

out of control as the defendant himself. From the moment early in the week when Judge Walker permitted excerpts from Sirhan's three handwritten journals to be admitted as evidence, it became increasingly clear that chief defense counsel Grant Cooper was losing control of his client. Cooper's defense strategy—depicting Sirhan as too mentally disturbed to be capable of the "mature and meaningful" reflection required for a first degree murder conviction in California—had already begun to upset the intensely proud Jordanian. But there was really nothing in the course of the case to prepare the court for his emotional explosion.

All the Elements

From the start, the trial of Sirhan Bishara Sirhan somehow lacked the basic elements for high courtroom drama. His counsel readily admitted that the defendant killed Robert F. Kennedy, and the low-keyed proceedings focused only on his state of mind when he pulled the trigger. But then last week, in one volcanic moment, the seemingly predictable trial erupted into the most extraordinary of courtroom dramas.

Suddenly, there was Sirhan, on his feet before a stunned court, repudiating his counsel with cold fury, declaring himself guilty of all charges against him—and announcing his desire to die. "I killed Robert F. Kennedy," he shouted out, "willfully, premeditatedly, and with twenty years of malice aforethought." Judge Herbert V. Walker managed to quell his outburst, temporarily at least. But the trial that had thus far unfolded as an orderly progression was suddenly careening, seemingly as unpredictable and

A Pasadena school official, testifying about the intellectual capabilities the defendant had shown in school there, had just told the court that Sirhan's IQ was a subnormal 89. Obviously agitated, Sirhan whispered to his counsel he wanted to make a statement to the court. The judge ordered the jury removed. Sirhan rose and, seemingly rigid with rage, spread his hands on the counsel table before him. "I, at this time, sir, withdraw my original plea of not guilty," he declared, "and submit the plea of guilty as charged on all counts. I also request that my counsel disassociate themselves from this case completely." Judge Walker challenged him: "What do you want to do about the penalty?" "I will offer no defense whatsoever," Sirhan replied. "The penalty..." Walker repeated. "I will ask to be executed," Sirhan replied. Walker asked why he wished to change his plea. "I believe, sir," Sirhan snarled, "that is my business, isn't it?" Walker

demanding a better reason—and Sirhan cried out his declaration of guilt.

"The court," ruled Walker, "will not accept the plea." He ordered Sirhan to be seated and quiet, under threat of being gagged and strapped in his chair. "I understand," Sirhan replied. "However, sir, I intend to defend myself *pro per*." He waved contemptuously at his panel of defenders. "I don't want to be represented by these counsel." "Counsel," Walker shot back, "is staying in the trial." Enraged, Sirhan shouted: "You are not going to shove it down my throat, sir, in any way you want."

Unchastened: Judge Walker asked a series of legal questions of the defendant. Sirhan could not answer them. "I find you are incapable of representing yourself," Walker declared, his voice rising. "Sit down and keep quiet." Sirhan refused. "I still maintain my original point," he said loudly. "I plead guilty to murder and ask to be executed." "The court," Walker repeated, "will not accept the plea." "I'm sorry," Sirhan replied. "I will not accept it." At that, Walker finally exploded. "The law tells me what I can and cannot do," he snapped. "From here on out you keep quiet—and if not, I will see to it that you are kept quiet." Sirhan, sullen, unchastened but finally quiet, sat down.

More than anything else, it seemed, Sirhan's diaries ignited the fuse that finally touched off his explosion. Along with two envelopes bearing still more Sirhan notations, they had been seized by Los Angeles police in a search of the Sirhan home last June (a search conducted without a warrant, counsel Cooper contended, thus setting up a key legal point for appeal). Sirhan's intention to kill Kennedy, repeated through the diaries, seemed to establish the premeditated nature of his act. But the bizarre ways in which that intent was expressed also suggested the demons in the young man's mind. Some samples:

- "May 18 9.45 AM-68 My determination to eliminate R.F.K. is becoming more the more of an unshakable obsession please pay to the Order ... R.F.K. must die."
- "Robert F. Kennedy must be assassinated before 5 June 68 ... I have never heard please pay to the order of of of of of of of of of of this or that."
- "R.F.K. must be disposed of like his brother was."

Sirhan, trial psychiatrists contend, wants most to be thought of as a political assassin, not as a mentally deranged killer, NEWSWEEK's Martin Kasindorf reported last week. In an apparent effort to mitigate the diaries' impact, he told the doctors he had written them while under self-induced hypnosis. But when it became clear his secret scribbles would be revealed for public scrutiny, the anguish of exposure seems to have proven more than he could bear. Repeatedly, over the course of the week, Sirhan had to be physically restrained in the court. At one point in the judge's

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R.F.K. must die - R.F.K. must be killed Robert F. Kennedy must be assassinated R.F.K. must be assassinated R.F.K. must be assassinated R.F.K. must be assassinated R.F.K. must be assassinated R.F.K. must be assassinated R.F.K. must be assassinated R.F.K. must be assassinated R.F.K. must be assassinated
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R.F.K. must be disposed of
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disposed of
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Robert Fitzgerald
Kennedy must soon die
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UPI
Private world of Sirhan Sirhan: Jottings in the 24-year-old assassin's diaries, which led to his emotional outburst in court when introduced in evidence, show an apparent intent to kill Robert F. Kennedy as well as his own profound inner turmoil

chambers, Sirhan became so distraught he turned on Judge Walker. "Your honor," he declared, "if these notebooks are allowed in evidence I will change my plea to guilty as charged. I will do so, sir, not so much that I want to be railroaded into the gas chamber, sir, but to deny you the pleasure, sir, of after convicting me, turning around and telling the world, 'Well, I put that fellow in the gas chamber, but I first gave him a fair trial,' when you in fact, sir, will not have done so."

At week's end, in the wake of Sirhan's repudiation, Cooper offered the court the resignation of the entire defense team. "I think," Judge Walker stated, "you have prepared a good defense—if not the only logical defense that could be presented." Refusing their resignation, he added, "We will proceed." And with that, Mary Sirhan, mother of the defendant, took the witness stand. Mrs. Sirhan had wept throughout her son's emotional outburst. Once on the stand, she verged on tears again. Defense attorney Russell Parsons tried to commiserate. "It's hard," she interjected, as her son looked on silently. "It's hard. It's hard."

It was obviously too hard. At 3:23 p.m. Friday, an hour and seven minutes early, Judge Walker declared the court adjourned for the week.