

The Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr

—Edward Sanders,
from *Robert Francis Kennedy— a Poem*

March 17, 1968

Kennedy flew to Kansas City
to begin his campaign

How would he be received
was the question on his supporters' minds

He'd chosen to give his first speech at KSU in Manhattan, Kansas

When his plane landed at the KC airport,
and then he was to get aboard the private plane
of Kansas Gov Robert Docking

to fly to Topeka
where there were over a thousand cheering supporters to greet him

March 18

In Manhattan, Kansas
14,500 in the fieldhouse

He told them how
a huge struggle was tormenting America
not for who would rule

but for the heart of the nation—

In the campaign months
Americans would have to make
decisions on what the nation will stand for,
what kind of citizens?

“If you will give me your help, if you will give me your hand,
I will work for you
and we will have a new America.”

It was as if an explosion had occurred
Students surged, shouted, beat chairs together
and pressed toward the candidate
in a hot high-metabolism moil of Yes

Then, the same day, a second speech
at KU's Allen Fieldhouse in Lawrence

with 19,000 on hand

Flying in His Brother's Topcoat

March 18

RFK had been chilled riding in a convertible
and "huddled in his late brother's topcoat"
in the flight back to Washington

talking about the faces of the students

so expecting, so pent-up with
hunger for a differing American time-track

Huge Reception in Los Angeles

March 24, 1968

Those who conspired to kill him no doubt
took notice of the huge crowd in Los Angeles

As Jack Newfield noted in his *Robert Kennedy— A Memoir*
(p. 241)

"later that night, Monday's *Los Angeles Times* hit
the streets with the huge, eight-column,
two-deck headline:

KENNEDY BESIEGED
Senator Gets Wild L.A. Welcome

The lead story, by Carl Greenberg, began:

Senator Robert F. Kennedy was greeted here
Sunday by one of the wildest demonstrations
ever given a political figure in Los Angeles...
The reception Kennedy received here was
uproarious, shrieking and frenzied..."

April 2, 1968

RFK

visited LBJ

at the WH

where the President introduced him
to his grandson, Lyn

RFK

realized that

the Pres would use his persuasion
to prevent him from the nomination

but no longer could fear
that RFK

after his abdication
would bump him.

They said goodbye for
the last time. It was cordial.

(pp. 258-259, *On His Own—RFK 1964-68* by William
vanden Heuvel and Milton Gwirtzman)

Martin Luther King and the Memphis Garbage Workers Strike

Down in Memphis

the garbage workers were

treated like dirt

There were 1,300 of them, mostly black

—low paying jobs, no job security, no insurance

They hauled the garbage around in old leaky leather tubs

on their shoulders

and no place for shelter in the rain

because white folk didn't want them on their porches.

The workers were members of

the American Federation of State

County and Municipal Employees

but the city refused to recognize them

Two workers

got into the barrel of their truck
a big cylinder with
a built-in compactor
during a rain storm

and were crushed

A few days after the crush
there was another rainy day

the mostly white supervisors were permitted to wait in the barns
playing cards till the rain stopped
and were paid for the full day

but 22 black workers were told to go out and collect it
in the rain
or not get paid

They went home
and were paid two hours.
So, on Lincoln's birthday, February 12
they struck

The same day that RFK thunder-voiced at Kansas State
Martin King broke into plans
for the Poor People's March
& came to Memphis
to speak to the strikers

Mayor Loeb had replaced them with scabs
There'd been a protest march
police ran over a women's foot
men rocked the car
police then maced a number of ministers
after which there were daily marches to city hall
& a boycott of downtown

They asked King
to come and help
as busy as he was with the March

He spoke to a huge crowd
and said he would return
in a few days for a General Strike

“I want a tremendous work stoppage,”
 he told them
 “All of you, your families and children,
 will join me & I will lead you on a march
 through the center of Memphis.”

The Poor People's March

The great Martin King at the time
 was leading the plans
 for a March on Washington
 for April 22
 which, had it been allowed to happen,
 might have
 changed America
 for the permanent better
 (which is perhaps
 why he wasn't allowed)

The March on Washington
 was much more truly revolutionary
 than scads of New Left dither
 It would have trembled America
 with its simple mode of
 “jobs, income and a decent life”

3,000 poor people
 blacks, Puerto Ricans, whites, Indians, Mexicans
 would go by caravan to D.C.
 pitch tents and sleep in them
 & each day delegations
 would go to government departments

The numbers wd increase
 to great size
 They'd stay camped out
 till there were results from the gov't.

