

P.O. Box 85065
Los Angeles, CA 90072-0065
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To the Editor:

In his April 30 column, entitled "Die-Hards Are at It Again on Kennedy Death," John Kendall concedes that "strictly speaking... the question of a second gun remains open." Mr. Kendall's basic message, however, seems to be that speaking "strictly" about the Robert Kennedy assassination is too bothersome and should be replaced by the kind of superficial and simplistic speaking illustrated by his article. The article requires a more careful reply.

Mr. Kendall is obviously wrong in his implication that the only serious issues involved with the Robert Kennedy assassination relate to so-called "one gun" or "two gun" "theories." Because he stresses firearms matters so heavily, however, it is worth noting that his account of the 1975 firearms examination is highly selective and misleading.

The work of the firearms panel was directed at limited issues and neither supported nor precluded the firing of a second gun, as is clear from the examiners' reports and court testimony. Only three reported victim bullets could be matched even with each other by any of the examiners, although many other bullets were fired at the crime scene. Mr. Kendall's suggestion of uniform examiner conclusions about a reported "double-furrowed gouge" is false, and he ignores various factual complications and uncertainties revealed by the tests. He concedes that no victim bullets could be matched with test bullets from Sirhan's gun, but strangely omits the fact that three such matches had been sworn to at Sirhan's trial by LAPD criminalist DeWayne Wolfer. Many other problems surround Mr. Wolfer's work in this case, his lost or missing records, and his handling of physical and firearms evidence. The state Court of Appeal described Mr. Wolfer's testimony in another major case as "bordering on perjury" and LAPD claims in 1975 that the examiners' findings "vindicated" his firearms work were nonsense.

No brief reply, unfortunately, can do justice to the complex issues involved in the firearms episode, much less other elementary crime scene problems which Mr. Kendall ignores. (With the release of long-suppressed police information, careful renewed study of such points is now in order.) Following initial reports of definitive results in 1975, one noted examiner, Lowell Bradford, pointed out that a two gun possibility had not been eliminated, adding that "the firearms examination simply closes one episode of evidence evaluation and should not constrain further efforts to resolve valid questions." Those judgements were echoed in subsequent examiner testimony.

Some other misleading points from this column also need response. There are, of course, many important reasons for study of the RFK assassination records, quite apart from "one gun" or "two gun" matters. Among these are serious unanswered non-crime scene questions and issues of institutional and law enforcement performance in response to a national tragedy. Nor do we share Mr. Kendall's apparent faith in recent pronouncements of Sirhan Sirhan, to which he gives peculiar emphasis. (Sirhan has said widely differing things in the past on these and other issues.) The reference to past in-house "investigations of the... investigation" ignores many well-known problems and limitations of those episodes. Finally, his crude attempt to derogate all those studying this assassination deems only Mr. Kendall, not his unnamed targets.

For years, Los Angeles Times editorials have assailed public figures who have attempted to clarify uncertainties in this case, while evincing minimum concern about official errors and the withholding of basic public records. Like Mr. Kendall's recent sketch, such attacks have contributed little to serious understanding. Impartiality, care, and an interest in speaking "strictly" remain necessary if the unresolved issues of the Robert Kennedy assassination are to be dealt with responsibly in the future.

Sincerely,

-Robert J. Joling, Past President, American
Academy of Forensic Sciences

-Philip Melanson, Professor of Political
Science, Southeastern Massachusetts
University

-Gregory Stone, Graduate Program, Political
Science, University of Wisconsin, Madison

-Dr. Cyril Wecht, Former Coroner, Allegheny
County, Pennsylvania, Advisor on RFK
Autopsy

-David Wrone, Professor of History, University
of Wisconsin, Stevens Point