

## **RAY WATCHING: THE HIGHLY PROTECTED, BRITISH PRISON EXPERIENCE OF MARTIN LUTHER KING'S KILLER**

Fifty years after his assassination, Martin Luther King is well established as a national icon and commemorations will be marked by largely well-intentioned eulogies to the slain advocate of non-violence. The anniversary will also see fresh discussion of the murder itself and the likelihood of a conspiracy that went beyond the lone gunman James Earl Ray (Pepper 2016; Lane and Gregory 2015; Weisberg 2013; Wexler and Hancock 2012; Emison 2014; Melanson 1989; Ray JE 1997; Ray J 2011; Ray JL 2008; Posner 1998). Given the many books discussing Ray's guilt or innocence, it is striking how little attention has been given to Ray's time imprisoned in Britain, which is the focus of this article. Ray's capture occurred at a time when the US government was facing increasing criticism for its Vietnam policy and amidst major demonstrations outside US embassy around Europe. The Labour Party in Britain contained outspoken critics of US policy, and this helped to ensure that the Wilson government remained unresponsive to US request for UK participation, alongside other nations like Australia, in the Vietnam conflict (Dobson 1988, 1990; Dumbrell 1996; Ellis 2001; Young 2001; Boyle 2003; and Vickers 2008). At the same time, Commonwealth immigration to Britain and rising domestic racial tensions ensured that British officials were more than passive spectators of the unfolding civil rights movement in the United States (Layton-Henry 1993). The American experience was largely seen as cautionary; a warning of what Britain might face if it allowed the situation to get out of control. Indeed, both immigration and race relations reform were under consideration by the UK Parliament in 1968.<sup>1</sup> It was in this context that the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4 1968 shocked the world and launched a manhunt. Under a media spotlight, this search spread rapidly from Memphis across the American South, the nation, and subsequently the world.

Eventually, Ray, traveling under one of his several aliases—Ramon George Sneyd, was arrested at London's Heathrow Airport on June 8 (Sides 2010).

The assassination had immediately sparked a wave of uprisings in over a hundred different cities, including the nation's capital as African Americans expressed their fury (Risen 2009). By early June, a fragile calm had returned only to be rocked again by the assassination of Bobby Kennedy on June 5. As this murder reawakened memories of President Kennedy's assassination in 1963, as well as King's death, and as Americans reflected on the endemic violence within their society, news broke of the London arrest. While attempting to board a flight to Brussels, Ray was initially apprehended by Detective Philip Birch of Scotland Yard because an "All Ports Warning" had been issued for anyone claiming to travel on the Canadian passport of Ramon Sneyd (Sides 2010: 365-69). Accordingly, Ray was charged with traveling on a false passport and also with failing to have a UK firearms certificate for the .38-calibre Liberty Chief revolver that he was found to have, on his arrest. These charges ensured his detention, during which time the US authorities pursued a request for extradition. Ultimately, it was July 18 before Ray was placed aboard a C-135 USAF transport plane at Lakenheath Air Base in Suffolk and flown back to face trial in Memphis. Ray had somewhat unexpectedly announced that he was not going to contest the extradition any further on July 16 ("News in Brief," 1968). Thus, King's suspected killer spent forty days in captivity in the UK, and using records from the UK National Archives that collate documents largely from Wandsworth prison, what follows will establish the extraordinary measures taken to ensure Ray's safety and consider their significance.<sup>2</sup> Given that the measures were taken by a British Labour government, largely at the insistence of the US government, the episode forms part of the history of the so-called "special relationship," and it illustrates how even an embattled American government was able to make demands of a foreign government. This article will ultimately consider why the Labour government acceded to US wishes.

As already indicated, most of the literature on the King assassination consists of attempts to establish that a larger conspiracy lay behind the crime, even to the point of exonerating Ray. Such claims only relate to Ray's time in England insofar as they raise the question as to how he was able to fund his escape to such an extent that he was able to travel internationally at a time when air travel was relatively expensive. Ray had traveled via Canada to London and then to Lisbon before returning again to London and seeking passage to Belgium ("Portugal Pact," 1968). During these travels he attempted to reach African states like Rhodesia, Angola, the breakaway Nigerian state of Biafra, and the Congo, where he hoped to serve as a mercenary (Bigart, 1968). In the context of acute US official concern, the British government worked hard to ensure Ray's safe return and trial for the alleged assassination of Dr. King. From the American side, this obsession with ensuring there was a trial that ended in a guilty verdict had two key components. First, there was the belief that this was essential to maintain the fragile peace in America's ghettos. News of Ray's arrest actually reached America while many people were watching the televised funeral of Senator Bobby Kennedy, and the *New York Times* reported that in Harlem the news brought "a sense of relief bordering on joy" ("Harlem's Anguish" 1968: 1). Secondly, there was the realization that a successful attack on Ray, the prime suspect in this killing would reinforce the suspicion of government complicity in King's assassination. Jack Ruby's murder of Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas after the Kennedy assassination in 1963, captured live on television, remained in people's minds, and claims that Oswald had been part of a larger conspiracy had garnered headlines in 1968. British motivation for the remarkable series of steps taken will be probed later, but first the details of the regime put in place to protect Ray deserve consideration, not least for the bitter irony that two states—the UK and the US—proved able to protect an assassin, whereas the US authorities, especially the FBI, had expended their resources harassing rather than protecting Martin Luther King (Garrow 1981).

The security measures taken were conspicuous from the moment of arrest. The Cannon Row police station where Ray (alias Sneyd) was initially held was sealed off with road blocks on both Cannon Row itself and Derby Gate (“No Quick Extradition,” 1968: 1). Reporters and all members of the public entering Bow Street Magistrates’ Court on June 10 were closely searched. London *Times* reporter Peter Waymark told readers that the detective searching his briefcase had asked him why he needed the scissors inside. Waymark explained that they were for press clippings and showed his press card before being admitted. He added that none of his experienced colleagues could recall being searched in this way before “Murder Warrant,” 1968: 1. American newspapers reported that while Ray was kept in custody on British charges, a further warrant was issued for his arrest in connection with King’s murder in Tennessee Schmidt 1968: 1.

