

# The Plot to Kill Martin Luther King: Survived Shooting, Was Murdered in Hospital

Martin Luther King was murdered in a conspiracy that was instigated by then FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Review of William Pepper's Book

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*For one bright moment back in the late 1960s, we actually believed that we could change our country. We had identified the enemy. We saw it up close, we had its measure, and we were very hopeful that we would prevail. The enemy was hollow where we had substance. All of that substance was destroyed by an assassin's bullet. - **William Pepper** (page 15, [The Plot to Kill King](#))*

The revelations are stunning. The media indifference is predictable.

Thanks to the nearly four-decade investigation by human rights lawyer **William Pepper**, it is now clear once and for all that **Martin Luther King was murdered in a conspiracy that was instigated by then FBI director J. Edgar Hoover** and that also involved the U.S. military, the Memphis Police Department, and "Dixie Mafia" crime figures in Memphis, Tennessee. These and many more incredible details of the King assassination are contained in a trilogy of volumes by Pepper culminating with his latest and final book on the subject, *The Plot to Kill King*. He previously wrote *Orders to Kill* (1995) and *An Act of State* (2003).

With virtually no help from the mainstream media and very little from the justice system, Pepper was able to piece together what really happened on April 4, 1968 in Memphis right down to who gave the order and supplied the money, how the patsy was chosen, and who actually pulled the trigger.

Without this information, the truth about King's assassination would have been buried and lost to history. Witnesses would have died off, taking their secrets with them, and the official lie that King was the victim of a racist lone gunman named James Earl Ray would have remained "fact."

Instead, we know that Ray took the fall for a murder he did not commit. We know that a

member of the Memphis Police Department fired the fatal shot and that two military sniper teams that were part of the 902nd Military Intelligence Group were sent to Memphis as backups should the primary shooter fail. We have access to the fascinating account of how Pepper came to meet Colonel John Downie, the man in charge of the military part of the plot and Lyndon Johnson's former Vietnam briefer. We also learn that as part of the operation, photographs were actually taken of the shooting and that Pepper came very close to getting his hands on those photographs.

Unfortunately, the mainstream media has ignored all of these revelations and continues to label Ray as King's lone assassin. In fact, Pepper chronicles in detail how a disinformation campaign has featured the collaboration of many mainstream journalists over almost half a century. He says he suspects that those orchestrating the cover-up, which continues to this day, are no longer concerned with what he writes about the subject.

"I'm really basically harmless, I think, to the power structure," Pepper said in an interview.

"I don't think I threaten them, really. The control of the media is so consolidated now they can keep someone like me under wraps, under cover, forever. This book will probably never be reviewed seriously by mainstream, the story will not be aired in mainstream - they control the media. It was bad in the '60s but nowhere near as bad as now."

And the most stunning revelation in *The Plot to Kill King* - which some may question because the account is second hand - is that King was still alive when he arrived at St. Joseph's Hospital and that he was killed by a doctor who was supposed to be trying to save his life.

"That is probably the most shocking aspect of the book, that final revelation of how this great man was taken from us," Pepper says. (By the way, when I quote Pepper as having "said" something I mean in our interview. If I'm quoting from the book, I'll indicate that.)

The hospital story was told to Pepper by a man named Johnnton Shelby, whose mother, Lula Mae Shelby, had been a surgical aide at St. Joseph's that night. Shelby told Pepper the story of how his mother came home the morning after the shooting (she hadn't been allowed to go home the night before) and gathered the family together. He remembers her saying to them, "I can't believe they took his life."

She described chief of surgery Dr. Breen Bland entering the emergency room with two men in suits. Seeing doctors working on King, Bland commanded, "Stop working on the nigger and let him die! Now, all of you get out of here, right now. Everybody get out."

Johnnton Shelby says his mother described hearing the sound of the three men sucking up saliva into their mouths and then spitting. Lula Mae described to her family that she looked over her shoulder as she was leaving the room and saw that the breathing tube had been removed from King and that Bland was holding a pillow over his head. (The book contains the entire deposition given by Johnnton Shelby to Pepper, so readers can judge for themselves whether they think Shelby is credible - as Pepper believes he is.)

