

MARTIN LUTHER KING: Truth and Reconciliation

by Mark Robinowitz, www.JFKMLKRFK.com

Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered in Memphis on April 4, 1968. He was 39 years old.

Now, MLK is a cultural icon, memorialized by the federal holiday, with schools and roads named in his honor. He is best known for his “I have a dream” speech at the 1963 March on Washington, but King’s legacy is far broader.

In 1964, King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He saw this as a responsibility to do more.

On April 4, 1967, he gave his most powerful speech, at Riverside Church in New York City: “Beyond Vietnam,” an indictment of what he called the “triple evils” of racism, militarism and poverty. The entire media attacked Dr. King for denouncing the war. Many of his allies ostracized him. Donations dropped to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He was never invited to the White House again.

In a 2016 article for *Sojourners* magazine, Rabbi Arthur Waskow recalled that King’s **“friend and co-worker Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was heard to mutter that by giving this profoundly radical speech [King] had signed his death warrant — and indeed, exactly one year later, he was murdered.”**

When King was killed, he had been organizing the “Poor People’s Campaign,” a second March on Washington. The plan was to camp on the National Mall by the US Capitol to demand the government address poverty (not only African Americans). Federal government leaders saw this as a dangerous threat. They feared MLK would not be able to keep the protest non-violent, especially after their demands were not met.

The official narrative of King’s assassination is that he was killed by James Earl Ray, supposedly a lone racist motivated by hate. King had received countless racist threats, but racism was not the only reason he was killed.

After some years, the King family suspected that James Earl Ray, the accused killer, was framed. They asked their friend, attorney William Pepper, to investigate. Pepper had helped persuade King to speak out more against the war on Vietnam, and toward the end of Ray’s life, became Ray’s attorney.

Ray never had a trial. He was coerced into pleading guilty to avoid the electric chair — and spent the rest of his life trying to withdraw that plea. The

King family eventually supported Ray’s (unsuccessful) effort for a trial.

Ray died in prison in 1998. In 1999, the family filed a suit against Loyd Jowers and “other unknown co-conspirators.” Jowers owned “Jim’s Grill,” near the Lorraine Motel where King was shot. He had admitted, in a public interview and in talks with Dexter King and Andrew Young, to have hidden the rifle that was used; fired, he said, by a Memphis police sharpshooter.

One piece of evidence that Ray was framed: several eyewitnesses said the shot was fired from bushes on the street. (Ray supposedly shot MLK from inside a rooming house next to Jim’s Grill.) The next day, the City of Memphis cut down the bushes.

While Ray was a fugitive in Canada, he used multiple identities for actual people who superficially resembled him, a feat that required access to centralized government databases.

King v. Jowers did not seek to prosecute or punish anyone, but to use the legal system to expose the truth. (They only asked for a symbolic fine of \$100 and no jail time.) **The family was inspired by the “Truth and Reconciliation” process pioneered in South Africa after Apartheid, which gave amnesty for politically motivated crimes if the perpetrators were willing to confess in public.** The jury heard three weeks of testimony and took one hour to reach a verdict: elements in the federal and local governments conspired with organized crime to kill King.

The family said the trial was “everything that the family members have to say about the assassination.” They said they “have done our part [and] those of you, if you find it in your hearts to get the ‘powers that be’ to officialize what 12 independent people have already done, that is your business.” Since then, there has not been a groundswell to highlight the implications for civil rights, issues of peace and war, and the contrast of poverty in the wealthiest nation in history.

Truth and Reconciliation applies not only to the perpetrators who ordered this and similar crimes of state, but also to the citizenry who have been hesitant to admit unpleasant parts of our history. The King family’s message of love and reconciliation could free our society from fear and divisiveness to reach our positive potentials.