Prison records show that Ray under the name of Ramon George Sneyd was remanded to Brixton Prison after his brief first appearance at Bow Street Magistrate’s Court. He was then transferred to Wandsworth Prison to ensure greater security. Brixton held a larger number of remand prisoners and this meant that it had more numerous visitors (“Sneyd Moved,” 1968: 1). There were fewer outside callers to Wandsworth where Ray was first examined by the prison doctor who took a medical history and concluded that the prisoner was in good health. The doctor also found no obvious psychiatric abnormality but in Home Office records this finding was supplemented in the written report by extracts taken from US sources that recorded that an earlier psychiatric assessment in October 1966, had detected a “sociopathic” personality type with “anxiety and depressive features.” A further Missouri prison assessment in December 1966 reported “obsessive-compulsive” symptoms. Weighed on four separate occasions during his stay, Ray gained 8 pounds in weight while in UK custody. The British were determined Ray would be returned not just unharmed but in optimal shape.

Accordingly, he was seen by the prison medical officer twice daily as part of a constant monitoring of his condition ("Medical Record).

On June 13, Home Secretary James Callaghan agreed to the commencement of extradition proceedings ("Extradition Move," 1968: 3). British officials attended meetings at the US Embassy where they met with the Assistant Attorney-General Fred Vinson and the Embassy's legal attaché, FBI agent John Minnich to agree arrangements for Ray. Minnich confided that everyone in the US government from the President down knew that if anything were to happen to Ray, "Nothing would persuade the American public of the validity of the reasons given for any failure, and that disorders would unquestionably follow ("Mannock Report," 1968)." In view of the scale of disorder that the US had experienced in the immediate aftermath of King's death, the safe return and swift prosecution of his assassin was a government priority. Ray's family also felt that he was in danger. The Associated Press reported that John Larry Ray had declared that the only reason his brother James would have killed King was if he were paid a lot of money, adding: "And those who paid him won't want him sitting in a courtroom telling everything he knows" ("Brother Fears," 1968: 76). The threats to Ray's safety were compounded by his track-record of escaping from prison. British authorities were warned that he had escaped in March 1967 and alerted to the fact that at his last prison, drugs had been used "to impregnate clothing in order to produce a situation helpful to prisoners." As a precaution, UK prison authorities provide Ray with two civilian suits and oversaw a change of clothes once a day around one of his exercise periods ("Mannock Report," 1968).

Faced with the twin threat of associates who might seek to aid Ray's escape and enemies who might try to harm him, prison authorities were advised to monitor all visitors closely. Wandsworth's Governor was to contact the Home Office before authorizing any visit. It was accepted that Ray had the right to legal counsel, and he was granted legal aid initially, but

even members of his legal team were searched to establish precisely what was being brought into Ray's cell. The US government's level of anxiety can be gauged from their request that a more thorough investigation be undertaken of building around the prison to exclude the possibility of a sniper attack on Ray's cell or any other room to which he might be taken from a vantage point outside (Mannock Report 1968). They also requested that strict procedures prevent any unauthorized person from approaching Ray inside the prison, specifically in transit to the exercise yard and that similar precautions should preclude efforts to intercept him during his transportation to and from court appearances. Press reports on his court appearances allude to "a circle of heavily built Special Branch detectives, some of them armed," that moved with the defendant as he walked from the dock to the witness box in the Bow Street court-room. "One stood next to him. Nine others shielded him from everyone except the magistrate and the lawyers" (Jordan 1968:5). The American government specifically feared a possible helicopter escape and consequently, the British officials agreed that Ray was to be removed from the exercise yard immediately if any low-flying aircraft were detected (Mannock Report 1968).

The prison authorities had already ensured that Ray was kept in a separate cell reserved for "special category" prisoners while on remand ("Orders for Reception," 1968). However, records indicate that in addition, the wing of the prison that housed his cell was cleared of other prisoners whenever Ray was moved. Routine appointments, such as medical examinations, were conducted in Ray's cell and if he left the cell, he was to be strip-searched on return with close attention paid to his clothing. In addition, Ray was to have guards with him in his cell at all times ("Instructions for Supervision," 1968). They were instructed that their "grave responsibilities" were to guard against escape, suicide, and assassination. These written instructions stressed that they must stay with the prisoner no matter what he was doing, including bathing and using the lavatory. The cell was fitted with an alarm but in

addition each guard had a radio with its own security call sign. The security detail was to be visited in Ray's cell by a chief prison officer half-hourly and hourly by a member of the Governor's staff. Guards were to record anything that might be of importance in an occurrence book, and their roster was to be staggered to ensure that no two officers commenced or ended their time with the prisoner concurrently. A further prison officer, equipped with a radio, was to be stationed at all times within 20 yards of the cell window.

Ray's exercise breaks were meticulously monitored ("Instructions for Exercise," 1968). The exercise was to be scheduled at no regular time nor for any fixed period but subject to five minutes' notice and varied until the prisoner's daily allowance was met. The exercise yard was to be searched before and after each session and the landing outside the cell and passages leading to the yard cleared of unauthorized personnel. If rain prevented use of the yard, the E Wing landing was to be used. While walking in the yard, the prisoner was to be accompanied by the duty officers alongside him at all times. The officer previously assigned to duty near the cell window was required to take a position at the entrance to the yard that allowed him to have both the yard and its surroundings within his field of vision. He would then return to his previous position. During exercise periods outside the cell, the cell itself was to be searched and any occurrence recorded in the log. Extra dog patrols were to be on duty at the perimeter during each exercise break. Officers were to ensure that the prisoner did not pick up small sharp objects in the yard that might be used in a suicide attempt.

