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20th Century Regicide: The Controversial Nature of the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Andrew Sussman, Huron University College

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the circumstances surrounding the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in an attempt to provide evidence that the killing does meet the criteria of a conspiracy. Beginning by outlining a clear definition of a conspiracy theory, the paper attempts to provide a detailed description of the events that occurred leading up to, during, and following King's assassination, paying specific attention to ambiguities related to James Earl Ray's involvement and the action and reaction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Drawing from a variety of sources published as early as 1970 and as recently as 2014, this paper ultimately concludes that there is sufficient evidence to support the notion that the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. does meet the criteria of a conspiracy involving more than just one person, despite the fact that the evidence does not present a clear picture of exactly who else was involved.

Keywords: Martin Luther King Jr.; Assassination; James Earl Ray; FBI; Conspiracy.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is perhaps the most notable figure of the 20th century American Civil Rights Movement. His murder in 1968 came as one of many shocks to the nation during that period, and has had a lasting impact on the discourse surrounding political assassinations throughout the last 60 years. Although there is little debate over how King was killed on the evening of April 4th, 1968, in Memphis Tennessee, the details of a possible larger plot to murder King, as well as details of who may have been involved in such a plot, remain mysterious. At the time, it was widely accepted that King was assassinated solely by James Earl Ray, a lone gunman motivated by racism. However, today evidence continues to surface that suggests a potentially far more insidious plot involving additional individuals and organizations. What were previously regarded as far-reaching conspiracy theories are now given more attention from historians, and ideas about exactly who might have been involved in the plot have only become more convoluted since the assassination. The purpose of this essay is to evaluate two of the most controversial aspects of these popular conspiracy theories. The first aspect will be the discrepancies and contradictions in the actions, ascribed motivations, and testimony of James Earl Ray. The second aspect is the seemingly malicious behaviour of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) towards King as well as a possible motivation that the organization may have had for ending his role in the Civil Rights Movement. This essay will begin by outlining the events of the assassination on April 4th, 1968 as they have been officially accepted, followed by analyzing the two main controversies of the case before concluding that there is sufficient evidence to support the notion that the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. does meet the criteria of a conspiracy involving more than just one person, despite the fact that the evidence does not present a clear picture of exactly who else was involved.

On April 3th, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed supporters of the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, Tennessee, delivering a speech entitled ‘I Have Seen the Promised Land’. This speech, like many before it, contained clear references to a premonition of his own death. He is recorded as saying, “the nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion is all around.” While noting the desirability of living a long life, he claimed that he was “not concerned about that now... “I have been to the mountain top” and “I have seen the promised land.” After saying he “may not get there with you” he noted that as a people, “we will get to the promised land.”¹ In hindsight, King’s words could not have been more ironic, given that he was to be assassinated the following evening. Many sources acknowledge that King’s word choice and attitude towards the end of the 1960s suggested that “he was ready to die.”² Perhaps King recognized that martyrdom was an attractive option, given the ferocity with which the government seemed to be threatening to end his career. Regardless, even more controversial than the murder itself are the circumstances surrounding the assassination, with the greatest controversy of all being the details about exactly who was involved. In Harold Weisberg’s book, he claims that “there are large conspiracies and little conspiracies. In little conspiracies, rich and/or powerful men are involved. Small conspiracies involve only little men. This definition will not be found in any code of law. Conspiracy is merely a combination to do wrong. It requires but two people, large or small being immaterial.”³ His definition is very different than more common conceptions of conspiracy, which typically involve absurd or improbable elements as two qualifiers. Weisberg’s definition implies that only the involvement of people other than the killer are necessary for an assassination to be a conspiracy.

