

## WAS SIRHAN PROGRAMMED?

If many were left unsatisfied with the official version of events in the assassinations of President Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., there seemed to be no question that the book was closed when it came to the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy--until the publication of Robert Blair Kaiser's "R.F.K. Must Die!" (E.P. Dutton- October, 1970). Kaiser is an established and respected reporter and a former correspondent for Time magazine. His previous reporting had won him a Pulitzer Prize nomination and an Overseas Press Club award for the best magazine reporting in foreign affairs.

Kaiser signed on with Sirhan's defense team as an investigator, agreeing to help finance the defense effort (Sirhan's attorneys took the case without fee) with a percentage of the royalties he would receive from his subsequent writing on the case. Kaiser was given access to the police and FBI files, and he became the chief repository of knowledge in the case and the bridge between the defense attorney's and the psychiatrists probing the motivations of Sirhan Bishira Sirhan. Kaiser was to spend approximately 200 hours with the Arab refugee who, in a crowded pantry in the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, had emptied his .22 calibre Iver-Johnson revolver at the 42-year-old Presidential hopeful. His investigations and his experiences with Sirhan convinced him that there had been a conspiracy, but Kaiser was to find that to advance a conspiracy theory meant that he would have to cope with The New York Times.

Kaiser felt that neither the Los Angeles Police Department nor the FBI had done an adequate job of investigation, and that neither was willing to seriously consider the possibility that there had been a conspiracy. They were unable to find the "girl in the polka-dot dress" to whom Sirhan was seen speaking just before he pulled his gun, and so they decided that she did not exist -- although Sirhan was reported seen with a girl of the same description on several occasions by at least five different people. The LAPD and the FBI failed to find certain acquaintances of Sirhan who should have been investigated, and they inadequately investigated others who definitely knew more than they were telling -- including a former Sirhan roommate of four months who left the Los Angeles area 12 hours before Kennedy was shot, and when located by the FBI in Eureka, California, denied ever knowing Sirhan.

Kaiser became intrigued by Sirhan's fascination with the occult and his membership in the Rosicrucians. He was perplexed by Sirhan's notebooks in which he had often written his name over and over, and in which he repeatedly wrote "RFK must die," always accompanied by the phrase

"please pay to the order of Sirhan." Sirhan seemed to have no recollection of these writings, nor did he recall firing eight bullets at Senator Kennedy.

Sirhan's behavior on the night of the assassination seemed extremely odd. He was observed two hours before the assassination staring fixedly at a teletype machine, and he failed to respond when the teletype operator addressed him. When he started firing his gun several people tried to wrest the gun from his hand, but his arm seemed frozen, and despite his slight size they could not loosen his grip. After the slaying it was reported that his eyes were dilated, and he was described as extremely detached during the all night police interrogation. The next morning he was found shivering in his cell although it was not cold.

Dr. Bernard L. Diamond, the chief psychiatrist for the defense, decided upon the use of hypnosis on Sirhan. Diamond expected that it would require several sessions to hypnotize Sirhan, but instead Sirhan went under almost immediately during the first session -- leading Diamond to suspect that Sirhan had been frequently hypnotized in the past. Under hypnosis Sirhan proved adept at "automatic writing" -- the same type that appeared in the notebook. Given a pen and pad, he wrote his name repeatedly, and when instructed to write about Robert Kennedy he wrote the phrase "RFK must die" again and again until ordered to stop. Under hypnosis Sirhan recalled making the previous entries in his notebooks while in a trance-like state induced by mirrors in his bedroom. The hallways of the Ambassador Hotel were also lined with mirrors. Dr. Diamond programmed Sirhan to climb the bars of his cell like a monkey, retaining no recollection that he had been told to do it. Upon awakening, Sirhan proceeded to climb the bars "for exercise." Sirhan experienced an interesting symptom upon emerging from a hypnotic state. He would undergo chills and would shiver from the cold -- the same behavior that was observed in him the morning after the assassination.

Dr. Diamond became convinced that Sirhan had killed Kennedy while in a dissociated state -- unaware of what he was doing. He concluded that Sirhan had programmed himself like a robot to kill Kennedy.

Kaiser could not bring himself to completely agree with Diamond. If Sirhan had programmed himself, reasoned Kaiser, he should have some recollection of it, but he remembered neither the programming nor the shooting. Furthermore, when Sirhan was asked under hypnosis if others had been involved he would either go into a deeper trance in which he was incapable of responding, or he would block, hesitating for a considerable period of

time before answering. Kaiser found several documented case histories of mind manipulation of highly suggestable subjects by skillful operators including a relatively recent case in Europe in which a man was programmed by a close friend who was a skilled hypnotist to rob banks, retaining no recollection of the deeds or the programming. Kaiser felt that the evidence pointed toward the same probability in the case of Sirhan. He concluded that Sirhan had been programmed and his memory blocked by some kind of blocking mechanism.

