

By Michael Mello

Standard-Times correspondent

Ask his age, or how long he's been married, and Philip H. Melanson might have to stop and think. But question him about an obscure item relating to a 25-year-old murder case, and he recalls the information in an eye-blink.

Such is the intensity with which the 43-year-old SMU political science professor pursues his work. He is recognized in scholarly circles as one of the top assassinations experts in the country.

Next year, which marks the 20th anniversaries of the slayings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, will be a busy one for Dr. Melanson. He is one of a handful of individuals nationwide clamoring for a reopening of the investigation of the Kennedy shooting.

Dr. Melanson charges that the Los Angeles Police Department botched the investigation of the June 5, 1968, fatal shooting of Robert Kennedy, who was slain as he left a celebration of his California Democratic presidential primary victory.

Dr. Melanson says investigators failed to look beyond the obvious when they concluded that a young Jordanian immigrant, Sirhan Sirhan, acted alone in planning and executing the assassination.

"They got a guy with a smoking gun," he says. The following spring, a Superior Court jury in Los Angeles convicted Mr. Sirhan of first-degree murder.

The LAPD's only concerns, says Dr. Melanson, were keeping Mr. Sirhan alive and wrapping up the case. "I can see that in the documents," he says, referring to the 40,000 pages of FBI documents and thousands more pages of trial transcripts and police records on the case.

"All they cared about was protecting their case," he said.

His insatiable appetite for information related to the case has brought him to Los Angeles eight or nine times in the three years since he established the Robert F. Kennedy Assassination Archive at Southeastern Massachusetts University in 1984.

The thousands of documents he has compiled in Dartmouth from the Los Angeles district attorney's office and other government sources form the nucleus of the archives. They also include 800 hours of taped interviews with eyewitnesses, a copy of the Sirhan trial transcript, and the 1,500-page police summary released last year.

Dr. Melanson also has labored to get the LAPD to release approximately 50,000 additional documents from its investigation. The Washington Post reported on June 26 that some of those files are about to be released because of increased public interest in the case.

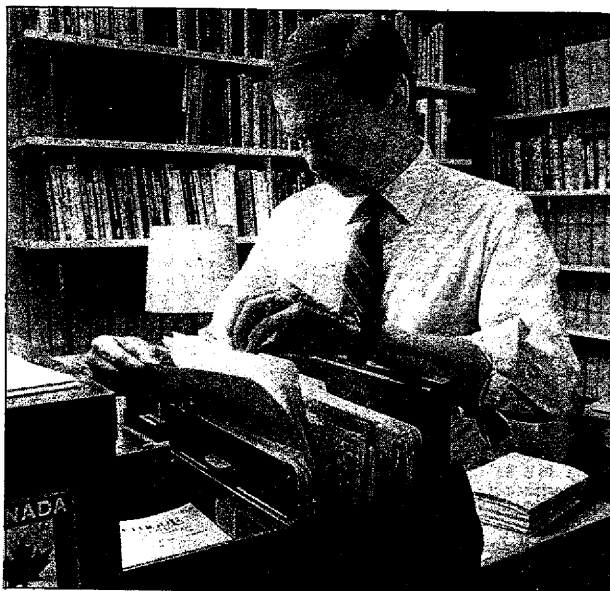
That interest, says Dr. Melanson, has been spurred by the media attention surrounding the upcoming anniversaries. An article in the June issue of *Regardies*, a Washington, D.C., business magazine, points to the same evidence that Dr.



Staff photos by Mike Valeri

A MATTER OF CREDIBILITY

SMU prof Philip Melanson has unanswered questions about the assassinations that shook the 1960s



Above:
A collage of images associated with the 1963 assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy hangs in Dr. Melanson's SMU office. It was a student's research into that assassination that spurred Dr. Melanson's interest in others.

Left:
Dr. Melanson was instrumental in locating the Robert F. Kennedy Assassination Archive at SMU in 1984. Among the thousands of documents are a copy of the Sirhan trial transcript and the 1,500-page Los Angeles police summary.