¹ Neal, Arthur G. *National Trauma and the Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*. 2nd. ed. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005, p. 115

² Frank, Gerold. *An American Death; the True Story of the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Greatest Manhunt of Our Time*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972, p. 53

³ Weisberg, Harold. *Frame-up; the Martin Luther King/James Earl Ray Case Containing Suppressed Evidence*. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey; Distributed by Dutton, 1971, p. 291

Other definitions, including David Coady's, suggest that conspiracy theories are explanations "that [are] contrary to an explanation that has official status at the time and place in question."⁴ For the purposes of this paper, it is perhaps best to consider both definitions in tandem. The official account of King's assassination is that it was motivated and carried out by one man, however, there is a considerable amount of evidence that suggests the killer could not have acted alone, meeting the criteria of both Weisberg and Coady's definitions of conspiracy.

Before this controversy can be evaluated further, an outline of the events of April 4th, 1968 is warranted. That evening, King and a small group of associates were intending to go to a friend's home for dinner. King had been staying at the Lorraine Motel and was getting ready when the friend called to let him know he was on his way to pick them up. King stepped out onto the balcony of his second-floor room and observed several of his associates in the courtyard below. One suggested to King that he put a coat on, as the temperature had dropped. At 6:01pm, as King was moving to go get his coat from inside, a single shot from across the street struck King in the cheek.⁵ One account of the damage the bullet did to King is as follows: "As King leaned forward on the balcony outside his motel room, a bullet shot from the front struck him in the jaw, tore through his mouth, and exploded into his neck. According to [a ballistics expert's] analysis, this front entering bullet should have propelled Dr. King forward off the balcony onto the ground below. Instead, the bullet knocked Dr. King violently backward, causing him to fall on his back on the balcony floor."⁶ The same account describes the killing wound as "consistent with an entrance wound of an exploding bullet."⁷ His associates rushed over to his aide and called for an ambulance, but King

⁴ Coady, D. *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*. Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2006, p. 2

⁵ Kirk, John A. *Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*. Edinburgh: Pearson, 2013, p. 129

⁶ Kurtz, Michael L. *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982, p. 179

⁷ Kurtz, Michael L. *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective*. pp. 211

was pronounced dead shortly after arriving at a Memphis hospital. As one monograph puts it, “At 7:05pm, the 39-year-old King was pronounced dead. The search for his killer or killers began; 20 years later, it still goes on.”⁸

Following his assassination, many monographs and journal articles account for the riots that erupted around the country. One of such texts claims that “President Johnson had to use more than four thousand federal troops to quell the disturbance across the nation’s capital. Nationwide, approximately seventy thousand army and National Guard troops attempted to restore some semblance of order; nevertheless, thousands of people were injured and the property damage soared into the millions of dollars.”⁹ Another book describes how King’s assassination caused “rioting in 125 cities”¹⁰, and yet another book discusses the lasting implications of the murder on the presidential election of that year, claiming that “across the nation blacks expressed their grief and anger in demonstrations and riots. The issue of race and the problem of law and order forced its way back into the presidential election of 1968. American society faced a time of turmoil and testing over an unpopular war and the question of racial justice.”¹¹ The assassination has since been perceived by the general public as unquestioningly political, as one book describes the crime as being “of a political character...Dr. King was the leader of a political movement...he was engaged in trying to compel the United States government to try to change political policy...whoever did this killing was acting consciously or otherwise as representative of a large body of persons who disagreed with the objectives and aims of Dr. King’s movement.”¹²

⁸ Melanson, Philip H. *The MURKIN Conspiracy: An Investigation into the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Praeger, 1989, p. 5

⁹ Boomhower, Ray E. *Robert F. Kennedy and the 1968 Indiana Primary.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 68

¹⁰ Carlisle, Rodney P., and J. Geoffrey. Golson. *America in Revolt during the 1960s and 1970s.* Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008, p. 9

¹¹ Gould, Lewis L. *1968: The Election That Changed America.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993, p. 55

¹² Huie, William Bradford, and James Earl Ray. *He Slew the Dreamer; My Search, with James Earl Ray, for the Truth about the Murder of Martin Luther King.* New York: Delacorte Press, 1970, p. 149