Memphis Police Spy on King from a Firehouse
as the Fates begin to Spin and Measure
 April 3

Martin King flew to Memphis from Atlanta

and checked into the black-owned Lorraine Motel
where he often stayed

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(It appears that King had been scheduled to sleep
in a room downstairs
out of sight of snipers
but had been moved to
an easy target location
based on a phone call the motel owner had received
urging that he be moved)

Around noon a black detective named Redditt
went to a back room at a nearby fire station
and taped a newspaper to a window
that looked out upon the 3rd-floor balcony
of the Lorraine (King's room)

He cut out holes in the newspaper
then put his binoculars up against them
in order to jot down the license plates
and names of visitors
and, as much as possible,
to note who did what.

The detective was joined by another black patrolman
& between them they could identify
virtually all the
black activists in Memphis

In the early evening of 4-3, not long after 7
James Earl Ray
in role as Eric S. Galt
checked into the New Rebel Motel
in Memphis

A Thrum of Rain evening April 3

A spring rain thrummed the metal roof
of the Masonic Temple
as 2,000 supporters wildly applauded
when Martin King came up the steps
for a glorious speech

at the end of which he spoke with the same tone of

acceptance

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as Malcolm X had

just before the Audubon Ballroom.

“And some began to talk about the threats that were out,” said King
“of what would happen to me

from some of our sick white brothers....

Well, I don't know what will happen now.

We've got some difficult days ahead.

But it really doesn't matter with me now.

Because I've been to the mountaintop!"

There was great applause, with thunder and lightning outside

"And I don't mind. Like anybody I would like to live... a long life.

Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now...

I just want to do God's will! And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain....

And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised land.

I may not get there with you, but I want you to know, tonight,

that we as a people will get to the Promised land!

So, I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything.

I'm not fearing any man!

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

—a speech truly to be listened

& trembled to

The Dire Day of Dream-Doom

April 4, 1968

The dire day of Dream-Doom

whirls with hidden fury

35 years later

for an evil that Evil wants kept in the cauldron

evil'd forth that bright spring Southern day

and just as Akhenaten's name

was chiseled out of

ancient Egypt's memory

so too modern power

has sought to erase what power

did to the great King.

After many years of studying the King case

**Army Security Agency Bugging the
King Party at the Lorraine that Afternoon**

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Though Lenny Bruce's rule # 16 (deny deny deny)
always is utilized
in order to scissor the past
it is fairly certain that the ASA bugged 3 rooms
at the Lorraine that day
including Room 306
King's room

& another room where a meeting with King went on
during the afternoon

**Pulling a Black Police Surveillor
from Fire Station #2**

Black Memphis Police Detective Edward Redditt
(in the 1990s a school teacher in Somerville, Tenn)

at the time of April 4, '68
had been assigned to the intelligence bureau
and reported to a Lt. E. H. Arkin

Redditt was sent with black patrolman
Willie Richmond of the intelligence bureau
to the locker room at the rear of fire station 2
on April 3-4

where they could view the Lorraine Motel
from a window in a rear door

As we have noted they cut holes
in paper placed over the window glass
in order to place binoculars up against them
to monitor the comings and goings
at the motel

On dream-doom day Officer Richmond arrived
between 2 and 3— Redditt was already on duty.

Sometime after 4 pm
Lt. Arkin appeared and asked Redditt
to follow him to police headquarters.

He did, entering a conference room “where he said he saw assembled twenty or more people, many of whom he didn’t recognize. Some were in military uniforms,”

as William Pepper describes on p. 250 of his book called *Orders to Kill*

Chief Holloman told Redditt that a Secret Service agent had flown in from Washington to tell Holloman that a contract had been put out on Redditt’s life and therefore security would be provided for Redditt and family.

Redditt protested, but Holloman ordered him home. & just as Redditt came to his house word came over the radio of the killing.

Ray Checks In to the Rooming House

3:15 pm

James Earl Ray, using the name of Willard checked into a second floor rooming house above Jim’s bar & grill with a bathroom window view down the hall (somewhat obstructed by trees and foliage) of Martin King’s room at the Lorraine Motel

(I wonder if the use of the name Willard was not a twerpish mote of secret police satire since Willard was the name of the hotel in DC in which the FBI had acquired those erotic tapes from early ’64 they compulsively passed around.)

