

Chairman doubts whole truth came out in King inquiry

(AP) — In 1978, Walter Fauntroy spoke proudly of the congressional inquiry he helped oversee into the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., with its dozens of hearings, scores of witnesses and 487 trips by investigators to track leads in five countries.

The far-ranging effort by the House Select Committee on Assassinations was well worth it, Fauntroy said then. "The American people want to know that their government is telling them the whole truth," he said.

Today, however, he doubts the whole truth came out. Fauntroy has joined historians and researchers in calling for a new and independent re-investigation of what happened in Memphis 25 years ago Sunday.

"I'm not out to prosecute anyone," said the former chairman of the subcommittee examining King's death. "I'm looking for the truth."

Fauntroy's concern grew not from any newly discovered "smoking gun" evidence, but from what he called a troubling "plethora of new information" — notably former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's hatred and harassment of King and reported U.S. Army spying on the civil rights movement.

"I feel that a very determined effort was made by the FBI to — I want to choose my words very carefully — to prevent our committee from conducting a thorough investigation of the assassination," he said. "Not the FBI — operatives in the FBI."

Thousands of pages of documents that the assassinations committee received from the FBI were partially blacked out, Fauntroy said, obscuring information he now

believes may hold clues.

"There's been just too much secrecy," said Bob Edgar, another former assassinations committee member who now supports a re-investigation.

For nearly a quarter-century, despite James Earl Ray's imprisonment for King's murder, researchers have said the same. Still, the King case often was lost in the glare trained on President John F. Kennedy's assassination, which the committee also investigated.

Now, the spotlight may be turning back to Memphis.

Airing Sunday night is an HBO cable network special in which Ray, who pleaded guilty as King's killer and ever since has sought a trial to disprove it, finally gets his day in "court." A mock trial on the murder charge was filmed in a Memphis courtroom, using the 1969 prosecutor's file that Ray sued to open.

From the beginning, some have suspected that Ray was at most a bit player in a conspiracy.

Arthur Hanes Sr. and Jr., his first lawyers, said time has not erased their many reasons for doubting Ray's guilt — from his own statements to inconclusive ballistics evidence. "The cumulative effect of all of it is just compelling to us," said Hanes Jr., now an Alabama judge.

Some investigators insist that government files sealed until 2029, to protect confidential sources and individuals' privacy, could help point to people with answers.

"Not only are there unpursued leads ... but there are definitely clues in there for expanding the database," said Philip Melanson, a scholar on political violence who has called for unsealing the files and urged appointment of a

special prosecutor.

But Harold Sawyer, another former committee member, notes that no criminal investigation answers every question.

"There are always loose ends," said Sawyer, who as a lawyer defended and prosecuted murder cases. "It never works out like it does on TV."

Ultimately, he concluded Ray was the triggerman, he said, partly because Ray did not take up Sawyer's offer to intercede to get his sentence reduced if he would provide evidence leading to any other conspirators.

The circumstantial case against Ray seems overwhelming.

No one disputes that Ray, a petty criminal with numerous arrests for nonviolent property crimes, was in Memphis when King was killed. His fingerprint was found on a rifle at the scene.

Ray acknowledges he rented a room in the flophouse from which authorities say the single 30.06 rifle shot was fired, and that he drove a white Mustang like one described as leaving the scene.

But he maintains he was set up by a man known to him only as "Raoul," who gave Ray instructions to buy the car and weapon — and thousands of dollars to pay for them — and directed his movements across the United States and in Canada and Mexico in the months leading up to the assassination.

Ray denies he fired the shot. He pleaded guilty, he contends, only because of the duress of eight months of solitary confinement.

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