With the context of the assassination having been outlined, the first major controversy, the motivations and actions of James Earl Ray, can now be analyzed. For the purposes of efficient analysis, details regarding Ray's troubled early life will be kept to a minimum. It is largely considered important that Ray was an ex-military man who had committed several small-crimes that ultimately resulted in a twenty year prison sentence. From inside his cell, Ray observed the civil rights protests led by King, which he perceived to be disruptive to the societal status quo that he had come to appreciate. One biography of Ray claims that "by the beginning of 1966, James Earl Ray's situation was [that] he was in a murderous rage at Martin Luther King and had by then constructed for himself a political ideology that gave himself a justification, a logic, a context in which to make sense of his murderous intention. What's more, he had accumulated a considerable stash of money for himself outside the prison."¹³ Ray is also quoted as claiming while in prison that "if [he] ever gets to the streets [he] is going to kill [King]."¹⁴ After escaping prison in 1967, sources claim that Ray began stalking Dr. King on the weekend of March 17th [of 1968] in Los Angeles.¹⁵ From this account, it is clear that Ray was personally motivated to kill King.

Ray arrived in Memphis on April 3rd of 1968 and booked into a rooming house. It was there that the following evening Ray would lock himself into the bathroom across the hall and fire the fatal shot at King.¹⁶ Scholars generally agree on the exact details of Ray's exit. Following the fatal shot, Ray hastily exited the building, forgetting to remove the empty magazine as he did so. After seeing a police car outside, "Ray allegedly dropped the bundle in the recessed doorway...before jumping into his white Mustang and heading for Atlanta, where he ditched the car. He then made his way to Canada. His prints were found on the gun, scope, binoculars, beer can, and copy of the

¹³ McMillan, George. *The Making of an Assassin: The Life of James Earl Ray*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1976, p. 210

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 209

¹⁵ Pepper, William F. *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King*. London: Verso, 2003, p. 9

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Memphis *Commercial Appeal* dropped in the bundle.”¹⁷ Ray however, has personally claimed that when he checked into the rooming house, “he didn’t know anybody was to be killed, didn’t know that Dr. King was in Memphis”, as well as claiming that when the shot was fired, “he was sitting in the Mustang on Main Street... [another] man came running down the stairs, dropped the rifle on the sidewalk, jumped into the backseat of the Mustang, covered up with a sheet, and he [Ray] drove away. About eight blocks from the rooming house, he said the ‘other man’ told him to stop, then jumped out of the car, after which he [Ray] drove on toward Atlanta.”¹⁸ These vastly differing accounts are just one part of the controversy surrounding the assassination. Ray was clearly motivated to kill King, and confessed to doing so shortly after his arrest. Despite that, the differing account that Ray provided in prison implies the involvement of others, but still suggests that Ray was a part of the plot.

The first controversy surrounding the assassination of Dr. King largely lies in these conflicting accounts given by James Earl Ray, the commonly accepted perpetrator. As one book puts it, “from the moment the shot was fired on April 4th, 1968, Dr. King’s murder was widely assumed to have been the result of a conspiracy. Then, after Ray was arrested in London on June 8th, 1968, this assumption gained support from much of what happened in the press.”¹⁹ James Earl Ray was arrested in London a few months after the assassination and upon identification was immediately charged with murder and brought back to America. He was quick to confess to the crime, but just “days later, Ray recanted his confession and claimed he had been set up as part of a conspiracy.”²⁰ Ray wrote a letter from jail claiming to be innocent, and insisted that his lawyer

¹⁷ Pepper, William F. *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King*. London: Verso, 2003, p. 9

¹⁸ Huie, William Bradford. *Did the FBI Kill Martin Luther King?* Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1977, p. 3