While wary of a suicide attempt, the graver threat was believed to come from others and so all visitors were to be subject to close scrutiny. The solicitors appointed to act on Ray's behalf in relation to UK law were Michael Dresden & Company, and no one was to be admitted without their letter of authority (Mannock Report 1968). This policy was strengthened by instructions that no one was to be admitted until their permission to visit Ray had been cleared with both the Governor and Scotland Yard. In embassy conversations, it

was agreed that an American attorney, Mr. Fred Schwartz, was to be denied entry and that the same restriction applied to Ray's brother, Gerald (Jerry). Anyone cleared to visit the prisoner was required to leave heavy coats and all parcels or bulky objects at the Gate security office, and no items were to be accepted for the prisoner (Instructions for Visitors, 1968). Any items brought in for Ray were to be reported to the Deputy Governor, who was also required to monitor and censor all outgoing and incoming mail.

The solicitor assigned to Ray was Michael Eugene, who first met his client in Brixton after he had been remanded (Sides 2010: 377-78). Initially, Ray insisted that he was the Canadian Ramon George Sneyd and that this was a case of mistaken identity; he was not James Earl Ray. Eugene explained that he would represent Ray in relation to UK offences and the concurrent extradition proceedings and enquired if there was anyone he should contact. Blithely, the man calling himself Sneyd replied that Eugene should call his brother and when asked for a name and address, responded that his brother was called Jerry Ray and lived in the Chicago area. The bemused English attorney took down Jerry Ray's contact details and listened while his client gave him a list of prominent US lawyers who should be contacted. Sneyd, who had been granted legal aid because he lacked funds to pay for counsel, told a perplexed Eugene that money was no object. Even if it were \$100,000, he could raise it.

By June 18, an extradition hearing had been set for June 27<sup>th</sup> on the understanding that if an extradition order were granted, the charges against Ray or Sneyd in the UK would be rendered moot. Extradition itself was not automatic and was generally governed by the Extradition Act of 1870 with further qualifications according to specific treaties ("Extradition," 1968: 21). Under the 1931 Treaty with the United States, British courts could grant extradition only if US authorities presented evidence that was judged to be likely to have prompted a trial under British law. Moreover, a person extradited to face a specific charge under the treaty could not then be charged with other offences not specified in the



extradition application. Once his true identity had been confirmed, Ray could have been readily extradited on the basis of his being an escaped prisoner. However, it was obviously more important that he be returned to face murder charges in the King assassination case. To be sure of securing his return, the US instigated two concurrent extradition requests. The high public profile of the case and its political significance raised the possibility that Ray might contest extradition as a “political” prisoner who was unlikely to receive a fair trial. Article 6 of the treaty granted any fugitive protection from political prosecution (Weisberg 2013: 16). When one considers the cumulative time and expense that Ray’s extradition cost, one has to wonder why the British government did not use its powers under the Alien Act to expel Ray as an undesirable on the basis of his attempt to travel on a forged passport. This would have prompted his rapid return to the US where he could have been summarily arrested. Even this process would have needed proof of his American identity as distinct from his claimed Canadian one. However, once fingerprints for the escaped prisoner Ray were compared to those of the arrested Sneyd, the fraudulent nature of the identity claim was proven.

To use the Alien Act to expedite matters and evade the extradition procedure would have laid the Wilson government open to accusations that they were subservient to the Americans and had not protected Ray’s civil rights. Hostile writers, notably Harold Weisberg, have interpreted the conduct of the British government precisely in these terms (2013: 16-18). Weisberg argues that the British refusal to allow Ray’s chosen American attorney Arthur Haynes to confer with his client until after the initial extradition order was made, and their subsequent refusal to grant him legal aid to appeal that ruling constituted what he terms a “kind of repayment for American aid” (18). Such reasoning is tendentious, but demonstrates that the UK’s involvement in Ray’s safe return can be seen as an attempt to placate a powerful ally, especially since the Wilson government’s repeated refusal to commit troops or other military personnel to the Vietnam conflict had soured relations with the Johnson White

House (Ellis 2001). The full context is revealing. First, there was the intense international outcry at King's murder, which made Ray's arrest front page news. Then there was the concurrent concern over the state of British race relations symbolized by the Labour government's pending Race Relations bill and the reaction to Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech, delivered on April 20 1968; just 16 days after the assassination and while American cities were wracked by racial violence ("Powell: stop them," 1968: 3). Powell's speech had elicited considerable public support, even while it had been condemned by the Conservative Party leadership under Edward Heath (Yates 1968: 8). Commentators feared that the racial violence dramatically televised in America represented Britain's future unless it took steps to improve community relations. In these circumstances, it would have been remarkable if the Home Office had sided firmly with Ray, bending conventions on prison visitation rights and covering the sizeable legal costs for an appeal process that could go to the House of Lords. Despite dissimilarities, Ray's potential claim for political asylum drew comparison at the time to the earlier case of Dr. Robert A. Soblen, who had been convicted of espionage in the US but fled while on bail ("Problems in extradition," 1968: 3). In London, Soblen had appealed for asylum as a political prisoner and taken a fatal overdose of barbiturates rather than face deportation (Haynes and Klehr 2006: 225-27). But while the latter may be seen as evidence of the special relationship of the Kennedy-Macmillan years, the Ray case indicates nothing more than a politic choice; why offend an already irritated ally and do so in support of what looked like a very bad cause?

