

Excessive Deletion Practices in Edited RFK Report

In most cases involving the censoring of names in the LAPD Summary Report on the assassination of Senator Kennedy the identities of the missing persons are difficult or impossible to determine. In some cases, however, the missing name is obvious or can be identified by careful work. A few examples of the latter situation follow. These illustrate the extremes to which needless deletions occurred in this work. This pattern, if extended, would be crippling to adequate public disclosure on the Robert F. Kennedy assassination.

1. "During the summer of 1955, *****, an ordained minister, met Bishara Sirhan while visiting Palestine. Bishara Sirhan asked him to assist him and his family to emigrate to the United States. The minister initially refused; however, after receiving several imploring letters from Bishara Sirhan, he made the arrangements." (Page 470, LAPD Summary Report)

The minister, Reverend Halder Lillenas, is mentioned on page 163 of Special Unit Senator (1970), the book about the case written by former LAPD Chief of Detectives Robert Houghton. Evidently Chief Houghton did not feel that this event, some thirteen years before the shooting, needed to be concealed. Furthermore, Lillenas is mentioned on page 476 of the FBI documents where it is stated that he died "five or six years" before the shooting. (The LAPD had full access to these files.) As noted in the letter written by Assistant City Attorney Unger, which is inserted at the beginning of the report, "The right to privacy generally does not continue after a person's death."

2. "*****, a co-employee at the Corona ranch with Sirhan, reported that she never dated Sirhan and that she had very few conversations with him. There were several references to ***** in the notebooks found in Sirhan's room." (Page 57)

Peggy Osterkamp's name was released by Chief Houghton (p. 91), the FBI (pp. 747, 749, 750) and Robert Kaiser, in his book "RFK Must Die!" (pp. 160, 190, 252...). In addition, Sirhan's notebooks containing her name were put in evidence during his trial, and have also been published.

3. "Sirhan's next known medical treatment came when ***** examined him for an injury to his left ankle, left index finger, and forehead after his arrest the night of the shooting. From all available evidence Sirhan was otherwise medically sound." (Page 55)

Why remove the name of Dr. Marcus Crahan, jail medical director? He is mentioned on five separate pages of the Kaiser book and no issue of privacy is involved. Similarly, in the report section concerning Sirhan's medical problems (p. 375) the names of the doctors who examined Sirhan were deleted for no apparent reason. The names of a dozen of these doctors were released during the trial, and can be found at the Federal Archives and Records Center at Laguna Niguel.

4. "The most publicized of the conspiracy allegations involving Sirhan was that of ***** who stated that she observed a girl in a black and white polka dot dress running from the scene of the shooting." (Page 62)

Since this was "the most publicized of the conspiracy allegations", why conceal Sandra Serrano's name? The Unger letter states that "on a few occasions, the Kennedy Report would indicate that the information included in the report had been obtained from an existing document which had already been publically released. If this was the case, the information would not be redacted unless it was defamatory on its face. It should be stressed that we did not look beyond the four corners of the Kennedy Report to determine if a fact included in the report had already been publically released..." Even assuming that the LAPD is unaware of many of the facts of the assassination, denoting this allegation as "the most publicized" shows that the episode had become public knowledge. The report also notes (p. 409) that Serrano voluntarily conducted an interview about her observations on national television less than two hours after the shooting. She is also mentioned extensively in the books by Chief Houghton, Kaiser, and Turner/Christian (The Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, 1978). Furthermore, she is named in numerous press stories, including one in the Los Angeles Times on the day after the shooting. A copy of this article can be found in the FBI files and presumably in the LAPD clipping files as well.

Referring to Serrano's testimony, the report goes on to say,

"***** account was substantiated somewhat by the account of ***** who was in the kitchen at the time of the shooting." (Page 62)

Vincent Di Pierro, the man in the kitchen, hardly needs his anonymity protected, since he testified publicly at the Grand Jury two days after the shooting, and as a prosecution witness at the trial. He was also mentioned by Chief Houghton (pp. 118, 124, 255, 288...), Kaiser (pp. 73-75, 111, 120-121, 129...) and the FBI (pp. 242, 378, 381...).

5. "On June 11, 1968, an article about Sirhan appeared in two Orange County newspapers alleging that he had been present at a Peace and Freedom Party meeting on May 21, 1968, in Los Angeles. The article referred to ***** the leader of a Cuban anti-Castro group who had allegedly become involved in an argument with Sirhan." (Page 67)

Once again a deletion is made that violates the rules set out in the accompanying policy letter. The name had been published in two Orange County newspapers, but the editing of the police report 17 years later conceals it. Also, Jose Duarte, the anti-Castro leader, is mentioned by Kaiser (p. 148), Turner/Christian (pp. 88. 114. 115...) and the FBI (pp. 837, 842, 846...).

6. "In early August 1968 ***** a newspaper writer and ***** turned free lance writer, entered into ***** investigation. ***** contacted this Department offering his assistance and he suggested that he would like to work with the Department..." (Page 82)

John Christian and William Turner, the two writers who wanted to involve themselves in the Owen investigation, detail this event in their major book on the case (see 4 above). Having chosen not to publish their book anonymously, they have no need of continued protection of their identities.

7. "***** who became involved in the most complicated allegation of conspiracy that developed in this investigation..." (Page 80)

Jerry Owen, known to some as the "walking bible", is mentioned extensively in the Kaiser and Turner/Christian books. Mr. Owen was named prominently by Los Angeles District Attorney Younger at his May 28, 1969 press conference and is featured in un-edited investigative files made public at the Sirhan trial (Exhibit 87). Furthermore, he took part in a highly publicized trial in 1975 concerning his claims during the Kennedy investigation, in which the police department was involved. Documents about Mr. Owen have also been made public by the FBI (pp. 323, 328).

