



Source 7

Letter from a British official in St Louis to the British Embassy in Washington, 18 July 1968, on James Earl Ray
(Catalogue ref: FCO 7/865)

2. My general conclusion was that James Earl Ray, if found guilty and sentenced to death, would not be executed. I deliberately did not, however, go out of my way to make too obvious enquiries, and my discussions were confined to casual conversation with businessmen and bankers who were not as clear about facts and procedures as lawyers, judges, and police officers would have been.

3. There is a death penalty in Tennessee, but there has been pressure in the State Legislature to have it abolished. For several years now, no one apparently has been executed in the State. I gathered that once a convicted murderer has exhausted his means of appeal, his case is submitted to the Governor for a commutation of sentence. The Governor then simply sits on the file, neither commuting the sentence nor confirming it. Thus a large number of convicted murderers remain in prison in a state, almost literally, of suspended animation. These include two particularly vicious killers - but even they are not now expected to be executed.

4. As far as I could see, there appears to be a good deal of feeling against the death penalty. Even a negro taxi driver commented to my Commercial Officer that Ray ought not to be executed. He added, incidentally, that he had already taken to their hotel half a dozen newspaper correspondents who had arrived in Memphis in good time for the trial.

5. Businessmen were not looking forward to Ray's return. Department stores had lost business following the riots and the killing of Martin Luther King, with persons living outside the city reluctant to come into town. Business was only slowly picking up. The trial would keep the wounds open. They hoped the court would rule that Ray could not get a fair trial in Memphis. In this event the trial was likely to be transferred to Nashville or Knoxville. (Whatever happens it must be held in Tennessee.)

6. Most people seem convinced that Ray did not act alone and that there was an organisation behind him. Ray's brother, who runs a bar in St. Louis, commented publicly that James Earl Ray was the sort of

person who would do anything for money.

7. 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 the extradition have been scrupulously correct.