

# Specter of Dallas Haunted LAPD in

BY ROBERT KIRSCH

## Sirhan Case

• At 45 minutes past midnight, June 5, 1968, in the Rampart Division of the Los Angeles Police Department, Sgt. William C. Jordan sat facing a slight, dark-haired young man who had just been brought into the station as the suspect in the shooting of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy.

The news of the tragic event was already being broadcast to the world. Stunned and disbelieving, men and women heard that life was ebbing away in the young man whose brother, the President of the United States, had been slain a few years before by an assassination. In a moment of electoral triumph, Robert Kennedy was struck down, the man who, after hearing of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, had quoted Aeschylus: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls

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drop by drop upon our heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

Uppermost in Sgt. Jordan's mind was the determination to see to it that the 1963 Dallas record, compounded by local ineptitude and shameful bungling, would not be replayed in Los Angeles in 1968. The specter of Jack Ruby, even more ominous than the memory of Lee Harvey Oswald, haunted the Rampart police station this sultry summer night.

The entire Los Angeles Police Department shared that belief—and a sense that history would judge their efforts to deal with the investigation fairly, efficiently and justly. In SPECIAL UNIT SENATOR: The Investigation of the Assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (Random House: \$6.95), Robert A. Houghton, chief of detectives, LAPD, with the assistance of Theodore Taylor, has written a taut and complete account of the "longest, largest and most expensive criminal investigation ever undertaken by the . . . department, possibly the most extensive investigation ever conducted

by any local law enforcement agency."

The memory of Dallas and its aftermath clearly conditioned that investigation, which Houghton called at the time of the organization of the special unit, a "supreme test of our judicial processes." That effort produced a 10-volume investigation summary, represented nearly 5,000 separate interviews and interrogations, more than 50,000 pages of documentation and material evidence, 1,700 photographs, 190 reels of tape and 200 reels of 16 mm. film.

From the adrenal moments of that night in the Ambassador, to the conviction of Sirhan Bishara Sirhan for the crime, several score of men in the

LAPD worked patiently, tirelessly on the case. Other law enforcement agencies cooperated. The purpose was not solely to build the prosecution case against Sirhan, but to determine (and here the memories of Dallas and its aftermath were crucial) whether Sirhan was part of a conspiracy.

To Capt. Hugh Brown, commander of the Homicide Division who was assigned to head the task force, Houghton made it clear that if there were in fact, a "great conspiracy" that linked the murder of Robert Kennedy to that of John Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "it had better be unveiled before another national leader fell victim," and that it was "imperative that we track every lead, every suspicion of possible complicity or conspiracy, no matter how tenuous or hollow it might sound."

He told Brown emphatically that he wanted "this investigation to stand up to whatever scrutiny, as much fine-comb study as it's going to get."

Houghton was expressing what other officers knew and turned out to be the toughest part of the SUS investigation. Lt. Charles Hughes, head of Rampart Detectives, who had initial charge of the case, had briefed Houghton, called back from a Yosemite vacation: "I don't expect we'll have much trouble proving who did the killing—it's finding out why he shot the senator and whether



there was more than one man responsible."

There was no deficiency of leads suggesting conspiracy, from the report of the girl in the polka dot dress who was supposed to have run from the scene shouting "We killed him," to the rumor that an announcement of the senator's death was heard on the radio a month before it happened, every sort of wild report came pouring in, from freelance writers and seers, far right wingers and citizens who had claimed to overhear the "plotters" in conversation.

Each one of these was investigated and re-investigated, patiently and tediously, by the members of the unit. Stories were checked by lie detector tests and identification procedures. At the scene of the crime were several thousand people; a time and movement pattern had to be established. Sirhan's background had to be carefully checked. And the entire investigation had to be conducted scrupulously within the requirements of new decisions on search and seizure and the interrogation of suspects. No evidence of a conspiracy stood the test of the investigation.

Yet, this book is not simply an account of a celebrated case. From it emerges a sense of the magnitude and depth of problems encountered in police work. It is true that SUS

pioneered many techniques in this case and a police manual based on these lessons is in preparation.

Nor is it an effort at vindicating the LAPD's handling of the case. If this book is written with professional pride, it is also written with a measure of self-criticism. Each of the supervising officers of SUS wrote a critique of the entire investigation. All recognized that much of the painstaking labor of SUS could have been saved had the framework of a special unit been in existence to be activated immediately.

Such experts as SUS's Lt. Manuel Pena, author of a text on criminal investigation, a teacher of police science at Cal State L.A., and Lt. Roy Keene, made some telling points about the need to separate witnesses, to interview them before newsmen (many

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of the false leads came from people who had unconsciously embellished their stories through repetition for reporters and then stuck to them because of embarrassment at contradicting themselves; others alleged they had seen things which they later admitted they only heard), the failure to rope off the pantry area (some kitchen employees were mopping up bloodstains before lab experts could examine them), inadequate witness identification.

Houghton agrees with these criticisms but concludes that considering the circumstances, "the department responded well in those first hectic, confusing hours."

Without employing Dragnet style, Houghton and Taylor make the officers and witnesses come alive, re-create the setting and the mood of emotion and grief. Most impressive is the human component. The common stereotypes so popular now are demolished here. The investigators display qualities of concern, curiosity, sympathy, pride and realism.

When Houghton asked one officer about Mayor Sam Yorty's public statement that Sirhan had Communist connections, the man replies:

"I was at Rampart when the mayor and Commissioner McCaughey came in. I talked to them for a few minutes and then got busy on something else. Next thing I know, Yorty and the commissioner were reading Sirhan's notebook. Hell, I'm not going to tell the mayor of this city and a police commissioner what to do. Besides, one is an attorney, and the other an ex-FBI man. They know the rules of evidence as well as I do."

What is certain is that the SUS makes it clear that there was no shred of evidence suggesting a conspiracy.

The account stands as a model of its kind, honest, evocative and compelling.