kill King. There is lots of evidence, however, to indicate that U.S. federal government agencies were out to get King. He was extensively surveilled by the FBI, CIA and Army Intelligence, as a dangerous radical who threatened national security. All three agencies believed that King had communist ties. J. Edgar Hoover, FBI director, hated King intensely and wanted him “neutralized” by almost any means. When King won the Nobel Peace Prize, Hoover publicly called him, “the most notorious liar in the country.” A Senate report stated in 1976 that the FBI tried “to destroy Dr. Martin Luther King.”

William Sullivan, FBI assistant director, considered King “the most dangerous and effective negro leader in the country.” King’s phones were tapped, his movements watched, his rooms bugged and his entourage infiltrated. The FBI threatened him, blackmailed him, launched a media disinformation campaign to discredit him, and sent him a letter suggesting that he commit suicide. A main goal of the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) which was aimed at eliminating black nationalist groups, was to prevent the rise of a black “messiah.” FBI memos also discussed finding a black leader to replace King. The final obscenity of U.S. “justice” was that the FBI which clearly wanted King dead was given the task of investigating his murder. Hence the official devotion to the baseless lone assassin theory for the last thirty two years. Judge Joe Brown who presided over one of Ray’s appeals, called the FBI’s investigation into King’s killing, “inept and incapable if not downright incompetent.”

In its surveillance of King, the FBI collaborated with Army Intelligence which had been spying on the King family for three generations, since 1917. There were seven U.S. Army Military Intelligence Groups (MIGs) spread out over the U.S., and six of them surveilled King as he toured the country. The Army maintained a massive domestic spy system which included 304 intelligence offices in the U.S. and national security dossiers on 7 million Americans. In a series of articles in the “Memphis Commercial Appeal” in March 1993, reporter Steve Tompkins detailed the “increasing hysteria” of Army intelligence chiefs over the national security threat they thought King posed. Tompkins stated that army intelligence was “...desperately searching for a way to stop him...” Particularly alarming was King’s opposition to the Vietnam War which he denounced as On April 4, 1967, as an “imperialist assault on Third World peasants.”

He equated the use of new weapons against the Vietnamese to the testing of “new tortures in the concentration camps of Europe” by the Nazis. King’s condemnation of the Vietnam War made him the leader who could merge the anti-war and civil rights movements. He announced his intention to lead a Poor Peoples’ March (of all races) to Washington D.C. in the spring of 1968 and shut down the government if it did not stop the war in Vietnam and take steps to end poverty in the U.S. The Army received reports stating that “King will create massive civil disobedience in [Washington] and in ten to fifteen major cities in the U.S. in the spring of 1968.” The Army was not prepared for such upheaval. According to Major General William Yarborough, assistant chief of staff for army intelligence, there were “too few reliable troops to fight in Vietnam and hold the line at home.”

Army surveillance of King continued until his assassination. Carthel Weeden, a former captain with the Memphis Fire Department, testified at the Jowers trial that on the afternoon of April 4, 1968, two men approached him at the fire station across from the Lorraine Motel, and showed the identification of U.S. Army officers. The men carried photographic equipment and positioned themselves on the rooftop of the fire station which gave them a

clear view of King and the assassin. Any photographs could be in Pentagon archives. According to former National Security Council operative, Jack Terrell, the army went beyond surveillance. Terrell testified that his close friend J.D. Hill who was part of the 20th Special Forces Group confessed to him that he had been a member of an Army sniper team in Memphis ordered to shoot an "unknown" target on April 4. The snipers were being transported to Memphis when their mission was suddenly cancelled. Hill stated that upon learning of King's murder the next day, he realized that the team must have been part of a backup operation to kill King if another sniper failed.

The U.S. government's murder of arguably "the greatest American who ever lived" signified that in violently propping up vicious right-wing dictatorships all over the Third World (as in Vietnam), the U.S. itself had become one of the biggest banana republics with no possibility for peaceful social change. Martin Luther King was a leader of international stature who spoke for the poor of the world and militantly confronted a system based on their slaughter. This pitted him against the most genocidal establishment on Earth. The state murder of such a great man only increased the power of his example.

Asad Ismi is a writer on international politics who specializes in detailing the destructive impact of U.S. and Canadian imperialism on the Global South and the resistance of the Southern people to this. He is a regular contributor to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Monitor, Canada's biggest left-wing magazine by circulation. Asad is winner of a Project Censored Award for his article The Ravaging of Africa which was released in 2007 as a radio documentary. He holds a Ph.D. in War Studies from the University of London (England) and taught for two years in Vietnam. He is a regular guest on community radio stations across Canada and the U.S. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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