

For historians and friends, serious questions remain about the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. Last week, the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners voted to begin declassifying records of the investigation that have been kept secret for 17 years.

Opening the files on RFK

By Murray Dubin
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LOS ANGELES — The Warren Commission's 26-volume investigation of the assassination of John F. Kennedy is available to the public. So are substantial portions of the related FBI and CIA investigations.

Congress' 12-volume investigation into the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is on public record. And extensive records have been released in the investigations of the Lindbergh kidnapping case, the Rosenberg spy case and the Alger Hiss case.

But, today, more than 17 years after the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, the bulk of the law enforcement investigation into his death remains a secret, locked in five four-drawer file cabinets in the Los Angeles Police Department.

Kennedy's assailant, Sirhan B. Sirhan, was caught, tried, convicted and remains in prison. Yet for historians and friends of Kennedy's, there still remain serious questions surrounding his assassination on June 5, 1968.

Among those questions:
• Was another gunman involved? The number of bullet holes reported would suggest that another gun — fired by another person — was used in the shooting.

• Who was the attractive woman that witnesses told police they saw with Sirhan before the shooting?
• How could Sirhan have shot Kennedy from one to three feet away, as witnesses said, if the autopsy showed that some of the



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As Robert F. Kennedy was lying fatally wounded in the pantry of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, Sirhan B. Sirhan, above, was arrested and taken from the hotel shortly after the shooting on June 5, 1968.

questions about whether someone put him up to it. I want to know why the police were not in the hotel until 15 minutes later. I want to know why they didn't check the guns of the security guards to see if they were fired."

Melanson said that the questions regarding the killing fall into groups: who Sirhan's friends and associates were and a clearer picture of the evidence discovered at the crime scene.

wounds were caused by a weapon fired from one to three inches away?

Last week, the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners took the first step in addressing those questions by voting to start what promises to be a long and complicated process of declassifying the more than 50,000 pages of documents and 1,700 photographs in the police investigation of the Kennedy slaying.

"The board has shown a commitment to open government, and it recognizes the public's right to know," said Stephen D. Ysias, president of the civilian board. But, Ysias added, "a balance must be struck" between that commitment and the right to privacy and confidentiality for individuals.

The board voted to begin editing for public release an existing 1,500-page summary of the investigation after receiving letters and listening to testimony by historians, political scientists and archivists from across the country asking for full access to the records.

It also voted to develop a set of standards that would be followed in the release of the summary and the remaining thousands of pages — standards that would weigh considerations of confidentiality, privacy and national security. The board members said at the hearing last week that a likely repository for the records was a university archive.

"It's an excellent step forward," said Philip H. Melanson, director of the Robert F. Kennedy Assassination Archive at Southeastern Massachusetts University.

But, aware that the police commissioners said 10 years ago that the records should be made public, Melanson said that he and others "will be carefully watching that they fulfill their commitments. I'm sure they will."

"The records are of supreme political importance and are the primary investigative record of one of the major political assassinations of our time," he said.

On June 5, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy won the California primary, a victory that many believed would give him the momentum to win the Democratic nomination for president.



Los Angeles Times

That night, as he was leaving a victory celebration, he was shot to death in the pantry of the Ambassador Hotel. Five others were wounded.

The Los Angeles police created a task force, "Special Unit Senator," to investigate the crime. Their major conclusions were that Sirhan killed Kennedy and wounded the others and that there was no evidence of a conspiracy.

On April 17, 1969, Sirhan was convicted of first-degree murder. His death sentence was later overturned.

Beginning in 1969, police officials said that "the interests of the public and law enforcement are best served by full disclosure of the results of the investigation. . . ."

The police commission made similar statements in 1975. But today, 10 years later, the results of the investigation remain sealed. Melanson said one reason that information had been disclosed in the Martin Luther

King and John F. Kennedy slayings, and not in the Robert Kennedy murder, was that the federal government played only a minor role in the investigation of the 1968 shooting.

"In the Robert Kennedy case, the FBI assisted," he said.

"In the JFK case, we had the Warren Commission, and in the Martin Luther King case, the United States Congress reinvestigated the case; got documents from the Memphis police and published 12 volumes."

He added that the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office had disclosed its records of the Kennedy assassination and that the FBI had disclosed 4,000 pages of its files and was in the process of declassifying 28,000 more pages. Still, Melanson said, the bulk of the investigatory files remain with the police department.

In 1973 and 1974, former Rep. Allard

Lowenstein of New York and Paul Schrade, a Kennedy campaign coordinator, who was wounded the night of the assassination, tried to get certain questions answered by the police commission.

"The commission refused. The commission then was influenced by the department, it regulates, and I don't think the police wanted it released," Schrade said in an interview. "You have to understand that the [Sirhan] trial left a lot of unanswered questions."

"It was not the kind of trial where every effort was made in his defense. They were trying to keep him out of the gas chamber. So there weren't questions about whether other people were involved with Sirhan. And the police were not questioned about their files."

"My questions now? I want to know what happened in that room that night. I have

"Was he motivated or encouraged by others? Is what a lot of people ask," Melanson said. "There's enough in the released record to make you want to see more."

"In the FBI documents, witnesses say they saw Sirhan in the company of other people at Kennedy gatherings and functions in the weeks before the killing. Who were these people?"

"An off-duty policeman, a restaurateur and others say they saw him with an attractive woman in a number of instances. She crop up at the crime scene as well."

"Maybe there's nothing to it. Maybe he was with a number of attractive females. Maybe he picked up women."

Melanson said that without seeing the police files, the evidence at the crime appears contradictory.

"There were too many bullet holes for Sirhan's gun," he said. "Seven bullets were recovered from bodies and an eighth bullet from a ceiling tile. There were eight chambers for bullets in his gun. But there are reports of bullets hitting the door frame and the ceiling. Maybe we're talking about wild trajectories."

And there's a famous Associated Press picture with two policemen, pointing to a bullet hole in a door frame. Whose caption is that? The police? AP?"

Melanson said the questions do not end there.

There is a question whether Sirhan ever got close enough to inflict the wounds. Witnesses say he was one to three feet away, by according to the autopsy, some of the wounds came from a weapon fired at much closer range.

"From my perspective, even if there were not any evidence questions, these files are still important. This was a national tragedy," Melanson said.

With their vote last week, the commissioners ignored the wishes of Police Chief Dary F. Gates, who had recommended delay in the release of the files. Gates argued that in material in the files was still "sensitive" and that "there are still people around who would be seriously harmed" if the record were made public.