

Busch Investigating Reports of Meddling With Sirhan Evidence

'Numerous Persons' Apparently Had Access to Office Where County Kept Weapons in Kennedy Murder Case

BY DAVE SMITH

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Dist. Atty. Joseph A. Busch Jr. said Saturday his office was "terribly concerned" over strong evidence that the fatal bullets and murder weapon in the assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy had been tampered with.

In a statement released by an aide, Busch said his office is investigating "evidence that exhibits have been directly handled by numerous persons" in violation of a court order sealing the items.

No suspects were named, but another spokesman said it was learned that almost anyone apparently could examine the exhibits in the County Clerk's office, where "the court order evidently was just ignored."

Busch did not categorize the possible tampering as either intentional or unintentional. However, he made clear that the development complicates an earlier investigation into claims that ballistics work on the Kennedy case was improperly done and that a second gun may have been fired in the rear pantry of the Ambassador Hotel where Sen. Kennedy was mortally wounded June 5, 1968.

Could Be Impossible

If extensive tampering has occurred, it could be impossible ever to prove or disprove these claims.

The report came to light on KNXT television's 6 p.m. news report Friday, after a KNXT employe reportedly was questioned by Busch's office about his own investigation of the "second-gun theory."

That news report followed by three days Busch's second postponement of a news conference at which he was expected to disclose results of his office's investigation of the claims.

That postponement was occasioned when investigators learned of the case with which unauthorized persons had been allowed access to the key exhibits in the state's case against Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, condemned to death for the assassination.

"We were dumb and fat and happy and thought we had a court order to protect those bullets," said Chief Dep. Dist. Atty. John Howard Saturday. "But the more we got into it, the bigger it got."

Asked how many persons might have handled the bullets and gun, Howard said, "plenty."

A chief danger to the integrity of the evidence, Howard said, is that a .22-caliber lead slug can be permanently changed even by being rubbed a few minutes between a person's fingers. If that has happened, merely at the hands of an innocently curious person, the bullets might never be made to match others from Sirhan's weapon in the event of future ballistics tests.

Attorney's Complaint

The reexamination of evidence was begun after attorney Barbara Warner Blehr wrote to the city's Civil Service Commission May 28 in an effort to block the permanent appointment of DeWayne Wolfer, Los Angeles Police Department criminalist, as head of the LAPD crime lab. That appointment was scheduled for July 1 but has not yet been made.

Mrs. Blehr charged that Wolfer had violated proper procedures in the ballistics investigation of Kennedy's death as well as in two other murder cases.

On June 4, Busch's office conferred with Police Chief Edward Davis and then undertook investigation of Mrs. Blehr's charges.

In the last month, Busch's staff has questioned at least two dozen principals in the Kennedy case and has twice postponed announcement of its findings. No new date for a news conference has been set.

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