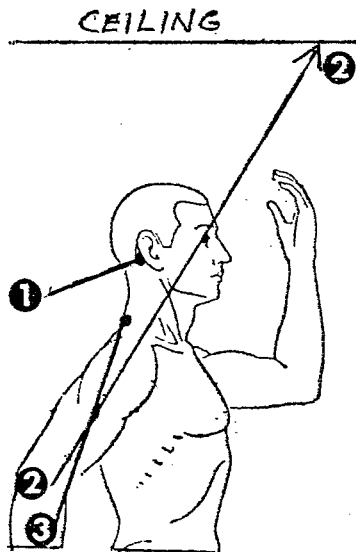


NEW QUESTIONS

THE DEATH OF RFK



The trajectories of the three bullets that struck Kennedy.



The Ambassador Hotel pantry after police removed the bullet-punctured ceiling panels.

ARTICLE IV: Lines of Fire.

By RALPH BLUMENFELD

SEN. ROBERT F. KENNEDY was walking eastbound through the hotel kitchen pantry when Sirhan Sirhan, gun in hand, darted forward to confront him on that June night in 1968 in Los Angeles.

Sirhan fired. RFK and five persons were struck. Among the first to fall was Paul Schrade, a bullet in his forehead.

Kennedy was shot twice in the back at steep upward angles, and once behind the right ear—all from point-blank range. The head wound, the autopsy showed, was the fatal one.

No eyewitness has testified to seeing Sirhan closer than 1½ to 3 feet in front of Kennedy. No one testified to seeing the Senator with his back to Sirhan at any time.

"Assume that Sirhan had escaped from the scene with the gun, without being seen at all by any eyewitnesses—what effect would these circumstances have had on the investigation?" asks California criminalist William W. Harper, who disputes the official version of events.

"Would the police have been searching for one assassin or two?"

The question concerns many critics of the Los Angeles Police Dept. Schrade and three other wounded victims have called for a reopening of the RFK case, and are now being joined by a number of Harper's professional colleagues, including Dr. Robert Joling, president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences.

Questions involving the autopsy evidence and firearms identification, examined earlier in this series, may command wider scientific interest since they depend less on eyewitness testimony than on the "geometry" of the RFK case—bullet tra-

jectories, firing angles and locations of bullet holes.

But Allard K. Lowenstein, the lawyer and former Congressman, is most intrigued by what can be most simply proven.

And in this case he believes it might be one of the earliest issues to emerge after RFK's death—the 9, 10, 11 or 12 apparent bullet holes supposedly created by Sirhan's eight-shot revolver.

This is known as the Too Many Bullets Problem. It might be solved, Lowenstein contends, by simple laboratory analyses of the bullet holes in two rather arcane bits of evidence: the right shoulder pad of RFK's suit jacket, and three panels from the pantry ceiling.

As far as Los Angeles District Attorney Joseph P. Busch Jr. and the LAPD are concerned, all the bullets have been accounted for in an official Trajectory Study report compiled by Crime Lab chief DeWayne Wolfer in 1968 but not released publicly until more than two years later.

The report, Harper charges, is "essential-ly an inventory" of eight bullets supposedly

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says he offered this option to the Los Angeles DA's office, which quickly accepted it, whereupon Lowenstein countered:

"What troubles me then is how did that bullet go front-to-back while the other bullets that hit Bob Kennedy went back-to-front? You've reduced the number of bullets back to eight—because then the bullet through the shoulder-pad could have hit Schrade in the head. But haven't you increased the number of guns?"

Another bullet, according to the LAPD, was fired by Sirhan as he was wrestled to the steam table by Uecker, Roosevelt Grier and others. The official trajectory has this bullet passing upward through an inch-thick vinyl sound panel, ricocheting off the cement ceiling and down through an adjacent sound panel, and striking witness Elisabeth Evans in the forehead as she bent over in the pantry doorway some 30 feet away, searching for her lost shoe. This bullet thus officially accounted for three bullet holes. Its downward trajectory is open to question, though, since the Evans wound traversed her scalp upward. Wolfer asserted that he X-rayed the ceiling panels. Harper and Lowenstein want to see those X-rays.

A footnote here about three other eye-witnesses in the hotel's kitchen pantry.

One was Richard G. Lubic, an independent TV producer who told The Post that "to this day, I don't believe Sirhan killed

Kennedy" Lubic dropped to the pantry floor during the shooting, and Kennedy fell at his feet. "As I was on the floor, looking to my left and in back of me," Lubic said, "I saw another gun. The gun was pointed in a downward position and it was held by a guy in a Ace Guard uniform. I didn't see him shoot."

A second witness was Donald L. Schulman, now 31, a TV crew member was interviewed on the night of the RFK assassination and he saw the same uniform security guard, from the Ace Guard Service in Van Nuys, Cal., firing his revolver during the chaos in the pantry. Schulman has since backtracked.