In fact, a second invaluable source was Ron Adkins, whose father, Russell Adkins Sr., was a local Dixie Mafia gangster and conspirator in the planning of the assassination even though he died a year before it took place. Ron told Pepper he had overheard Bland, who was his

family's doctor, tell his father that if King did survive the shooting he had to be taken to St. Joseph's and nowhere else. As Pepper describes it:

He remembers Breen Bland saying to his father, 'If he's not killed by the shot, just make sure he gets to St. Joseph Hospital, and we'll make sure that he doesn't leave.'

Ron, who was just 16 when the shooting took place, was apparently taken everywhere by his father in those days, and he was able to recount many details of what happened as the assassination was planned and carried out.

"I definitely found him credible," Pepper says. "I found him troubled, I found him disturbed in a lot of ways by things that went on earlier in his life."

His deposition is also contained in the book, which Pepper explains was important so that readers could judge the statements for themselves.

"What I wanted to do was to make sure that the entire deposition of these critical moments and this critical information was there, so that one could go and read the depositions and see that I was being accurate," Pepper says.

Besides describing what he heard Bland tell his father, Ron Adkins described the many visits made to Russell Sr. by Clyde Tolson, J. Edgar Hoover's right hand man. Known to Ron as "Uncle Clyde," the high-level FBI official often delivered cash to the elder Adkins for jobs he and his associates would carry out on behalf of Hoover. Among those the younger Adkins said were paid to supply information about the activities of Martin Luther King were the reverends Samuel "Billy" Kyles and Jesse Jackson.

### **The basics of the official story**

If you seek out any information from a mainstream source about James Earl Ray, you'll find him described as the killer of Martin Luther King, just as Lee Harvey Oswald and Sirhan Sirhan are labelled "assassins" in the murders of John and Robert Kennedy.

But once you read any or all of Pepper's three books on the King slaying, you see very clearly that Ray is not a killer at all. Instead, he was a petty criminal who was a perfect "follower." Like Oswald and Sirhan, Ray was set up to take the fall for an assassination that originated within the American deep state. In fact, Pepper says he's convinced that knowledge of the plot went all the way to the top.

"The whole thing would have been part of Lyndon Johnson's playbook," Pepper says. "I think Johnson knew about this."

As the official story of the shooting goes, at 5:50 p.m. on April 4, Kyles knocked on the door of room 306 of the Lorraine Motel to let King and the rest of his party know that they were running late for a planned dinner at Kyles's home. Kyles then walked about 60 feet down the balcony where he remained even after King came out of the room at about 6 p.m. (Although Kyles has maintained ever since that he spent the last half hour in the room, Pepper has proven otherwise.)

Andrew Young (left) and others on balcony of the Lorraine pointing to where the shot originated while King lies at their feet. (Joseph Louw photo)

Members of a militant black organizing group the Invaders, who were also staying in the motel because of King's visit, were told shortly before the shooting by a member of the motel staff that their rooms would no longer be paid for by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and that they had to leave immediately. When they asked who had given this order, they were told it was Jesse Jackson. At the time of the shooting, Jackson was waiting down by the swimming pool. Ron Adkins also identified Jackson as the person who called the owners of the Lorraine Motel and demanded that King be moved from a more secure inner courtyard room to an exposed room on the second floor facing the street.

The Memphis Police Department usually formed a detail of black officers to protect King when he was in town, but did not this time. Emergency TACT support units were pulled back from the Lorraine to the fire station, which overlooked the motel. Pepper also learned that the only two black members of the Memphis Fire Department had been told the day before the shooting not to report for work the next day at the fire station. And black detective Ed Redditt was told an hour before the shooting to stay home because a threat had been made on his life.

Just about a minute after King exited his room, a single shot was fired and the bullet ripped through King's jaw and spinal cord, dropping him immediately. The shot appeared to come from across Mulberry Street. King was rushed to hospital, where he was pronounced dead just after 7 p.m.