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147

²⁰ Carlisle, Rodney P., and J. Geoffrey. Golson. *America in Revolt during the 1960s and 1970s*, pp. 93-94

had “coerced him into making the guilty plea.”²¹ Whether or not Ray was truly guilty is not relevant to the controversy at hand. What is controversial about this case is whether or not Ray acted alone. As one book posits, “because of the public official posture that there was no conspiracy... this means that the proof must be: that Ray, alone, fired a single, fatal shot; and that he was not, in any way, helped by anybody.”²² One of the most notable arguments against Ray acting alone was made by the Canadian police, who got involved after finding falsified Canadian identification used in Ray’s getaway. The Canadian police made four observations about his escape: the first is that “he showed expert knowledge of the loopholes in the Canadian system of obtaining birth certificates and passports.” The book also notes that those loopholes “have been used before by extensive Soviet espionage apparatuses to get secret agents into North America and by heavily-financed narcotics smuggling organizations.” The second is that “he appeared to have plenty of money”, which was unusual for a man who had escaped from prison only a year prior to the assassination. The third observation was that “there is some evidence that he had contacts in Canada who knew in advance what his assumed names would be”; and the fourth is that “his obtaining a second Canadian passport in Lisbon might mean he planned to establish residences in several places, an expensive business for a man on the run.”²³ These observations, made very soon after Ray’s arrest, build a strong case for Ray having some form of assistance.

Yet another peculiar aspect of this case is the fact that the prosecution was never able to conclusively prove that Ray was present in the rooming house on the day of the assassination. Ray himself admits to having been there, drawing specific attention to the registration book which he

²¹ Scott, Peter Dale., Paul Hoch, and Russell Stetler. *The Assassinations: Dallas and Beyond: A Guide to Cover-ups and Investigations*. New York: Random House, 1976, p. 315

²² *Ibid.*, p. 320

²³ Huie, William Bradford. *Did the FBI Kill Martin Luther King?*, p. 148

fraudulently signed into as 'John Willard'. According to Ray, he was "amazed when the prosecutor never mentioned that at the mini-trial. They said that the registration book was lost."²⁴ This troubling detail is made all the more suspicious by the immediate presence of the police in the rooming house in the hours following the assassination. It is easy to imagine how police may have inquired into the registration book to determine who had or had not been at the rooming house that day. According to one book, "Ray's handwritten registration was the only evidence that the state could use to prove his presence there. Yet the prosecuting authorities made no reference to that document."²⁵ When asked about this particular peculiarity, Ray responded by claiming: "I don't know for sure, but I can guess that maybe there is something else in that book, perhaps someone else who registered, that they don't want anyone to know about... it would have to be something important for them to give up the only evidence that could prove I was in that rooming house."²⁶

The second major controversy behind the King assassination goes far deeper than just whether individuals other than Ray were involved in the killing as part of a wider plot. Many texts point to the FBI as a potential conspirator. The first factor of this controversy is whether or not the FBI had any motivation for wanting to end King's life. According to William Pepper, notable conspiracy theorist and one-time defence counsel for Ray, King's "formal announcement of opposition and condemnation of his government generated serious apprehension in the boardrooms of the select list of large American corporations who were receiving enormous profits from the conflict."²⁷ The same source goes on to explain how "when business speaks with one voice, as it did in respect of the war or the purported extreme threat of war at the time when Martin King set

²⁴ Lane, Mark, and Dick Gregory. *Code Name "Zorro": The Murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977, p. 172

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Pepper, William F. *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King.* London: Verso, 2003, p. 5

himself up in opposition, the relevant government agencies and their officials become mere foot soldiers for the mighty economic interests. Out in front in time of war are the armed forces, the intelligence, and law enforcement communities.”²⁸ Although Pepper provides a significant amount of evidence in support of there being external involvement in the assassination, Gerald Posner ultimately notes that as Pepper continued to make claims, they began to sound “increasingly hollow. By his high profile hijinks, [Pepper] somehow had converted the assassination more into a battle over his theories and credibility than a battle to free [Ray].”²⁹ Despite this, the FBI was generally considered to be in opposition to the Civil Rights Movement, and at the time many would argue that it was serving the impartial role of protecting all American citizens, including notable leaders of the movement. King himself is documented being in discussions as recently as a few days before his death with militant groups who were in support of his Memphis march “with the purpose of convincing them to march peacefully and to monitor and ensure that ‘agitators, especially the ones engaged by hostile forces like the FBI to wreak havoc, are subdued’.”³⁰