And then at 4 pm, Ray drove to a gun shop in his white Mustang with Alabama plates to purchase some binoculars (or somebody did)



but a later judge (who was an expert at rifles)
pointed out that
Ray's rifle was a pump-action
and would have kicked back
if he had leaned the pump on the sill
as he fired
making it almost impossible
to hit his target as he
stood, maybe with one foot in the bathtub
one foot on the floor
waiting for his brief moment
in history

Pulling the Firemen

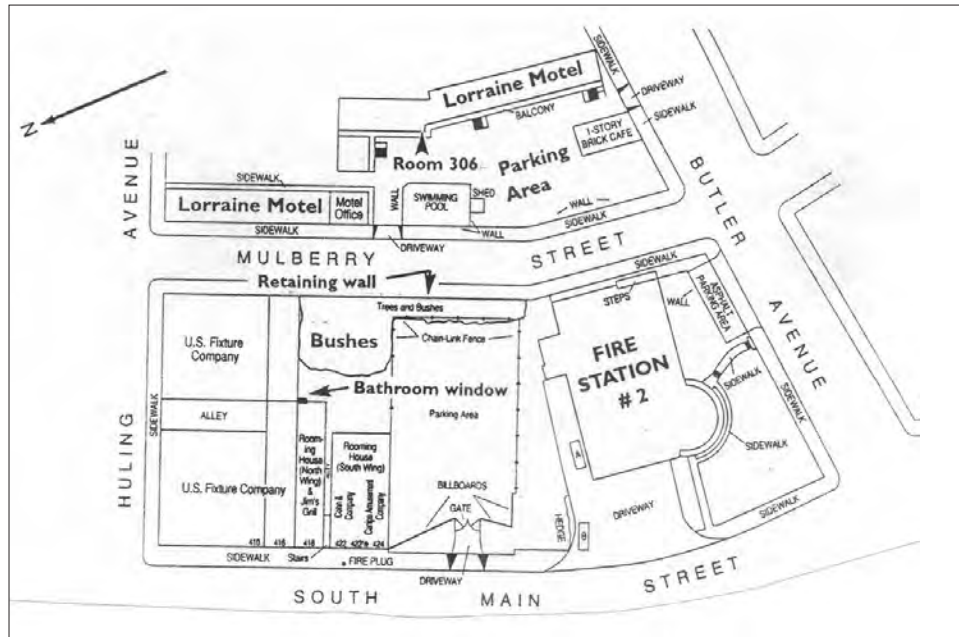
There were only 2 black firemen
at Fire Station #2.

That day they were pulled from duty there
and sent to another station

Filming from the Fire-House Roof

From the roof of Fire House #2
as Douglas Valentine wrote in
his book *The Phoenix Program* (p. 338)

the military intelligence officers, perhaps
 the very ones that Captain Carthel Weeden
 conducted to the roof the previous day
 and who had returned that dream-doom afternoon
 “reportedly watched and took photos
 while King’s assassin moved into position,
 took aim, fired, and walked away.”



William Pepper, author of two historic books on the
 King assassination, uncovered a plan ordered by General
 William Yarborough, assistant chief of staff
 for Army Intelligence.

Under General Yarborough was an Army officer, who also
 worked as a CIA officer, Colonel John Downey

“William Yarborough was the man who gave him the orders
 to organize the assassination of Martin King,” said Pepper
 at a lecture on his work on the King case.

John Downey had previously been President Johnson’s
 briefer on the Vietnam War.

Why would Col. Downey work on an assassination
 of an American Civil Rights leader?

The Colonel’s daughter told Pepper that the Colonel

“honestly believed that Martin King was a danger to the security of the United States, and he had no qualms about organizing that effort because he believed that Martin King was a serious danger”

Downey, in Pepper’s words, “coordinated the whole operation from the 902nd Military Intelligence Group, in the bowels of the Pentagon.”

On hand in Memphis that dire day were two sniper teams, comprising, which Pepper describes as “an Alpha 184 unit, a unit that is normally a sniper unit.”

Through a writer, Steve Tompkins, who had written a long investigative piece on the role of Military Intelligence infiltrating the Civil Rights movement

Pepper arranged for Tompkins to interview several of the snipers.

Pepper: “They laid out their presence in Memphis, where they were, where the two guns were, laid out that Andrew Young was also a target.

“Each sniper had a spotter” in their positions in Memphis. “They were briefed at Camp Shelby at 4:30 in the morning. (Shelby is in southern Mississippi, about 5 hours drive from Memphis.

“They were shown photos of King and Young, and these were the targets. These were enemies of the state. But they were told 'you are not to fire' until you're given orders by your captain.”