According to the official story, the shot was fired by Ray from the bathroom of a rooming house above a bar called Jim's Grill, which backed on to Mulberry and faced onto South Main Street. But, as Pepper's investigation proves, the shot actually came from the bushes located in between the rooming house and the street. In fact, the only "witness" who placed Ray at the scene was a falling-down-drunk named Charles Stephens, who later did not recognize Ray in a photograph and who cab driver James McCraw had refused to transport a short time before because he was too intoxicated.

The bushes that concealed the shooter were conveniently trimmed the day after the shooting, giving a false impression that a shooter could not have been concealed there. Several witnesses, including journalist Earl Caldwell and King's Memphis driver, Solomon Jones, described seeing the shot come from the bushes and not from the bathroom of the rooming house as the official story states.

Another casualty of the King murder was cab driver Buddy Butler who reported that he saw a man running from the scene right after the shot, going south on Mulberry St., and jumping into a police car (this would turn out to be MPD Lieutenant Earl Clark). Butler reported this to his dispatcher and later to fellow cab driver Louie Ward. Butler was interviewed at the Yellow Cab Company later that evening by police. Ward was told the next day that Butler had either fallen, or was pushed, to his death from a speeding car on the Memphis-Arkansas Bridge.

The owner of Jim's Grill, Loyd Jowers, would later admit to being part of the conspiracy to kill King, and he would be found responsible - along with various government agencies - for the killing in a 1999 civil lawsuit by the King family, which was represented by Pepper.

“The King family got enormous comfort out of the results of that trial and the evidence that came forward from that,” Pepper says.

Betty Spates, a waitress at Jim’s Grill and girlfriend of Jowers, says she saw him rush into the back of the Grill through the back door seconds after the shot, white as a ghost and holding a rifle, which he then wrapped in a tablecloth and hid on a shelf under the counter. He turned to her and said, “Betty, you wouldn’t do anything to hurt me, would you?” She responded, “Of course not, Loyd.” Spates, who didn’t come forward until the 1990s, also recounted that Jowers had been delivered a large sum of money right before the assassination.

James McCraw stated that Jowers had shown him a rifle the day after the shooting and told him it was the one used to kill King.

“We confronted Loyd,” Peppers explains. “We told him he was likely to be indicted if he didn’t help us, if he didn’t give more information. Jowers didn’t know there was no way the grand jury was going to indict him. All he knew was what he did, what he participated in, how much money he got for it – he got quite a large sum of money, built a taxi cab company with it, had his gambling debt with [local Mafia figure Frank] Liberto forgiven.”

Liberto, an associate of Louisiana crime boss Carlos Marcello, turned out to be involved in the assassination also. He owned a produce warehouse and one of his regular customers, John McFerren, was making his weekly shopping trip there when he overheard Liberto shout into the phone an hour before the shooting: “Shoot the son of a bitch on the balcony.” Nathan Whitlock and his mother, LaVada Addison Whitlock, who owned a restaurant frequented by Liberto, stated that Liberto had told them he was responsible for the King murder.

### **Setting up the patsy**

One thing that many don’t know is that Ray was in prison in 1967, the year before the assassination, serving a 20-year sentence for a grocery store robbery in 1959. After a couple of unsuccessful escape attempts, Ray succeeded in breaking out of prison on April 23, 1967. Unknown to Ray was the fact that the escape had been orchestrated, because he had already been chosen as the patsy in the planned assassination of King, which was still a year away.

The warden of Missouri State Penitentiary was paid \$25,000 by Russell Adkins Sr. to allow the escape (as confirmed by Ron Adkins). The money was delivered to Adkins by Tolson, and it was this same connection that would later be used to finance the assassination of King.

After his escape from prison, Ray went to Chicago for a few weeks where he got a job. But, worried about getting caught, he went to Canada, specifically Montreal, and took the name Eric S. Galt. His intention was to get a passport under a false name and to travel to a country from which he could not be extradited.

At the Neptune Bar in the Montreal dock area in August 1967, Ray met a mysterious figure who identified himself as “Raul.” Raul asked Ray to help him with a smuggling scheme, and Ray agreed. In the months ahead, Ray would do a number of jobs, including gun running, for Raul for which he was paid and given a car. Always, Ray had to wait to be contacted by Raul, who Ray said co-ordinated his activities right up until the day of the assassination.