Melanson says warrants a reinvestigation.

Among that evidence:

Mr. Sirhan fired all eight shots from his 22-caliber handgun into the pantry of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, where Robert Kennedy was killed. Yet several eyewitness accounts claim there were more than eight bullet holes in the pantry. No one at the crowded crime scene reported firing back at Mr. Sirhan.

Also, medical reports state that the fatal shots were fired from behind Robert Kennedy, at point-blank range. Eyewitnesses claim that Mr. Sirhan stood face-to-face with Kennedy, and never at a close enough range to fire those fatal shots.

Unfortunately, says Dr. Melanson, the physical evidence from the case — the bullets and wood from the pantry area where Kennedy stood when he was shot — have been destroyed.

But he says he believes many questions pertaining to the case still can — and should — be answered. Specifically: How did Mr. Sirhan get there? Did he have help? Was there another gun involved?

Dr. Melanson also says the witnesses interviewed in the LAPD's investigation were not all asked the same questions. He and others, such as investigative reporter Dan Moldea, have developed a questionnaire to use when talking with witnesses, and have uncovered some "rich" information.

A striking example of what Dr. Melanson calls the LAPD's lack of thoroughness in its investigation was its dismissal of the infamous "lady in the polka-dot dress."

Some people at the Ambassador Hotel on the evening of June 5 said they were startled by a woman on her way out of the hotel. Asked what all the commotion was about, she is reported to have said, "We just shot Kennedy."

Dr. Melanson says a student has compiled a folder thick with accounts of people who claimed to have seen the woman that night. Many of those witnesses, he asserts, were never talked to by the LAPD.

Through his research and that of students who have taken his seminar and introductory course on assassinations, he has come to believe there is evidence that Mr. Sirhan had "sinister" help.

"There has never been a full-scale investigation of the RFK case. That is what's needed," he said.

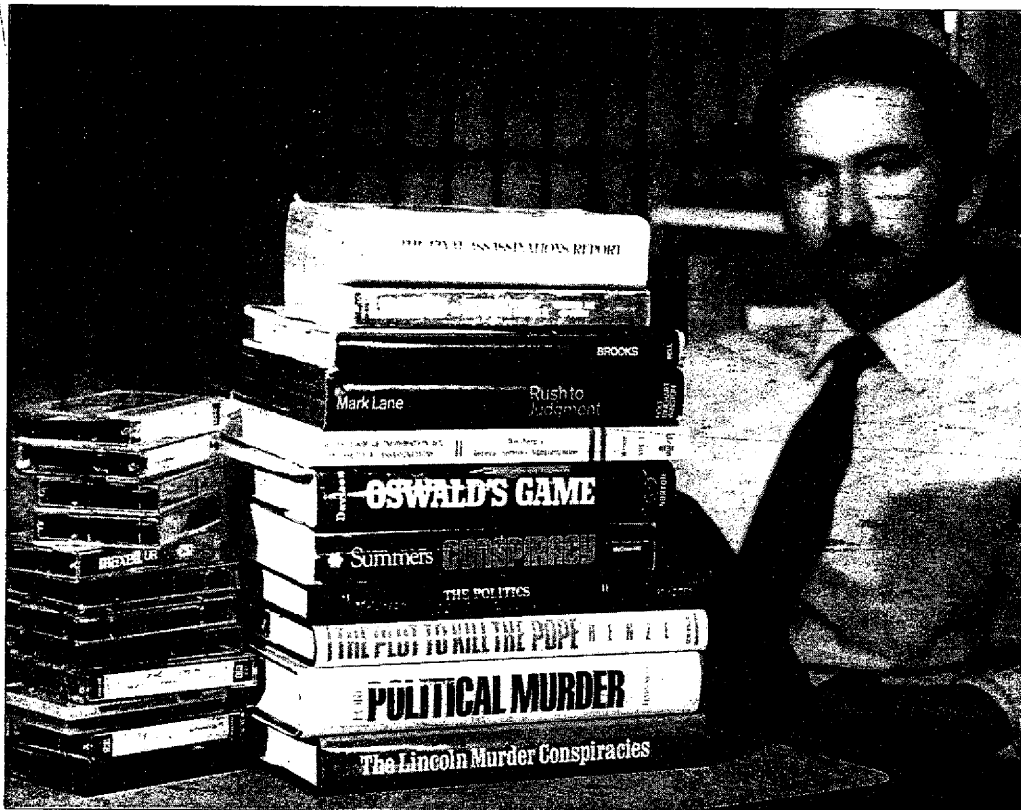
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Robert Kennedy was one of his political heroes, Philip Melanson says, sitting in the living room of his Marion home.

