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RFK murder files incomplete, expert says

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DARTMOUTH — Testimony from 51 key witnesses is missing from interviews taped during the Los Angeles Police Department's investigation of Robert F. Kennedy's assassination, an SMU professor charged.

Dr. Philip H. Melanson, an expert on assassinations, also said that 29 of the 51 were persons with accounts that "relate directly or indirectly to questions of conspiracy."

Dr. Melanson said those omitted included:

- Twelve witnesses with information relating directly to whether Sirhan B. Sirhan was accompanied by a female accomplice — the so-called "girl in the polka dot dress."
- Seven witnesses with information relating to

the possibility that Mr. Sirhan stalked Sen. Kennedy while accompanied by a young woman.

■ Five witnesses at a pistol range where Mr. Sirhan was allegedly seen talking with a young woman and talking target practice the day of the assassination.

■ Paul Schrade, wounded during the assassination. His estimated position (there is no photographic record) at the time of shooting is "vital to the question of whether two guns were fired," Dr. Melanson said.

In contrast to those omitted, the SMU professor cited some of those whose testimony was taped: a woman who once gave Mr. Sirhan Bible lessons, a doctor who analyzed Mr. Sirhan's X-rays after he fell off a horse and crime scene witnesses "who saw neither the suspect or the shooting."

Dr. Melanson acknowledged at a press conference Wednesday that he can only speculate what happened to the missing statements. But he said he is particularly disturbed because they pertain to some of the "most controversial and important witnesses."

The political science professor also raised questions about the total number of taped interviews in the files. The police department's own records indicate that police conducted 3,470 interviews, he said. But less than one-tenth — 211 witnesses and 301 interviews — have been preserved on tape.

What emerges, Dr. Melanson said, is a " yawning gap in the case record" of an investigation that Los Angeles police have "touted as one of the most thorough in history."

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Dr. Philip Melanson discusses his findings Wednesday.



Staff photo by Ron Rice

■ Witnesses

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Commander William D. Booth, Los Angeles Police Department spokesman, said Wednesday that officials there are "not going to make the effort to respond or counter the various criticisms" of a 20-year-old investigation.

"To our knowledge, all of the documents the LAPD had are now with the (California) archivist," Commander Booth said, noting the files were released publicly April 19. "What there is will have to speak for itself."

However, the commander said his department is satisfied that the investigation was complete. "There was a successful prosecution and a person was convicted. It was the finding of the court that only one person was involved in the murder. That person (Mr. Sirhan) has been convicted and is still serving time."

As for those who believe otherwise, "I don't think there is anything we can say that can change their minds," said Commander Booth.

Dr. Melanson ranks high on that list of skeptics.

On Wednesday, he pointed out that the credibility of the LAPD investigation has already been challenged. When the files were opened in California last month, 2,400 photographs expected to be there were not.

"The police have been very terse

in their response to the missing photographs," said Dr. Melanson, among those who had long fought for the police files to be made public. "They said they were destroyed because they were duplicates."

Commander Booth said that indeed was what happened — plain and simple. "It's a factual thing" incorporated in other non-police records in the case.

However, Dr. Melanson said the photographs, coupled with the tapes, then combined with previously lost or destroyed physical evidence — such as door frames with bullet holes — create major reservations about the investigation.

While not calling for a reopening of the case — Dr. Melanson said he would first have to do a thorough study of the 50,000-page files — he did not rule out the possibility.

If certain questions "are not answered in the police files," the chief investigative study, then the matter "should surely be reopened," he said.

Explaining what he has done so far with the police files, Dr. Melanson said he and his research assistants, SMU students Alyson Wihry and Deanna Perry, conducted a "preliminary survey."

As a starting point, they drew from a list of "significant witnesses" as defined by sources including the FBI, Los Angeles district attorney's office, and police interview summaries.

Dr. Melanson also noted that

Robert Houghton, now retired chief of detectives for the Los Angeles police, said in his 1970 book, "Special Unit Senator," that he told his second-in-command to give field investigators tape recorders because written reports weren't enough. "Something always gets lost," Mr. Houghton said.

The department was acutely aware of the criticism leveled at the Dallas police for their handling of President John F. Kennedy's assassination — and didn't want to leave themselves open to the same charges.

Overall, Dr. Melanson said his initial findings suggest one of three possibilities. All, he said, are "disturbing":

■ That police failed to follow orders and tape interviews with all witnesses.

■ That investigators did tape interrogations, but lost, over the course of 20 years, some of the tapes.

■ That someone purposely destroyed the material.

Dr. Melanson said that of the three, the second possibility — that it was some of the most significant material that happened to be "lost" — is the one that he would reject.