At one point Ray was instructed to purchase a deer rifle with a scope (although Raul was not satisfied with the one he bought and made him exchange it for another). Ray was instructed to go to Memphis (he arrived April 3, 1968) and upon meeting with Raul in his motel was given the name of Jim's Grill, where the two were to meet at 3 p.m. the next day. He also handed the rifle over to Raul and always maintained that he never saw it again.

Ray rented a room at the rooming house above Jim's Grill (the two met the day of the assassination as planned). About an hour before the shooting, he was given money to go to the movies, but first he tried to have a tire repaired because Raul had said he wanted to use the car. But when Ray heard the sirens that followed the shooting, he got scared and left the area.

Fearing he had been set up, Ray left the country and ended up in England where he was captured on June 8, 1968 at London's Heathrow Airport as he was trying to leave the UK. Once charged with the crime, Ray was pressured by his second lawyer, Percy Foreman, to plead guilty on the grounds that the evidence was too strong against him and Foreman was not in good health and couldn't offer a strong defence.

"Foreman was sent in with the purpose of replacing the original lawyers," Pepper says.

Foreman offered Ray \$500 to get another lawyer if he pleaded guilty and even put this in writing. Ray would regret accepting this offer for the rest of his life. He tried unsuccessfully to rescind the guilty plea and get a trial for the next 30 years, finally dying in prison of cancer in 1998.

### **Pepper becomes convinced of Ray's innocence**

It was 10 years after the assassination before Pepper would even consider meeting with Ray. He had taken for granted at first that Ray was the assassin, but he was encouraged to meet him by Rev. Ralph Abernathy, who had succeeded King as President of the SCLC. Abernathy had remained unsatisfied with the official account of the shooting.

In the book, Pepper describes his first meeting with Ray in 1978 and how he quickly came to believe that Ray had not been the shooter and that the case was essentially still unsolved. It wasn't until 1988 before Pepper became certain that Ray had not played any knowing part in the conspiracy, and at that point he agreed to represent him, which he did until his death.

Purveyors of the official story of the assassination have always claimed that Raul was an invention of Ray's, and mainstream media accounts refer to this question as still unanswered even though Pepper not only found witnesses who described their connections to Raul, he actually found Raul himself with the help of witness Glenda Grabow (Pepper learned that his last name was Coelho). She identified Raul as someone she had known in Houston in 1963 and who around 1974, in a fit of rage, had implicated himself in the King assassination right before raping her. Grabow also identified Jack Ruby as someone who she had seen with Raul in 1963. This fascinating story is recounted both in *An Act of State* and *The Plot to Kill King*.

One of the most intriguing things to come out of both of these books is the account of a young FBI agent named Don Wilson who after the assassination was sent to check out a white Mustang with Alabama plates (Ray drove a white Mustang) that had been abandoned and that was thought to be connected to the assassination. Wilson opened the car door and

some papers fell out. He examined them later and found a torn-out piece of a 1963 Dallas, Texas telephone directory. Written on the page was the name “Raul” and the initial “J” and a phone number, which turned out to be that of a Las Vegas night club run by Jack Ruby, the man who had shot Lee Harvey Oswald in the basement of the Dallas police station. A second piece of paper had a list of names with amounts of money beside each. Wilson decided to hold on to this evidence, fearing it would disappear forever if he turned it in. He held on to it for 29 years before making it available to Pepper and the King family.

### **The shooter revealed**

Another incredible revelation in *The Plot to Kill King* is the identity of the man who appears to have fired the fatal shot. Pepper learned his identity from Lenny B. Curtis, who was a custodian at the Memphis Police Department rifle range. Curtis told Pepper this in 2003, and Pepper recorded a deposition with him but kept it confidential out of fear for Curtis’s life. Only after his death in 2013 did Pepper reveal what Curtis had said – that the shooter was Memphis police officer Frank Strausser.