The head of the team was on hand.

"They were there, in position.
They described where
Andy Young was,
and Martin on the balcony.

"And all of a sudden there was a shot.
It hit Martin just above the jaw.

"One of the guys said they just thought the other team had shot first, and they had got too anxious or something. But, it was very unlike them,

because they were so highly trained and disciplined.

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These were Special Forces guys.

But the next order they received was to disengage.

They disengaged and

left the area the same way they came in."

—from talk William Pepper gave

at St. Mark's Church, available on YouTube

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ISfWE6dMgw>

King is Murdered

King and Reverend Ralph Abernathy

were in a meeting in room 201

& then, at 5:40 went up the steps

to room 306.

Then, just before 6

King came out onto the balcony

His associates were arrayed down below

& there was a limousine on loan from a

local black funeral home

to take them to dinner

He stood on the balcony

for a minute or two

then back into his room

Abernathy wanted to put on aftershave lotion

King said he'd wait for him on the balcony

where he chatted with people

including young Jesse Jackson of Chicago

It was just at the moment

he was ready to walk down

the iron-edged steps

there was a single shot

and King fell down

blood spurting from his jaw

According to Ralph Abernathy's biography

And the Walls Came Tumbling Down (p. 441)

“the black woman operating the motel switchboard
at the time of the shot

....suffered a heart attack and died,
thereby making outgoing calls impossible.”

—perhaps one should not rule out saxitoxin

Taking Pictures at 6:01

In William Pepper’s book, *Orders to Kill*
he writes (p. 434) about interviewing one
of the two army photographers on the roof of
Fire House #2
across the street from the Lorraine.

At the moment of death
one photographer on the fire-house roof had
his camera trained on King on the balcony

& the other was filming and viewing arriving autos

Bang!

The photographer filming King “said he was surprised
and in rapid succession quickly snapped four or five
photos following Dr. King as he fell to the balcony floor.”

The other photographer, filming arriving autos previously,
“almost instinctively swung his camera from its parking
lot focus to the left and, focusing on the brush area,
caught the assassin (a white man), on film as he
was lowering his rifle. He then took several shots of him
as he was leaving the scene.”

The two military photographers hand-delivered the pictures
to a Military Intelligence officer
but the one who had filmed the shooter
kept the negatives and made another set of prints.

The sniper, Mr. Pepper was told, was not James Earl Ray.

William Pepper describes it:

"What Yarborough knew and Downey didn't necessarily know was that the FBI had been involved in a complementary but similar plan for quite a period of time. Hoover had identified Dr. King back in the middle to late '50s and he was focussed on King as an enemy, that he, Hoover, thought had to be gotten rid of.

"What I've now been able to uncover which has never been revealed, Hoover's number two, who was also his lover, Clyde Tolson, was the man Hoover sent around the country with bags of money to pay for some of the worst types of activity you can imagine, in terms of killings of progressive people in
America.

"Clive Tolson was very much involved with people in Memphis, Tennessee, on the ground, who carried out the assassination of Martin King. There's no question about it, that Tolson was a major planner of this operation.

"Martin was killed by a civilian, firing from the bushes, who was a sharpshooter, a Memphis police officer. He was paid a sum of money to do it. He was the mechanic. That's all he was.

"He's alive, alive and well, and I've confronted him in a non-threatening way, and I've asked him to talk to me (He agreed to meet but then didn't show up.) He took off, and he missed a meeting, and I found out (from a contact) he went to visit his son, in a small town in Virginia. His son works in this small town in Virginia. I said, 'What's this small town in Virginia?'

The answer: "'It's Langley, Virginia.'
Pepper said that the shooter is "a very nasty piece of work, very dangerous guy, even at this age."

A man named Lloyd Jowers owned Jim's Grill, behind the brush area from which Martin was killed. After the fatal shot, the shooter handed the smoking gun to Jowers, who broke it down.

presenting clear sight difficulties

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for someone leaning a pump-action 30.06
on the sill of the window
to focus on King on the balcony

had been cut away

Branch in Front of the Bathroom Window

Pepper interviewed an assistant to
Fire and Police Commissioner Frank Holloman
named Ed Atkinson

who recalled being at police headquarters
after the assassination

with 2 other officers

one of whom said that he had been at the
bathroom window in the boarding house's rear
with 2 FBI agents

One of the FBI guys said that a tree branch
would have to be cut

lest no one would believe that
an assassin could
make the shot

[Many more details of this government murder
are to be found in William Pepper's excellent book of 2003
An Act of State— The Execution of Martin Luther King]

And none of this was known by the
doomed RFK
in the air
on the way to Indianapolis.

