SECRET

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Open Case

James Earl Ray's plea of guilty and the mini-trial that followed have brought the courtroom drama to a sudden end. But the neat wrap-up of the Ray case does not by any means indicate that all the loose ends of the Martin Luther King assassination have been tidied up. Indeed, the guilty plea and the pro forma trial that followed guarantee that public speculation about the killing will run wild for some time to come.

The evident predilection of a large part of the American public toward elaborate conspiracy theories is certain to be reinforced by the outcome of the Ray case, which effectively prevented a full public airing of the killer's motives. In addition, the conspiracy theory was promoted by Ray himself as the basis for his defense, by means of an authorized account of the killing published in a national magazine, in which the assassin claimed to have been hired to gun down the civil rights leader. And Ray added still more fuel to the conspiracy fire during his brief trial, when he pointedly refused to accept the statements of the prosecuting and defense attorneys that no plot was involved.

These suspicions will not be laid to rest by the assertions of the opposing attorneys that they uncovered no evidence of a conspiracy. Given the nature of the crime and the identity of the victim, the unanswered questions that still surround the case can produce a dangerous infection that could spread malignant suspicion and mistrust through this society.

Perhaps the most effective antidote would be the naming of a presidential commission to look into all aspects of the King assassination and to make a full report to the American public on its findings. Requests for such a study have already come from a number of Negro leaders, including Dr. King's widow.

The history of the Warren Commission has shown that no such study can quiet all the speculation and the rumors. But a thorough probe by a properly selected board could provide most reasonable men with an answer to the question of whether Ray was driven by his own warped passions, or whether other guilty men are now enjoying freedom under cover of the assassin's plea of guilty.

Failure to provide that answer could convert the Ray trial into a very unfortunate legal shortcut.