“We had to be very careful about [Curtis’s safety],” Pepper says.

Curtis said to Pepper in his deposition that he heard Strausser say about King four or five months before the assassination that somebody was going to “. . . blow his motherfucking brains out.” He also described that Strausser had practised in the rifle range with a particular rifle that had been brought in four or five days earlier by a member of the fire department. That fireman had shown the rifle to Curtis and asked, “How would you like that scoundrel, that baby there?” When Curtis said it look like any other rifle, he replied, “No, this is a special one; that baby is special.” Lenny remembered that on the day of the assassination, Strausser spent the whole day practicing with it. (Strausser has given several conflicting accounts of where he was and what he was doing that day.)

After the assassination, Curtis says he was followed and intimidated by Strausser. Pepper writes:

Lenny said that he subsequently became aware that strange things were happening around him. His gas was strangely turned on once when he was about to enter his house. He had lit a cigarette, but as he opened the door he smelled gas and quickly put out the cigarette. A strange Lincoln was occasionally parked across the street from his apartment house. He was frightened. One morning when the car was there, he got into his own car and quickly drove off, and the strange car pulled out and followed him. He managed to see the driver. It was Strausser.

In the book, Pepper describes how he came to meet with Strausser, who he describes as a committed and devoted racist.

“He had no respect for black people at all,” Pepper says. “He wasn’t explicit about his racism. But he was not at all sympathetic to what Martin King was all about.”

In the hope of prompting an admission, Pepper lied and told him that he had been implicated in the killing by Loyd Jowers – but Strausser didn’t take the bait. Pepper also told Strausser that the footprints found in the bushes after the shooting were from size 13 shoes (which they were). Then he asked him about the size of *his* feet:

“He had a bit of a grin on his face, and he said ‘13 large,’” Pepper says.

Pepper also arranged to have cab driver Nathan Whitlock, who Strausser knew, tell him that there was a good possibility that he (Strausser) would be indicted for the shooting. He responded: “What are they going to indict me for, something I did 30 years ago?” Then he caught himself and added, “Or something I knew about 30 years ago?”

### **A threat to the powers that be**

As Pepper explains, King was not only hated by the establishment as he rose to prominence in the 1960s, he was feared. Not only did he have the ability to move large numbers of people with his message of peace and tolerance, but he had designs on a political career. According to Pepper, King was planning to run for president on a third-party ticket with fellow anti-war activist Dr. Benjamin Spock. He was also causing panic in powerful circles because he intended to bring hundreds of thousands of poor people to an encampment in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1968 to bring attention to the plight of the poor.

“They were terrified that the anger level when [the demonstrators] were not going to get what they wanted was going to rise to such a point where Martin was going to lose control of that group and the more radical among them would take it over and they’d have a revolution,” Pepper explains. “And they didn’t have the troops to put it down. That was a real fear that the Army had. And I think it was a justifiable fear.”

King would also have posed an increasing threat to the political establishment because he intended to become much more vocal in his opposition to the Vietnam War. He had been influenced by an article and photos by Pepper called, “[The Children of Vietnam](#),” which was published in *Ramparts Magazine* in January 1967 and later reprinted in *Look* magazine. (The man who published the piece in *Look*, Bill Atwood, actually told Pepper he received a visit from former New York governor and ambassador to the Soviet Union Averill Harriman who passed on a message from President Johnson that he would appreciate it if Atwood never published anything by Pepper.)

Beyond King’s importance as a powerful force for justice, peace, and equality, he was also Pepper’s friend. And the lawyer/journalist had to deal with that loss as he sought the truth about who really killed King and fought for justice for the man falsely accused of his murder. He writes:

For me, this is a story rife with sadness, replete with massive accounts of personal and public deception and betrayal. Its revelations and experiences have produced in the writer a depression stemming from an unavoidable confrontation with the depths to which human beings, even those subject to professional codes of ethics, have fallen. In addition, there is an element of personal despair that has resulted from this long effort, which has made me even question the wisdom of undertaking this task. (page xiv, *The Plot to Kill King*)

But he did undertake it, and we should all be grateful that he did.

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