Accusations of government interference circulated at the time in any case because Ray was not able to see his preferred American attorney. Among the lawyers Ray had mentioned to Eugene was Arthur Hanes, an Alabama attorney who first came to public prominence as a political figure in that ardently segregationist state. In 1963, Hanes had been mayor of Birmingham when Martin Luther King led a celebrated nonviolent protest campaign that

helped to galvanize a national coalition of conscience against racial segregation. According to one account on June 14 1968, Eugene phoned the law firm of Hanes & Hanes and spoke with its senior partner, explaining Sneyd/Ray's predicament (McMichael 2015). He advised Hanes that his client had written a letter requesting Hanes to act on his behalf. Hanes declared that he would look out for the letter but also enquired if Eugene's client had the means to pay fees and costs. Eugene said that "He gave me that indication, sir" (McMichael: location 253). Home Office records report that Eugene visited Ray at 2.45pm that day and given the time difference, he could have then placed a call to Hanes in Alabama (McMichael: location 251). As we know, the prison was keeping a record of Ray's correspondence. This indicates that the first letter that Ray sent to Hanes was postmarked 19 June whereas the first letter received from Hanes & Hanes was dated 18 June 1968 (Record of Letters 1968). Following Eugene's earlier phone call, therefore, it was the American attorney who took the initiative. US records indicate that Hanes tried unsuccessfully to pull strings to get a passport outside of normal office hours using his previous background as an FBI agent on June 16 (McMichael 2015: location 253). The next day he called a press conference outside his Alabama offices to announce that he was heading to London to serve as attorney for a prisoner about whom he claimed to know nothing. As a former mayor of Birmingham, Hanes' remarks drew widespread radio and TV coverage, but also bafflement. The King murder trial would be in Memphis Tennessee and any defendant would logically seek an attorney registered to practice in that state. If the logic of a local lawyer had relevance across different American states, it had still greater pertinence between separate nations. At the four-star Royal Lancaster Hotel near Hyde Park, London on June 20 Hanes gave a further press conference (McMichael: location 278). Asked if he would be allowed to see his client, Hanes conceded that this was unlikely since he was not licensed to practice law in the UK, but he was here to offer moral support. The press then asked who was footing the bill and Hanes insisted that he

was certainly not working *pro bono*; he expected to be paid. Reporters were well aware that Hanes's most recent and notorious case had been to defend the Klansmen accused of the murder of Viola Liuzzo. Mrs. Liuzzo had been a volunteer helping to drive marchers back home after the Selma-to-Montgomery march in 1965, when she was shot to death (Stanton 2000; May 2005).

In defending the Klansmen accused of Liuzzo's murder, Hanes had repeated in court the slurs and scurrilous accusations made by the white supremacist press against the Detroit housewife. Hence, the press asked Hanes if he was taking the current case as a segregationist lawyer. Hanes resented the inference. "You don't label liberal lawyers 'integrationist,'" he complained (McMichael 2015: location 278). The next day Hanes applied to visit Ray in prison and as he had anticipated, his application was denied. He was also informed that his putative client had less than £200 so was in no position to cover Hanes's costs and fees. It has subsequently been alleged that Hanes had struck a deal with journalist William Bradford Huie who was keen to obtain exclusive access to the Ray story. Huie had made a lucrative career as a "check-book journalist," writing sensational accounts of racial crimes, beginning with the confessions of the killers of Emmett Till after a Mississippi jury had found them not guilty. Pate McMichael (2015) has recently outlined the deal that allied Huie and Hanes. Huie would get the story with lucrative cinematic rights, and in return Hanes would get his fees covered and maintain his status as one of the leading attorneys for white supremacist groups. During a brief initial appearance in relation to his extradition on June 27, Ray showed that he was not going to remain a passive subject in the process. From his seat in the courtroom he objected to the testimony given by Detective Chief Superintendent Thomas Butler, head of Scotland Yard's Flying Squad. Through his barrister, Roger Frisby, Ray told the court that Butler had falsely testified that when confronted with the allegation that he was James Earl Ray, Sneyd had said "Oh God, I feel so trapped" (Borrell, 1968: 2). Frisby presented the case

against the extradition requests by first seeking to establish that the request in relation to the Missouri prison escape was inadmissible on the technical grounds that the treaty stipulated that the offence should be robbery with violence whereas his client was convicted on a charge of robbery with a dangerous or deadly weapon. On the second extradition request, Frisby questioned Ray in court to establish that he had no personal relationship with Dr. King and presented the testimony of a British journalist who had been to Memphis to establish the political climate there. The latter confirmed that King had been widely disliked by whites for his advocacy of racial equality. Were it proven that his client had killed Dr. King, Frisby argued, his motivation was not personal, but political, and as such was explicitly excluded by the extradition treaty (O'Callaghan 1968: 1). Before the hearing adjourned, the presiding magistrate indicated his concern that Frisby's reasoning seemed to imply that the murder of any controversial public figure would have to be deemed a political act. Among the sworn testimony presented by American authorities were statements by three Memphis residents identifying Ray as the person seen close to the crime scene on April 4. Indicative of official fears on the American side, each of these witnesses had been removed from their homes and placed under police protection when reporters went in search of them in Memphis on June 28 (Waldron 1968: 25).

When proceedings resumed on July 2 Chief Magistrate Frank Milton indicated that the case for extradition had been accepted ("Magistrate Makes Order," 1968: 3). On the basis of the verbal and affidavit evidence, he felt that Ray would have faced a trial under English law. He also ruled that the US had demonstrated that the man identifying himself as Ramon George Sneyd was in fact James Earl Ray. He rejected the defense claim that the offence for which Ray was imprisoned in Missouri was not governed by the treaty and he further ruled that to grant Ray exemption on the grounds that his actions were politically motivated would be to "extend the meaning of the Act far too far" (3) Ray made a further public statement in court

complaining that Chief Superintendent Butler's comments had been reported in the US press and thereby prejudiced his chances of a fair trial. He also complained about the decision to exclude his US attorney Arthur Hanes, which he attributed to the Home Secretary to whom he had applied for permission to see Hanes and received no response. Given the grave circumstances he faced, he felt he should be allowed greater "freedom to write and receive visits from people" (3).