The Ace security guard has long-since been identified as Thane Eugene Cesar, a part-time Ace employe hired by the Ambassador Hotel to help with crowd control on the night of RFK's triumph in the California Democratic Presidential primary. Cesar has alternately admitted pulling his gun in the confusion—a .38 caliber revolver—and denied it. He is also said to have sold a .22 caliber gun—the same caliber as Sirhan's weapon—either four months before RFK's murder or three months after. And finally, Cesar is reported to have "vanished" in the years since Los Angeles police last questioned him in 1972.

Some who don't believe that Sirhan was the only gunman in the pantry that night suggest that Cesar might have fired "the second gun."

The Post interviewed Cesar's lawyer, Garland J. Weber, in Sherman Oaks, Cal. on May 1. Weber said Cesar is still living in the Los Angeles area and would be available for an interview for a cash payment. "But he might not tell you anything," Weber said.

No further effort was made to interview Cesar. The physical evidence in the RFK case—autopsy conclusions, bullet identification and the location of bullet holes—remains paramount for the moment to critics of the official version of the RFK assassination.

As one such critic put it: "Even if Thane Cesar walked into a police station and confessed to the assassination of Robert Kennedy, you'd still have to prove it in court."

TOMORROW: The DA's Story.

fired from Sirhan's gun. "It suffers from a dearth of technical details: no measurements of distances or angles are given, nor the locations of the bullet holes and ricochet marks." And while the eight bullets are numbered, "giving the impression that the

time sequence of the various shots was determined," Harper recalls that Los Angeles County Coroner Dr. Thomas T. Noguchi gave autopsy testimony that such a sequence was not determinable. Not even the most observant eyewitnesses attempted to say which shot came when.

The closest witnesses, oddly, were not among the wounded. One was assistant maitre d' Karl Uecker, who had led Kennedy eastward through the pantry by the wrist and was between RFK and Sirhan when the firing erupted.

Uecker and others remember Kennedy turning left briefly to shake hands with busboy Juan Romero just before Sirhan fired, but there is no precise agreement on whether or not the Senator turned back—partly or fully—to face Sirhan at the end. Uecker testified in effect that RFK's "head was turned to the left" while his wrist was being tugged toward Sirhan; another witness thought Kennedy was still facing left when Sirhan fired, while others insist they were face to face.

A statement to the LAPD by Pete Hamill, the former Post columnist who was in the pantry that night, implied that all of them were correct.

None of the witnesses testified to seeing Sirhan's gun within point-blank range of Kennedy, but the relative positions of Sirhan and Kennedy remain a serious issue because of the angles of the "wound tracks" in Kennedy's head and body.

The question is whether Sirhan could have inflicted these wounds from any distance, since he was firing right-handed from a point directly east of Kennedy. If Kennedy were fully facing Sirhan, as some contend, these wounds could not have been caused by Sirhan's gun. If RFK was facing left, the head wound could not have been caused by Sirhan's gun. If RFK was facing left, the head wound would be possible but the back wounds would be highly unlikely to have come from Sirhan, firing with his right hand.

The authority for that conclusion is the consensus of eyewitnesses who vividly remember Sirhan firing right-handed over the steam table and around the bulky form of 190-pound Karl Uecker, who blocked his path to Kennedy.

Others who remembered it that way included college student Vincent DiPierro, and maitre d' Edward Minasian, and uniformed security guard Thane Cesar, who was located directly behind Kennedy.

Cesar told the LAPD: "I knew it wasn't a .38 when it went off because I can tell the difference . . . It appeared to me to be a .22 . . . As soon as I looked up and spotted it, the shots went off—so it was an instantaneous thing . . . but I did—I did look up just as I say and to me it looked like he was arching his arm a little bit like he was getting over the group of men in front of him."

Q. Reaching around somebody or something?

A. Yeah. This is why I suspected he was short also.

Sirhan is 5-3 and Kennedy was 5-10½—a height differential cited by the LAPD to explain the steep upward angle of RFK's back wounds. Those who doubt it, however, say that Sirhan would have had to fire around Uecker with his wrist twisted upward and rightward in order to shoot Kennedy in the back—assuming Kennedy was turned to the left.

One theory would have permitted that scenario—it would not have been too difficult for Sirhan to have shot Kennedy behind the right ear from their relative positions, causing him to go into a body-spinning position and thus exposing his back to two more Sirhan bullets.

No witnesses, however, have ever testified to seeing Kennedy spin about.

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Wolfer's analysis also took into account a bullet that had penetrated Kennedy's right shoulder pad, declaring that this was what had struck victim Schrade in the forehead.

Since Schrade was almost directly behind Kennedy as they walked—slightly right of RFK's right shoulder—the back-to-front trajectory would have required Kennedy to have been spun completely around; but no eyewitness has so testified. If Kennedy had been turned fully left, shaking hands with busboy Juan Romero as the LAPD has hypothesized, the shoulder-pad bullet could have gone back-to-front, Lowenstein concedes.

"But the difficulty that creates is that the bullet would then have gone into the North kitchen wall," Lowenstein said, because Kennedy was turned in that direction to shake hands with Romero.

The final option is that RFK was facing Sirhan, and the bullet traveled front-to-back through Kennedy's shoulder pad. Lowenstein