From an internal perspective, it is clear to see from the memos circulating within the FBI around the time of King’s assassination that the intent of the organization was far more insidious than it may have seemed. One from January 2nd, 1968 claims that “Martin Luther King Jr... has publicly stated that he will create massive civil disobedience in the Nation’s Capital and in 10-15 major cities throughout the United States in the spring of 1968 if certain commitments are not forthcoming from Congress in the civil rights field.”³¹ Another one reads: “King has warned that these massive demonstrations may result in riots. Because of this we should be in a position to

²⁸ Pepper, William F. *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King*. p. 6

²⁹ Posner, Gerald. *Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.* New York: Random House 1998. p. 319

³⁰ Smiley, Tavis, and David Ritz. *Death of a King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Final Year*, p. 23

³¹ Melanson, Philip H. *The MURKIN Conspiracy: An Investigation into the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 133

obtain intelligence so that appropriate countermeasures can be taken to protect the internal security of the United States.”³² The wording of these memos clearly suggests that the FBI intended to portray King and his movement in a negative light, possibly in an attempt to sway public opinion further against him. These memos continued up until days before the assassination, as on April 2nd, 1968, one was distributed that read: “despite this violence in Memphis Levison [aide to King and alleged communist influence] and King are continuing their plans for massive civil disobedience to start in the later part of April 1968, in Washington D.C.”³³ With growing discontent, it is easy to see how the FBI may have become frustrated to the point of desperation with the domestic unrest being caused by King’s demonstrations. Considering that the threat of such turmoil was rapidly approaching the nation’s capital, a clear potential motive for the FBI to put an end to King’s days as a threat to national security emerged. If the FBI was involved with the assassination, and if claims are accurate that their motive was to end to domestic unrest, then it is ironic how in the days following King’s murder the nation broke out into riot across many prominent cities. Many monographs and journal articles agree that “when the riots were quelled and the smoke had cleared, not only was the immediate threat gone, but so was its source. King’s fearsome ability to put people into the streets would never again be a problem for ‘internal security’.”³⁴ However, if it was the intention of the FBI to quell the Civil Rights Movement altogether, then this plot could not have backfired further, as one book points out that “King’s killing was the best timed one [for African Americans] in this century, because it resulted in maximum possible continuance of what he was trying to do.”³⁵

³² Melanson, Philip H. *The MURKIN Conspiracy: An Investigation into the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 133

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Williams, John A. *The King God Didn't Save; Reflections on the Life and Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Coward-McCann, 1970, p. 17

With a clear possible motivation established, the next logical step is to analyze the actions of the FBI in relation to King. As early as 1963, “Bureau officials met in Washington to explore ways of ‘neutralizing King as an effective Negro leader’.”³⁶ The agreement made at this stage was to hide recording devices in “Dr. King’s hotel rooms as he traveled in an effort to pick up evidence of extramarital sexual activity which could be used to tarnish his reputation or even blackmail him...Numerous hotels nationwide were bugged from late 1963 to the end of 1965.”³⁷ From a historical perspective, this morally ambiguous behaviour was nothing new for the FBI, which at the time was becoming quite renowned for “calling itself other than a police force” while making itself a body of “secret federal police and a political police, violating the law at will or contriving evasions that are more demeaning of the law than open contempt for it.”³⁸ Beyond that, it is also possible to argue that the FBI was only spying on King out of a concern that he was becoming closely linked with communism. Many books agree that throughout the 60s, King was moving “closer to embracing socialism as a way to redistribute the wealth of the nation” and that “his language angered the administration and mainstream black leaders who had access to politicians and power.”³⁹ King’s criticism of the Vietnam War also introduced further tensions between him and the White House. With the Cold War at its height, and an American political opposition to communism stronger than ever before, one book claims that “it was child’s play for Hoover to link King’s tolerance of progressive ideas to a communist-style treason.” The same source adds that “it was Hoover himself who acted most like Soviet Russia with the unconstitutional tactics employed trying to trap King.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Pepper, William F. *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King*. p. 11