The magistrate indicated that the extradition order would be stayed for 15 days to allow Ray a further chance to contest it. Ray had indeed written a number of letters of complaint; one directed to the then leader of the Opposition, Edward Heath, had actually been forwarded by the Deputy Governor to the Home Secretary (R.G. Sneyd 1968). Guards report that Ray was an avid newspaper reader, although his main interest was in any items relating to himself. The detective sergeant who accompanied him to court appearances, Alexander Eist—the two men handcuffed together at all times while in transit—has reported that Ray came to see him as a friend because he was able to get him American magazines and newspapers (Sides 2010: 379). Ray had worked for the George Wallace campaign in California and continued to follow its progress. From the British press, Ray could also have gleaned that the Opposition, the Conservative Party was home to politicians like Powell who were similarly hostile to racial integration, and this, alongside the lack of an immediate response from the Home Secretary, may have prompted his letter to Edward Heath. In this letter Ray claimed that the Home Office had declined his request to see his attorney Hanes "on the grounds of security." Ray wrote that this was "a very lame excuse" as they had "a special place here for such purposes" and described the partition arrangement with a small window which required "you talk through heavy screens" (Sneyd 1968). Ray refers to a previous Home Secretary Duncan Sandys as someone who could confirm this for Heath, and this supports the idea that Ray's newspaper reading had made him familiar with UK politics. He ends his letter with a Cold

War claim that “even in Iron Curtain countries you can have visitors from one’s own country.” The letter also demonstrates that while in his interaction with the guards immediately surrounding him Ray was routinely described as polite and cooperative, he was also shrewd enough to seek to manipulate the wider political context.

Hanes eventually got to visit Ray on July 5, accompanied by Michael Eugene. On the same day the Scottish MP Robert MacLennan asked the Home Secretary James Callaghan for clarification of his refusal to allow Hanes to visit and Callaghan’s written answer indicated that he first received a petition from Ray about Hanes on June 25 and that he authorized an ordinary visit since Hanes did not qualify for treatment as a special visitor under Home Office guidelines (Callaghan 1968). Hanes visited Ray again on July 6 when his request for time alone with his client was denied. Despite this, Hanes told reporters that he had no cause to complain about the restrictions placed upon him by the UK authorities “because that’s the system here” (“Lawyer Says,” 1968: 38).

Following the extradition decision, the expectation was that Ray’s legal team would contest the order and the basis for their challenge would be that the extradition treaty forbade removal where the offence was political in character (“Ray Will Plead,” 1968: 10). If Ray ceased to maintain the fiction that he was actually Ramon Sneyd, it might be possible for him to explain that his assassination of Martin Luther King was politically motivated and he could have cited his commitment to the George Wallace presidential bid as evidence that he was vehemently opposed to King’s demands for racial equality. Of course, to do so would have been to plead guilty to the assassination charge and he had instructed his American attorney Arthur Hanes that he intended to plead not guilty. Thus, any elaboration of the “political” case against extradition was hampered by Ray’s decision to maintain his innocence at this point. Once back in the US, he did eventually enter a guilty plea before the court in Memphis.

As already demonstrated, British authorities established a regimen to ensure Ray's safety based on constant surveillance. Thus, prison records include the guards' reports on Ray's state of mind and conduct. However, in reading these documents we must bear in mind the detailed instructions given to the guards, who have been left in no doubt that this is no ordinary prisoner and that they must maintain the utmost vigilance. On June 12, in an otherwise uneventful afternoon and evening tour of duty, his guard reported that Ray appeared "in good humour and respectful." (Reports to Governor 1968) He discussed the *Daily Telegraph's* report of his transfer to Wandsworth and the guard felt that he displayed some anxiety about references to the imminent "arrival of his finger prints from the U.S.A." The same guard also noted his interest in firearms, observing that he took "great delight in retelling his use of them while serving in the American army as a military policeman." Ray had also talked about the Robert Kennedy assassination suggesting that the "Black Moslem group" was involved and implying that it was also "behind the Martin Luther King shooting." On a later occasion (June 16) Ray made a number of disparaging remarks about Bobby Kennedy, accusing him of "double dealing and getting rid of many of his enemies by making false charges against them, especially when he was Attorney General" (Reports 1968). His allusion to Kennedy's pursuit of Jimmy Hoffa and other figures associated with organized crime (Neff 2015) may reflect gossip within the criminal underworld that Ray knew, but also the conspiracy theories widely circulating about the Kennedy assassination by 1968, many of which owed at least some of their credibility to the pre-trial murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby (Scheim 1988; Davis 1993). But primarily his views reflected the reality that Bobby Kennedy's tenure as Attorney General had "hurt" individuals close to Ray such as his one-time accomplice Arthur Rife. Reflecting on the closure of local gambling and prostitution rings, Rife told sociologist George McMillan: "There used to be a lot of money in



Quincy [where he and Ray operated] till Kennedy got in there. I wouldn't shoot him, but I hate him for that reason" (McMillan 1976: 146).

The next day (June 13), after a visit from Michael Eugene, Ray was reported as being "in a happy mood," pleased at the prospect of staying in the UK for up to three months if he contested the extradition request (Reports 1968). Politics remained one of Ray's preferred topics of conversation and he implied that his "present plight" might be due to politics, but the guard also noted that he qualified this comment by saying that "Martin Luther King's assassination had been organized by one of his own lieutenants to gain control of the organization's funds." The guards got the impression that he was not greatly worried by the King murder charge in itself but was concerned that it might be changed to one of conspiracy to murder. Such comments clearly addressed political choices to be made by the Home Office. Technically, if the US government subsequently charged Ray with conspiracy to murder, the extradition would be invalid since this charge was not stated in either of the two applications for extradition. However, such comments can be readily taken by conspiracy theorists as signs that Ray had not acted alone.