The more the thin, balding professor talks about the case and its tangled investigation, the more animated he becomes. His intense dark eyes blaze, his face lights up and his hands wave.

He leans forward in his reclining chair to make a point, momentarily forgetting a recent back injury suffered while lifting a box filled with thousands of trial transcripts.

Those transcripts had been delivered to the doorstep of relatives living in Maine and picked



Staff photo by Mike Valeri

Tools of research: Philip Melanson has collected interview tapes, books and a small mountain of documents.

up by Dr. Melanson while on vacation there with his wife Judith, and children Brett, 14, and Jess, 12.

It would seem that Dr. Melanson never strays far from his assassination studies, whether on vacation in Maine or on the West Coast, at work, or at home. A small room in his basement is adorned with photos and other items from the cases he has studied. A poster of Robert Kennedy dominates one of the walls.

When he began his tenure at SMU in 1971, he says, he was no different than most of the American public.

That is, he believed most of what he was told by government authorities. Specifically, he believed that the Nov. 22, 1963, assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, was carried out by a lone gunman. And that the April 4, 1968, murder of black civil rights leader Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tenn., did not involve a conspiracy. And that Robert Kennedy was shot by the lone Mr. Sirhan.

In 1974, a student in his American government class proposed a paper on the shady background of John Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. Dr. Melanson had read some of the numerous books that raised questions about the investigation of that shooting, but he wasn't convinced of the questions' validity.

So when the student suggested the paper, "I tried to discourage her, I told her there was no controversy," he says with an ironic laugh.

But the student did the paper. And as Dr. Melanson began to delve into Mr. Oswald's "anti-communist" background, and into the evidence that a congressional investigative committee said proved Mr. Oswald acted alone, he became convinced otherwise.

Dr. Melanson says that the many questions that persist around the Dallas case probably will never be answered. Among them is former House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill's recent announcement that one of President Kennedy's aides told the Federal Bureau of Investigation he was sure he heard two shots fired from behind the grassy knoll, across the street from the building where Mr. Oswald perched. If true, that story suggests there was another gunman. That aide later changed his story at the urging of the FBI, said Mr. O'Neill, and told the Warren Commission something else, "to not stir up any more pain and trouble for the (Kennedy) family."

Dr. Melanson's research into the JFK case led him to look into the other two assassinations.

He has interviewed and corresponded with James Earl Ray, the convicted killer

of Martin Luther King, and two of the three men whose aliases Mr. Ray used during his two months of hiding after the assassination. Dr. Melanson's conclusion: Mr. Ray did not act alone, and definitely not without financial help.

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Many people who listen to Dr. Melanson — even some of those who agree there are unanswered questions in the three cases — ask why it is important to rehash these cases and stir up painful memories.

Dr. Melanson has ready answers. "Suppose that in the Philippines everybody believed that (slain opposition leader) Benigno Aquino was shot by a lone nut," he said. "Their whole history might have been different . . ."

"We really need to know what happened to us in the 1960s," said Dr. Melanson. "We lost three charismatic political leaders . . . Were they all lone nuts who did this, or were there conspiracies? We need to know that to understand our own history."

Dr. Melanson has written a book on the history of the Secret Service. In it, he points out the continued importance of protecting our political leaders. Of his research he says, "You've got to understand the disease before you can prescribe a cure." ■