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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. (4 April 1968) | [Next entry](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_azikiwe_nnamdi_1904_1996) | |
| At 6:05 P.M. on Thursday, 4 April 1968, Martin Luther King was shot dead while standing on a balcony outside his second-ﬂoor room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. News of King’s assassination prompted major outbreaks of racial violence, resulting in more than 40 deaths nationwide and extensive property damage in over 100 American cities. James Earl Ray, a 40-year-old escaped fugitive, later confessed to the crime and was sentenced to a 99-year prison term. During King’s funeral a tape recording was played in which King spoke of how he wanted to be remembered after his death: ‘‘I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving  others’’(King, ‘‘Drum Major Instinct,’’ 85).   King had arrived in Tennessee on Wednesday, 3 April to prepare for a march the following Monday on behalf of [striking Memphis sanitation workers](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_memphis_sanitation_workers_strike_1968/). As he prepared to leave the Lorraine Motel for a dinner at the home of Memphis minister Samuel ‘‘Billy’’ Kyles, King stepped out onto the balcony of room 306 to speak with [Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) colleagues standing in the parking area below. An assassin ﬁred a single shot that caused severe wounds to the lower right side of his face. SCLC aides rushed to him, and [Ralph Abernathy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_abernathy_ralph_david_1926_1990/) cradled King’s head. Others on the balcony pointed across the street toward the rear of a boarding house on South Main Street where the shot seemed to have originated. An ambulance rushed King to St. Joseph’s Hospital, where doctors pronounced him dead at 7:05 P.M.   [President Lyndon B. Johnson](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_johnson_lyndon_baines_1908_1973/) called for a national day of mourning to be observed on 7 April. In the following days, public libraries, museums, schools, and businesses were closed, and the Academy Awards ceremony and numerous sporting events were postponed. On 8 April King’s widow, [Coretta Scott King](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_coretta_scott_1927_2006/), and other family members joined thousands of participants in a march in Memphis honoring King and supporting the sanitation workers. King’s funeral service was held the following day in Atlanta at [Ebenezer Baptist Church](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_ebenezer_baptist_church/). It was attended by many of the nation’s political and civil rights leaders, including Jacqueline Kennedy, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, and [Ralph Bunche](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_bunche_ralph_johnson_1904_1971/). [Morehouse College](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_morehouse_college/) President [Benjamin Mays](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_mays_benjamin_1894_1984/) delivered the eulogy, predicting that King ‘‘would probably say that, if death had to come, I am sure there was no greater cause to die for than ﬁghting to get a just wage for garbage collectors’’ (Mays, 9 April 1968). Over 100,000 mourners followed two mules pulling King’s cofﬁn through the streets of Atlanta. After another ceremony on the Morehouse campus, King’s body was initially interred at South-View Cemetery. Eventually, it was moved to a crypt next to the Ebenezer Church at the [King Center](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_center_atlanta_georgia/), an institution founded by King’s widow.   Shortly after the assassination, a policeman discovered a bundle containing a 30.06 Remington riﬂe next door to the boarding house. The largest investigation in [Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_federal_bureau_of_investigation_fbi/) history led its agents to an apartment in Atlanta. Fingerprints uncovered in the apartment matched those of James Earl Ray, a fugitive who had escaped from a Missouri prison in April 1967. FBI agents and police in Memphis produced further evidence that Ray had registered on 4 April at the South Main Street roominghouse and that he had taken a second-ﬂoor room near a common bathroom with a view of the Lorraine Motel.   The identiﬁcation of Ray as a suspect led to an international manhunt. On 19 July 1968, Ray was extradited to the United States from Britain to stand trial. In a plea bargain, Tennessee prosecutors agreed in March 1969 to forgo seeking the death penalty when Ray pled guilty to murder charges. The circumstances leading to the plea later became a source of controversy, when Ray recanted his confession soon after being sentenced to a 99-year term in prison.   During the years following King’s assassination, doubts about the adequacy of the case against Ray were fueled by revelations of the extensive surveillance of King by the FBI and other government agencies. Beginning in 1976, the House Select Committee on Assassinations, chaired by Representative Louis Stokes, re-examined the evidence concerning King’s assassination, as well as that of [President John F. Kennedy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kennedy_john_fitzgerald_1917_1963/). The committee’s ﬁnal report suggested that Ray may have had co-conspirators. The report nonetheless concluded that there was no convincing evidence of government complicity in King’s assassination.   After recanting his guilty plea, Ray continued to maintain his innocence, claiming to have been framed by a gun-smuggler he knew as ‘‘Raoul.’’ In 1993 Ray’s lawyer, William F. Pepper, sought to build popular support to reopen Ray’s case by staging a televised mock trial of Ray in which the ‘‘jury’’ found him not guilty. In 1997 members of King’s family publicly supported Ray’s appeal for a new trial, and King’s son [Dexter Scott King](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_king_dexter_scott_1961/) supported Ray’s claims innocence during a televised prison encounter. Despite this support Tennessee authorities refused to reopen the case, and Ray died in prison on 23 April 1998.  Even after Ray’s death, conspiracy allegations continued to surface. In 1999, on behalf of King’s widow and children, Pepper won a token civil verdict of wrongful death against Lloyd Jowers, owner of Jim’s Grill, a restaurant across the street from the Lorraine Motel. Although the trial produced considerable testimony that contradicted the original case against Ray, the Justice Department announced in 2000 that its own internal investigation, launched in 1998 at the King family’s request, had failed to ﬁnd sufﬁcient evidence to warrant a further investigation.    **Sources**   Homer Bigarts, ‘‘Leaders at Rites,’’ *New York Times*, 10 April 1968.  Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 2007.  King, ‘‘Drum Major Instinct,’’ in *Knock at Midnight,* eds. Carson and Holloran, 1998.  Mays, Eulogy, 9 April 1968, MLKJP-GAMK.  Pepper, *Orders to Kill*, 1995.  Posner, *Killing the Dream*, 1998. |