Another topic that Ray felt free to talk about with his guards was prison life. On June 15 the guard related Ray's discussion of his previous prison experiences (Reports 1968). After complaining that his Missouri sentence for robbery was "illegal," Ray chose not to disclose the method of escape he had used, saying wryly: "Could come in handy again." Charged with armed robbery, Ray had insisted on acting as his own legal counsel, and had alleged that his confession, which he later repudiated in court, had been beaten out of him. He unsuccessfully appealed his 20-year sentence on the basis that his testimony had been obtained by violence and intimidation (McMillan 1976: 162-63). He also boasted to his British guards that he was "100 miles away before they began looking for him," and revealed that he had a radio with him that enabled him to track his pursuers (Reports 1968).

The next day Ray asked his guards whether the escapes of “Great Train Robber” Ronnie Biggs (1965) and Soviet spy George Blake (1966) had prompted tighter security arrangements (Reports to Governor). It had in fact prompted the Mountbatten Report and a further report on the best policy for long-term incarceration of the most dangerous prisoners was submitted in 1968 (Admiral 1966; Radzinowitz 1968). However, Ray’s comments were read as underlining his interest in escaping, which he confirmed with the observation: “Well, I guess even with you two guys here they could bust me out.” Consequently, the guards informed their superiors that Ray was showing an active interest in escaping. They also reported that he had discounted suicide, saying to them on one occasion, “If they want me dead, they will have to kill me, I won’t help them out” (Reports 1968). Prompted by their superiors, the guards dutifully reported all suspect comments that might signal an increased risk of an escape attempt, and this amplified the wariness inherent to the prisoner-guard relationship.

Ray’s American prison experience had been very different from the 24-hour constant monitoring he was experiencing in Britain. In his systematic profile of Ray, George Macmillan (1976: 166-68) offers a detailed portrait of the startling state of affairs in Jefferson City Prison, St Louis during Ray’s time there. Drawing on a joint Missouri legislative committee study from 1964, Macmillan describes a prison that had seen 145 stabbings between 1961 and 1963 (at a time when a well-run prison would have reported only one a year on average). The psychiatric unit was run by a man discharged from the armed forces for emotional instability. The hospital allowed a private doctor to conduct questionable experiments on prisoners and also housed a luxury suite for two prisoners who were the prison’s crime bosses. These were just the more conspicuous signs that the prison authorities were not in control. According to Macmillan, by the time Ray was admitted in 1960 the power relationship was so inverted that guards were buying their safety from key prisoners

with favors and gifts, and this situation was compounded by the low pay of prison staff, many of whom had to work a second job to make ends meet.

In this context, Ray, who had first developed his skills as a black marketeer while stationed in postwar Bremerhaven, Germany, was able to establish himself as what in prison parlance is called a “merchant” (Macmillan 1976: 107-09; 171-72). He had a job in the kitchen which enabled him to obtain foodstuffs that had black market value. According to former inmates, he also operated a racket that exchanged prison script for hard currency, and advanced loans. However, his most lucrative trade was in drugs: amphetamine in particular. Ray is said to have amassed savings that he was able to smuggle out to his siblings with the complicity of a prison guard (179-83). Macmillan calculated that it would have been possible for Ray to have stashed away through this trade all the money he then used during his period on the run before and after the King assassination (196-99). The Congressional Committee that investigated the King assassination concluded that while some of Ray’s funds came from drug trafficking while in Mexico and California, the idea of his accumulating funds while in prison should be discounted in favor of the theory that on July 13 1967, James and his older brother John had successfully robbed a bank in Alton, a small town in southern Illinois that the Rays knew well from childhood (House Select Committee 1978: 5c).

Ray’s multiple periods in jail had taught him many things and the most important was how to behave there so as to be safe and able to hustle without detection. British guards repeatedly reported that he was cooperative, respectful and polite. However, the drugs he once traded, he had also used (Macmillan 1976: 181). A hypodermic syringe was found in his London lodgings, and his guards reported intermittently that he found it hard to relax and settle unless he was sleeping (Reports 1968). They also reported that he had started doing press-ups to improve his muscle tone and get fit, possibly in preparation for an escape bid. One guard reported that he had declared that once he was able to do one hundred he would be ready, and

had added ominously “they can’t watch me all the time” [June 21]. The same guard related a conversation in which Ray said he was going to have to complain about the razor blades, and when the guard asked why, Ray joked that he had to have something to complain about when the Governor came around.

The respect and cooperation therefore that Ray gave to his British captors was never complete. As the days passed, the constant monitoring began to irritate him especially as he learned via newspaper accounts that his various aliases had been tracked by the authorities. On June 21 when he returned in the afternoon from exercise he became incensed by the fact that various personal papers had been taken for inspection by the Deputy Governor. When these were returned, Ray tore them up and put them down the toilet, saying “if he wants to read them, they are down there, if he is so interested” (Reports 1968). This was around the time that he was expecting a visit from Arthur Hanes, whom he had asked to act as his attorney, and whose arrival in the UK had been reported in the press. The following morning (June 22), the guard reported Ray as being “withdrawn and sullen and rather restless.” The guard concluded his report by stating that in his opinion Ray would certainly try to escape if the opportunity arose and that his attitudes were typical of those who have been institutionalized; in the guard’s words: “he thinks he can beat the laws of any country he is in.” Yet even this mood did not last long since the afternoon duty guard reported that Ray became more talkative after supper and remained “polite and cooperative.” The lack of contact with his American lawyer remained a concern for Ray. However there is no evidence that the reluctance to admit Hanes was due to active collusion between the UK and US authorities. The US was required to present findings already obtained through witness statements and forensic evidence in order to secure Ray’s extradition. It was not permitted to use evidence obtained in the UK. Consequently, the two legal processes of extradition and trial were ideally to be kept separate. If Arthur Hanes was Ray’s choice as attorney for the

murder trial, his role depended on the outcome of extradition. Hanes's profile as a lawyer eager to represent individuals charged with racially motivated murders and as a segregationist mayor of an infamously racist city certainly did not encourage the British authorities to waive customary practices. Ray's agitation over his inability to see Hanes reflects therefore his misunderstanding of legal processes, and his eagerness to learn via a sympathetic source the extent to which the network of white supremacist groups might mobilize to support him. At the same time his discontent reinforced the tense atmosphere that the special security measures generated.