Robert Kennedy Recites from *Agamemnon*

His plane was in the air
with tentative word

It landed in Indianapolis
 where he found out for certain

He was making a campaign stop
 The Indiana primary was a few weeks ahead

He drove to the rally
 about a 1000 supporters
 who hadn't yet heard the news

RFK then delivered a spontaneous encomium
 in praise of Martin Luther King
 to a stunned audience

which included these lines:

“My favorite poet was Aeschylus
 He wrote
 ‘In our sleep
 pain
 which cannot forget
 falls
 drop by drop upon the heart
 until
 in our own despair
 against our will

 comes wisdom
 through the awful grace of God”

He'd first read those words
 a few months after Dallas
 when Jacqueline Kennedy had shown him Edith Hamilton's
The Greek Way

He read it carefully, also Hamilton's *Three Greek Plays*.

Did King's death alert Robert Kennedy to the danger
 out there in the gun-batty darkness?
 or did it make him more quietly fatalistic
 in the walled words of Greece

I decided to take a look at the ancient text

Ahh, Robert Kennedy!
 what a thorny cluster of lines
 the bard has made
 his Argive elders chant!

In his translation of *Agamemnon*
 Robert Lowell
 elides together some 23 lines
 (including those the grief-numbered Kennedy spoke)
 into three:

Glory to Zeus, whatever he is:
 he cut off the testicles of his own father,
 and taught us dominion comes from pain!

And Ted Hughes in his translation
 does lines 176-183 as follows:
 (as best I can determine)

The truth
 Has to be melted out of our stubborn lives
 By suffering.
 Nothing speaks the truth,
 Nothing tells us how things really are,
 Nothing forces us to know
 What we do not want to know
 Except pain.
 And this is how the gods declare their love.
 Truth comes with pain.

Not nearly as true to gnarly Aeschylus
 as RFK.

The poet who visits
 the original chorus
 runs into the wall-like obstinance of genius

You have to pound it
 verb by verb, and image by image
 into your pain-hardened brainland

But even after a long and pounding study

how can a bard translate these lines
 with their cretics, iambs and dochmiacs
 in the starkness of current strife & war?

(& did the medieval copyists
 get all the verbs and endings exact?)

I decided to translate a larger section of the chorus
 beginning a few lines before the
 ones Kennedy chanted that stunned afternoon

to try to understand:

Oh Zeus! whoever he is!
 (if this to him is a pleasing
 name to be called)

This is how I name him
 and I am unable to come up with any other
 when I ponder it fully
 except Zeus, and so it's meet to
 hurl this follyful idea
 out of my mind.

Whoever once was great
 teeming with war-hunger
 shall not be said to have ever been alive,
 while he that later grew
 as a conqueror of land
 has come and gone

But someone who sound-mindedly shouts
 victory chants to Zeus,
 he shall build a wisdom of the All—

for Zeus, by leading mortals to
 think things over
 sets them on a useful road:

knowledge comes from suffering
 in magisterial mightiness!

It drip drip drips in sleep
 in front of the heart

—the relentless memory-pain—
 so that even against our will
 a wisdom of soul comes upon us!

thanks to the violent grace
 of our divinities
 in their sacred throne-place of rule
 (their σελμα σεμνον)

—lines 160-183

Be careful, o Robert Kennedy
 Please do not venture forth
 with the soul-searing knowledge of Aeschylus
 making you heedless of the fatal anger

Anger, Grief, Riots

Anger and grief
 and a solid plutonian wall of injustice
 from the earth to the moon

caused big riots in over 125 cities
 nationwide

—Chicago, Baltimore, D.C., Detroit, Boston—

55,000 troops were sent to quell them

A flare o' fire
 as in D.C. where

bayonet-affixed troops
 surrounded the capitol

are you happy, off-oids?

In D.C. April 7
he toured the devastation with Ethel
after the burning and destruction

Reverend Walter Fauntroy of the New Bethel Baptist Church
in Washington, D.C.
had a moment alone with RFK
where he asked him how the campaign was going

Kennedy replied, well, and if he could win Indiana and Nebraska
then it would build and he could win Oregon then California

and if he won California
then he felt he'd get the nomination

He paused, then said
“But there's one problem”

“What's that, Bobby?” asked the Reverend

“I'm afraid there are guns between me and the White House.”

•••••

—from *Robert Francis Kennedy— a Poem*