

News

Expert on RFK assassination claims conspiracy theory tapes missing

DARTMOUTH, Mass. (AP) — The head of an archives on Robert F. Kennedy's assassination says key material supporting a conspiracy theory appears to be missing from recently opened Los Angeles Police Department files.

Professor Philip Melanson said yesterday that discrepancies existed between earlier accounts of how much testimony was taped and the amount of audiotape made available for public perusal last month.

"Our survey of the files has discovered a major gap in the case record," Melanson said. "There is a large shortfall of tape recordings of interviews, (and) ... the best circumstantial evidence indicates that more data did exist but disappeared."

Melanson said the records contain no taped interviews of 51 key witnesses, including 29 whose testimony would have been expected to shed light on whether Kennedy had been a victim of a conspiracy.

"The fact that they do have to do with conspiracy is disturbing because it means that the original investigation was either quite incompetent ... or ... if it wasn't incompetence, and it was some kind of purging of a record, it's the

most disturbing of all," he said.

In Los Angeles, police spokesman Cmdr. William Booth said the department would "not deal with what somebody else calls a discrepancy."

"Everything that we had in file with regards to that case had been turned over to the (state) archives," he said. "In terms of individuals coming up with their own theories ... and being critical as to whether they find what they're looking for or not ... the records have to speak for themselves."

Robert Houghton, who as chief of detectives headed the police investigation into the June 5, 1968, assassination, rejected suggestions of a cover-up and characterized conspiracy theories as "ridiculous."

"I don't know anything about destroying any tapes at all," Houghton said from his home in Northridge. "Certain things I understand have been blocked out, but that was to protect a lot of people who were interviewed. I don't know what was taken out, if anything."

The Robert F. Kennedy Assassination Archives are part of Southeastern Massachusetts University library's private collec-

tion. Melanson started the archives in 1984, when the college in Dartmouth accepted material gathered by the Robert F. Kennedy Truth Committee, a group believing more than one person was involved in the shooting.

Los Angeles police concluded in 1969 that Sirhan Sirhan alone was responsible for the assassination. Conspiracy theorists suggested that a second gunman fired at Kennedy from behind, while Sirhan stood in front of him.

Melanson, who teaches political science, said that of the 3,470 interviews Los Angeles police conducted in investigating the killing, only 301 interviews were available on tape.

Melanson said he was told in 1985 by Theodore Taylor, co-author with Houghton of a 1970 book on the investigation called "Special Unit Senator," that "every single interview was taped," and Taylor later said he had access to 3,000 hours of audio tape in police department files.

After tabulating the approximate length of witness tapes listed in police records "a generous estimate is that about 400 hours of audio tapes were disclosed," by the department, said Melanson.

MORE NEWS

Missing RFK tapes?

The head of an archives on Robert Kennedy's assassination says tape recordings of key witnesses to the slaying are missing. C-7

A losing lottery

Connecticut's new state lottery is shut down for 24 hours following the discovery that tickets could