The morning guard continued to report some hostility on June 24 which he attributed to a growing anxiety over the looming prospect of his return to the US and "the lack of communication between himself and his American attorney" (Reports 1968). The change of mood was confirmed by the afternoon shift, whose report noted that Ray had asked about the punishment regime in British prisons and had shown interest in whether the bar on the toilet [a substitute for a chain] could be worked free. This guard advised that the prisoner should be watched carefully for the next few days, yet added that he remained polite and cooperative. By June 25, all guards were reporting that Ray was in better spirits. His attendance at court on June 27 seemed also to improve his mood although he told his guards that a lot of lies were said at court, presumably referring to the comments of Chief Superintendent Butler. After the extradition orders had been granted, during the period when Ray should have been working to frame an appeal against going back to the US, guards reported that he remained in good spirits. In a lengthy report on July 3, the afternoon guard reported that Ray talked openly of an offer he had received from a US political group promising to cover all his legal expenses in the US. Their attorney, who was not Hanes, had written to tell him that his initial investigations made him confident that he could prove Ray's innocence. With this prospect of help on his return, Ray felt that he would probably only remain in the UK for a further two

weeks. Finally, as a sign of his resurgent self-confidence, Ray had talked about how in the US there were various ways in which prisoners could bribe guards to assist them, especially because they needed extra money. He added pointedly that he supposed English guards might be the same (Reports 1968). Ray may simply have been joking in a teasing fashion, but in the context of the guards' instructions, his remarks were deeply suspect and had to be reported.

The surveillance regime meant that all meetings were monitored to check what was discussed. On July 5, the guards filed a report on Attorney Hanes's first visit (Reports 1968). They noted that Hanes was keen to tell Ray, whom initially he dutifully addressed as Sneyd, that he had been keeping a scrapbook of all the press coverage and was confident that Sneyd was going to make more money than he had ever dreamed. To this, Ray replied disingenuously that he wasn't interested in money. When Hanes asked whether Sneyd was being well treated, he said he was but that he wasn't used to English food. Hanes also told Sneyd repeatedly that it was very important that he say nothing further and especially that he should say nothing further when in court; thus signaling that he felt Ray's public challenge to the detective's testimony had been a mistake. From past experience, Hanes may have concluded that a defendant's challenging of police testimony was likely to bolster its credibility rather than undermine it. The listening guards also recorded that Hanes and Ray differed on the question of whether to appeal the extradition order. By this stage, Ray was keen to return to the US seemingly because he believed this would end the continuous press coverage of his case which he felt was prejudicial. He may also have grown weary of the intensive security regime, and notwithstanding his response to Hanes, he was probably eager to see what financial and promotional opportunities awaited him. With the British solicitor Michael Eugene, who would presumably oversee an appeal against extradition, in attendance, Hanes diplomatically insisted that Ray should have faith in the fairness of British courts and pursue his appeal. The guards also heard Hanes telling Sneyd that everyone knew who he

really was and that it was pointless now to continue to deny it. One guard reported that Ray accepted this fact placidly, but another noted that during the entire visit, Ray's nervousness was signaled by his inability to keep his left leg still. When Ray was returned to his cell, his guards reported that he spent time making notes for Hanes's next visit. He told them that he thought "they" [presumably his lawyers] were "guessing at what happened" and that they could "not do much" until he got to America and could tell them (Reports 1968). When asked by his guards whether he had told his attorney anything today, Ray replied: "No, I don't trust that room too much and I had to talk through the wire with officers in the room." Hanes's follow-up visit the next day drew less comment from the guards although he did indicate that now that he had the names and addresses of Ray's brothers and sister, he would try to stop them from giving interviews. James's elder brother John had already implied that Ray might have murdered Dr. King to collect a bounty fee ("Brother Fears," 1968: 76). A collective policy of no comment might well improve Hanes's chances of exonerating his client.

As has already been intimated, Ray was trapped in a dilemma with regard to appealing extradition. The strongest basis for doing so was to insist that he was a political prisoner who would not face a fair trial in the US, but to assert this cogently seemed to require him to admit that he shot Martin Luther King. In a letter of July 8 sent on his return to the US, Hanes asked Ray to consider the advantages of returning voluntarily to the US and issuing a statement that he was doing so in order to make his innocence "known to the world as soon as possible" (Hanes to Sneyd, 1968). A further practicality now intruded. Ray/Sneyd had been granted legal aid to cover the costs of defending himself against the charges brought by the British authorities and the initial requests for his extradition. However, he had to make a further application for such aid to cover expenses related to any appeal against the magistrate's ruling in favour of extradition. On July 12, Ray learned that his application had been refused on the grounds that Ray's counsel had not demonstrated that he had reasonable grounds on

which to dispute the extradition order. The arguments presented to and rejected by the magistrate in the initial hearing had been repeated but not strengthened. As a result, Ray told Hanes that he was now without British legal representation and so he was ready to accept extradition. Hanes returned to London and met with Ray on July 17 and 18 to discuss the details of his return (Information of Specific Importance 1968). At 5.45p.m. on July 18 Ray was informed that a surrender order had been signed by the Home Secretary. At 6.30p.m. he was asked by Wandsworth's Deputy Governor if there were any matters or complaints that he wished to raise and he replied "No" and at 6.35p.m. he was discharged into the custody of Chief Superintendent Butler who was to lead a convoy of cars to the US Air Force base at Lakenheath.