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Weisberg, Harold. *Frame-up; the Martin Luther King/James Earl Ray Case Containing Suppressed Evidence*. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey; Distributed by Dutton, 1971, p. 235

³⁹ Gould, Lewis L. *1968: The Election That Changed America*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993, p. 59

⁴⁰ Dyson, Michael Eric. *April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Death and How It Changed America*, p. 59

As a rebuttal to the argument that King was being monitored solely for perceived undesirable ideological shifts, it is also entirely possible, especially given the motivations established earlier by this paper, that the concerns regarding communism were merely a cover-up effort to justify or legitimize the tactics employed by the FBI to monitor King. It is also well recorded that the wiretaps performed by the FBI revealed that King occasionally “submitted to the temptations of the flesh.”⁴¹ Although the FBI claimed that the recordings including information on sexual liaisons concerned a potential intimate relationship between King and a lover with communist connection, it has since been revealed that the FBI’s intention and use of these recordings was not as innocent as they claimed. The use of these recordings culminated in one particularly aggressive threat from the FBI directed at King in 1964, when “the Bureau mailed King a tape recording containing ‘highlights’ from FBI bugging of his hotel rooms. The unsigned letter accompanying the tape implied that he should kill himself rather than face the public humiliation of having the tape exposed: ‘there is only one thing left for you to do... you are done. There is but one way out for you. You better take it before your filthy, abnormal fraudulent self is bared to the nation.’”⁴² Although this tactic clearly did not hinder King greatly in his campaign for equality, it did have a strong effect on other prominent figures. One source points out that “all black leaders had been and would remain silent because all feared Hoover’s blackmail. All feared any open opposition to Hoover would result in his publicizing whatever it is he had spied out about King’s personal life.”⁴³ There is thus a clear trend of the FBI resorting to more and more ethically ambiguous tactics to hinder the Civil Rights Movements, with several recorded instances of

⁴¹ Weisberg, Harold. *Frame-up; the Martin Luther King/James Earl Ray Case Containing Suppressed Evidence*, p. 246

⁴² Melanson, Philip H. *The MURKIN Conspiracy: An Investigation into the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 2

⁴³ Weisberg, Harold. *Frame-up; the Martin Luther King/James Earl Ray Case Containing Suppressed Evidence*, p. 240

Hoover also instructing “his agents to leave King unwarned about, and unprotected from, death threats.”⁴⁴ With a clear potential motive, and documented illegitimate tactics employed for the purpose of damaging King’s reputation and putting a stop to the Civil Rights Movement, it is not so difficult to imagine that the FBI’s frustration could eventually have resulted in their involvement in an assassination plot.

Several of the more extreme conspiracy theories go as far as to suggest that the FBI might have framed Ray for the murder. One book claims that “the CIA, the FBI, or military intelligence would frame someone whose lack of an obvious motive would allow for decades of accusations and speculations – as opposed to framing someone who would raise fewer questions and significantly undermine one of the expanding and potentially dangerous movements these agencies were already attempting to counter and undermine. In the case of the FBI in particular, they would also have to avoid trying to implicate the extreme racists that they had been battling for several years.”⁴⁵ Even if the evidence in support of the FBI’s motivation for wanting King dead is unconvincing, there is also evidence that suggests a possible FBI cover up following the assassination. Another book claims that “the FBI took over the investigation of the murder from the outset. They kept control by means of a legal fiction. They made a miserable botch of the entire thing.”⁴⁶ When these documents began to emerge in the following decades, the Carter Justice Department mandated that a review be made of “the FBI’s investigation of the assassination, and of its possible complicity in the murder.”⁴⁷ Despite this, “the probe found no evidence of a