"R.F.K. Must Die!" was reviewed in The New York Times Book Review on November 15, 1970 by Dr. Thomas S. Szasz. Szasz described Kaiser as "a conscientious and competent reporter," but only one paragraph of his review addressed the contents of the book:

For Kaiser is a true believer in the psychiatric ideology, and proud of it. 'My reporter's dream was complete,' he writes in the preface, 'when Dr. Bernard L. Diamond... began taking me into Sirhan's cell with him for his analysis of Sirhan under hypnosis.' And Kaiser uncritically accepts Diamond's theory of the assassination: "...that Sirhan had -- by his automatic writing -- 'programmed himself exactly like a computer is programmed by its magnetic tape... for the coming assassination.'" But this neither describes nor asserts any ascertainable facts; instead it subtly induces the reader to regard Sirhan as a nonhuman object (like a computer), and those who so view him (including the reader himself) as compassionate students of the human mind.

Either Dr. Szasz did not read "R.F.K. Must Die!" or he deliberately misrepresented its contents, for Kaiser did not agree with Dr. Diamond. Szasz' review gave no hint that Kaiser believes there was a conspiracy. Robert Kaiser wrote me: "My narrative of the facts, most of which have been hidden from the public, cried out for a re-opening of the case by the authorities. That was news and Dr. Szasz ignored it."<sup>1</sup> The remainder of Dr. Szasz' lengthy review consisted of his own view that it is "absurd" to judge Sirhan's act in any context other than the commission of the act: "In courtroom psychiatry, 'facts' are constructed to fit theories." According to Dr. Szasz "Diamond and Kaiser (and many others) tried to diminish Sirhan's importance by robbing his murderous act of all significance." Dr. Szasz closed his non-review by expressing his hope that the death penalty be preserved, and that Sirhan's death sentence be carried out.

The Times could not have found a more inappropriate reviewer if they had assigned Martha Mitchell to review Senator Fulbright's

"The Arrogance of Power." Dr. Szasz is generally regarded as the most controversial figure in contemporary psychiatry. He maintains that mental illness does not exist. He has written more than 150 articles and seven books<sup>2</sup> criticizing that concept and the use of psychiatry in the courtroom. Dr. Szasz believes that criminal cases should be decided strictly on their legal merits. In his philosophy a psychiatric defense is discriminatory -- in effect he believes that everyone should enjoy an equal right to be executed. Much of "R.F.K. Must Die!" deals with the various psychiatric examinations of Sirhan, and the psychiatric nature of the defense strategy. Dr. Szasz' position precluded in advance an objective review of the book.

Moreover, Dr. Diamond (who Kaiser describes as "the only hero in my book"<sup>3</sup>) and Dr. Szasz are diametrically opposed to one another's views and have confronted each other in the past in public debate. Diamond is a frequent contributor to legal and medical journals on the subject of psychiatry and the law. He helped pioneer the legal concept of "diminished capacity" in California, and he is one of the country's leading authorities on insanity and the criminal offender. In the October, 1964 California Law Review, Dr. Diamond reviewed Dr. Szasz' book "Law, Liberty and Psychiatry." A quote of the first three sentences of the review is enough to show the enmity existing between the two: "Law, Liberty and Psychiatry is an irresponsible, reprehensible, and dangerous book. It is irresponsible and reprehensible because the author must surely know better. It is dangerous because its author is clever, brilliant and articulate -- the book reads well and could be most convincing to the intelligent, but uncritical reader."

Robert Kaiser summed up the Szasz review better than I could hope to: "An honest review of my book, pro or con, one that would have dealt with the facts I revealed and the issues I raised, could have been a valuable service to the large reading public that depends on the Times Book Review. From a purely personal viewpoint, it made the difference for me; instead of being a bestseller, my book was only a modest success -- not because the reviewer made a successful attack on my thesis, but because he simply ignored it."<sup>4</sup>

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1. letter from Robert Blair Kaiser to the author dated August 9, 1971
2. "Normality Is A Square Circle Or a Four sided Triangle" Maggie Scarf, New York Times Magazine October 3, 1971 -- article on the philosophy of Dr. Szasz.

3. letter from Robert Blair Kaiser to the author, op. cit.
4. letter from Robert Blair Kaiser to the author, op. cit.