There, a giant C-135 cargo plane awaited (Sides 2010: 380-84). Butler officially surrendered Ray into the custody of the United States in the form of four FBI agents and an Air Force physician. The latter quickly checked Ray's health before the six passengers and crew of three departed on a plane designed for 125 passengers or more. What the FBI dubbed Operation Landing had begun. The obsessive concern for Ray's safety had not abated. With FBI agents replacing British prison guards, Ray remained under constant scrutiny. When the plane eventually touched down at Millington naval air base north of Memphis, it was met by a large and armed law enforcement entourage that included FBI special agent Robert Jensen. Local sheriff, William Morris was formally entrusted with the man identified as "James Earl Ray, alias Harvey Lowmeyer, alias John Willard, alias Eric Starvo Galt, alias Paul Bridgman, alias Ramon George Sneyd" in an exchange filmed by one of Morris's deputies. Stripped naked on the plane, Ray was given fresh clothes and placed within a bullet-proof vest, heavy handcuffs and a leather harness. One of agent Jensen's subordinates relayed every step of the process over the phone to FBI headquarters. Two lines of armed guards formed a corridor from the plane to a special armored vehicle, reputedly strong enough to withstand a rocket



attack. To mislead the media, Morris had a decoy convoy at Memphis airport to distract the press waiting there. When the armed convoy arrived at the Criminal Courts Building downtown, more guards stood on the rooves, rifle-wielding police lined the streets and a city bus acted as a screen to block any sniper's view of the path from the armored car's rear door to the entrance. Whisked by elevator to the third floor, Ray was placed in a fortified cell within a pre-existing cell, reputedly constructed exclusively for him at a cost of \$100,000. Permanently illuminated, with closed-circuit cameras and multi-directional microphones, the cell was far more technologically advanced than what Ray had experienced at Wandsworth. But he remained what he had been since his arrest, one of the most vigilantly guarded human beings on the planet.

As the moment of extradition approached, the British government had asked one of its consular staff in St. Louis to assess the mood in Memphis, and in particular to advise them as to the likelihood of Ray's execution, if found guilty ("James Earl Ray," 1968). An oral report was phoned through before the extradition occurred with a written report filed later. Capital punishment had fallen out of favour in European democracies, and in the UK a provisional Abolition of the Death Penalty Act had passed in 1965. The law would lapse unless replaced by 1970 (Parliament actually voted in favour of abolition in cases of murder in 1969). Hence, in 1968 the British government was mindful that its surrender of James Earl Ray was potentially sending him back to face capital punishment. However, the reports from Memphis were reassuring. While the death penalty remained in Tennessee, there had been moves to repeal it and the current practice of successive governors had been to leave inmates on death-row indefinitely. Moreover, discreet enquiries directed at businessmen, bankers, and other Memphis residents, outside the legal profession, suggested that there was no great public clamour for Ray's death. King's widow, Coretta, indicated that she did not wish for the death penalty. Thus, the British government's compliance with the American extradition request

would not produce the embarrassment of an execution. The consular report concluded: “I have found throughout my District an admiration for the part played by the British police and immigration authorities in the arrest of Ray. There is also an appreciation that British judicial procedures over extradition have been scrupulously correct” (“James Earl Ray” 1968: 5).”

Reviewing Ray’s time in British custody, is it fair to judge it as “scrupulously correct”? At first glance, the scale of security measures taken to ensure that the man calling himself Ramon Sneyd could neither escape nor come to harm was extravagant. The obsessive care taken seems to reflect American fears bordering on paranoia, that only the safe return of this prime suspect could prevent a renewed wave of ghetto insurrections. The arrest of Ray, coming so soon after the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, which deepened further the sense that violence in the US was out of control, held out a possibility of closure, and with it hopes for a restoration of order. The American Embassy in London was forthright in expressing these concerns, and it is clear that the British authorities judged it politic to accommodate Washington. In making this assessment, the primary consideration seems to have been the negative consequences of irritating an already disgruntled ally. The Labour government had been uncooperative on several major foreign policy questions and delivering this prime suspect in an infamous murder investigation must have seemed a reasonable way in which to soothe American suspicions. Ray, or Sneyd as he was currently calling himself, was a secondary consideration, but not an insignificant one. He had previously escaped from prison, had been convicted of robbery with at least the threat of violence, and during his time in custody, it emerged that he was probably guilty of attempted robbery of a jewelers’ shop while in London (Fletcher 2008: 4). He had false documents, a string of aliases, and the evidence presented by the FBI of a high powered rifle found near the murder scene with Ray’s fingerprints, of witnesses testifying that they had seen him at the scene, of evidence that he had purchased the rifle, binoculars and telescopic sights after engaging in

conversations about their merits with the gun-store owners, gave the British little scope for giving Sneyd the benefit of the doubt. Others will argue about a larger conspiracy, but in 1968, the British authorities were determined that their police and prison staff should prove better than Texan ones had in Dallas five years earlier. Fifty years after Martin Luther King's death, this is scant consolation.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Race Relations Act of 1965 had founded a Race Relations Board. Its chairman, Mark Bonham Carter, went to the U.S. in 1967 to learn “lessons [from the] American experience,” the main one being “the necessity for a positive policy on the part of the central government.” The revised Race Relations Act of 1968 duly included more enforcement powers. See Bonham Carter (1967).

<sup>2</sup> These undigitalized records are classified as HO336/11. HO for Home Office; 336 for Prison Records and 11 for Ray/Sneyd's case file, all housed at the National Archives, Kew, England.