⁴⁴ Dyson, Michael Eric. *April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Death and How It Changed America*, p. 59

⁴⁵ Wexler, Stuart, and Larry J. Hancock. *The Awful Grace of God: Religious Terrorism, White Supremacy, and the Unsolved Murder of Martin Luther King Jr.* Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012, pp. 319-320

⁴⁶ Weisberg, Harold. *Frame-up; the Martin Luther King/James Earl Ray Case Containing Suppressed Evidence*, p. 253

⁴⁷ Melanson, Philip H. *The MURKIN Conspiracy: An Investigation into the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. xv-xvi

conspiracy... [and concluded that] James Earl Ray had acted alone.”⁴⁸ Regardless of these findings, the emergence of this information during the 1970s meant that America learned about “the awful truth about Hoover’s FBI. The Bureau had engaged in a protracted persecution of Dr. King; it has worked to discredit him, and even to destroy him, both personally and politically.”⁴⁹ This discovery led to the recovery of evidence that has since served only to call the FBI’s actions further into question over time.

Just a year after the Carter Justice Department conducted their review, the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) produced a report that found that “James Earl Ray assassinated Martin Luther King Jr. as a result of a conspiracy... The conspirators who allegedly put a bounty on King were based in St. Louis.”⁵⁰ Although this second review did not implicate the FBI any more than the first, it too meets both of the main criteria outlined for a conspiracy. Not only did it imply that Ray was not acting alone, but it also challenged the official account. One book acknowledges that “The House Assassinations Committee’s version of the truth was highly speculative. It was supported by only the vaguest circumstantial evidence” and goes on to assert that “the truth of the King assassination is that it was a much more sophisticated conspiracy executed by persons possessing the kind of expertise generally found within intelligence circles.”⁵¹ Furthermore, Ray’s brief escape from prison in 1977 fueled further suspicion that the attempts were being made to hide the truth of the assassination. Hampton Sides notes that “the ease with which Ray had broken out from a maximum-security prison, some said, was further proof of the massive conspiracy that was behind the death of [MLK]. The people who had killed King had not

⁴⁸ Melanson, Philip H. *The MURKIN Conspiracy: An Investigation into the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, pp. xv-xvi

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xv

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. x

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. xvi

wanted Ray to disappear.”⁵² Thus, although there is no evidence that directly incriminates the FBI with a plot to assassinate King, there is certainly enough evidence to suggest that Ray was not working alone. Philip Melanson articulates the implication of this well when he claims that “an individual may have only one associate; but if the associate is a KGB agent, or a CIA agent, or a Mafioso, the potential for conspiracy is manifest.”⁵³

In conclusion, it is likely that the complete truth behind the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. will never be revealed. However, based on the evidence that has continually surfaced since the official verdict on who was behind the assassination, there is a growing consensus among historians that there is far more to this case than originally thought. While there is little question that James Earl Ray is the murderer, the amount of evidence in support of conspiracy theories that suggest the involvement of additional individuals and organizations is constantly growing. Furthermore, the intentions and actions of the FBI in relation to Martin Luther King Jr. leading up to his assassination cause further controversy, given that many theories suggest the organization was somehow involved in the plot. Ultimately, a conspiracy can be defined as an account of events that involves more than one plotter as well as that differs significantly from the official account of events. Furthermore, it seems that sufficient evidence has emerged since 1968 to suggest that James Earl Ray was likely not acting entirely alone. Thus, if those two conjectures can be agreed upon, then the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. is certainly a case that warrants further investigation into whether or not additional parties were involved.

⁵² Sides, Hampton. *Hellhound on His Trail: The Stalking of Martin Luther King Jr. and the International Hunt for His Assassin*. New York: Doubleday, 2010. p. 393

⁵³ Melanson, Philip H. *The MURKIN Conspiracy: An Investigation into the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 40

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