8. "...a girl with a polka dot dress was in the pantry area when the shooting occurred. ***** a Kennedy girl, was wearing a bright green dress with gold polka dots at the Ambassador Hotel the evening of June 4, 1968." (Page 421)

Why delete the name of Valerie Schulte? She is mentioned in Chief Houghton's book (p. 277, 287, 290), in Kaiser's book (p. 25, 26, 386) and in the Turner/Christian book (p. 81). She testified as a prosecution witness at the trial and her name appears in documents released by the FBI (pp. 79-97).

9. "***** telephonically contacted the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department on June 7, 1968, and informed them she believed she was the girl in the polka dot dress wanted by this Department. ***** told detectives she was at the Ambassador on June 4-5, 1968, and was wearing a green dress with a orange polka dot scarf around her neck." (Page 418)

Cathy Fulmer was mentioned in Chief Houghton's book (p. 83), in Kaiser's book (p. 120) and in the Turner/Christian book (p. 69). In addition, she died in 1969 and, as noted in the City Attorney letter, her death removes the grounds for personal anonymity. This death is noted in Chief Houghton's book on page 145.

10. "The search for Sirhan's vehicle produced a sales receipt for .22 caliber ammunition sold by the Lock Stock 'N Barrell Gun Shop. The clerk who made the sale was identified as *****." (Page 497)

The clerk, Larry Arnot, was identified by Chief Houghton (p. 111) and Kaiser (p. 118). He testified for the prosecution at the Sirhan trial, and his name has long been public knowledge. Arnot is clearly identified in FBI documents (p. 98) that were released in the 1970's.

11. "***** saw Sirhan stop and talk to the blond and made gestures with his hands, pointing at both the rear sight and the front sight of her weapon. After several minutes the blond said, 'You son of a bitch,' or 'Goddamn you, you son of a bitch, get away from me. They will recognize us.'" (Page 505)

The name of Everett Buckner requires no concealment. Like others whose names are being excised in 1986, he testified at the Sirhan trial in 1969. Also, he was mentioned in Chief Houghton's book (pp. 208-209), Kaiser's book (pp. 118. 156) and by the FBI (pp. 68, 72, 671...).

12. On pages 368-369, the names of most of Sirhan's former employers are excised. Why? No serious privacy issue is at stake and several of these names, such as Bert Altfillisch and John Weidner, have been released by Houghton, Younger and other sources.

13. "***** is a collector for the Sanitation Department. Mr. ***** met Sirhan in connection with him (sic) employment..." (Page 909)

The trash collector is Alvin Clark, a witness at the trial who was mentioned by Chief Houghton (p. 244), Kaiser (pp. 387, 484) and by the FBI (pp. 16, 173). He is mentioned elsewhere (p. 611) by name in the LAPD Summary Report: "Alvin Clark, a trash collector for the City of Pasadena advised investigators that he had known Sirhan during 1967 and 1968..." (In other instances as well names disclosed on one page are censored elsewhere.)

14. In its discussion about Sirhan's first years in America, the report consistently reverses judgements about requirements of privacy which were made by Chief Houghton in his published 1970 book. A few examples of this practice follow:

Report: "***** Sirhan's sixth grade teacher, could recall nothing of Sirhan except his unique name. ***** however, made notations on Sirhan's school achievement records dated January 1957, and June 1957. These notes reflected that Sirhan had a language handicap, tried hard and was showing improvement in all areas. He was cooperative, well-mannered, well-liked and made many new friends. Sirhan's personal record shows that he maintained a C+ average at Longfellow..." (Page 353)

Houghton: "His teacher, Mr. Floyd Fraley, was not able to remember anything special about Sirhan other than his strange double name. There were a few comments inscribed on his school records, however, between January and June of 1957. These notes indicate that he had a language problem but was 'trying hard' to overcome it, and 'showed improvement'. He was, moreover, 'co-operative, well mannered, and well-liked'. He made 'many new friends'. He graduated in June with a C-plus average. (Page 162)

Report: "***** was a classmate of Sirhan in a Social Studies class and an English class...(Sirhan) often argued ***** in class; and, if not called upon during discussions, waved his hand and snapped his fingers to get teacher's attention. She recalled that Sirhan frequently compared his country with the United States. She thought his country was Syria. He gave the impression he did not care about the United States, and she wondered why he did not return to his own country." (Page 355)

Houghton: "One of the girls...remembered that Sirhan was always 'arguing' with the teacher, waving his hand angrily and snapping his fingers impatiently to get the teacher's attention if he was not immediately called upon to speak. He would often compare life in the United States with how things were done in 'his country', Carol Neal recalled. She had thought his country was Syria and wondered, since he was being so critical of the United States, why he did not return to it." (Page 164)

Report: "***** taught Sirhan English and Social Studies ten hours a week during the 1959-1960 year...Other students teased Sirhan because of his nationality and did not associate with him. ***** states that he was of Armenian extraction and was quite friendly with Sirhan. He felt that he understood Sirhan's problems as a foreigner. (Page 354)

Houghton: "Mr. Samuel Soghomonian, his teacher of English and Social Studies, recalled that because Sirhan was darker than any other student in his class and a 'foreigner', some students 'teased' him. Soghomonian, himself of Armenian ancestry, could easily empathize with Sirhan's isolated position in school." (Page 164)

15. Forty known witnesses have given official testimony that is relevant to Sirhan Sirhan's actions at the San Gabriel Valley Gun Club on June 4, 1968. The edited summary provides only three of these names (Corliss Edwards, Claudia Williams, Ronald Glen Williams) in its interview section. Another three witnesses (Dean Pack, Margie Thorn, Robert White) were apparently not listed in the interview section, and the other thirty-four witnesses had their names deleted.

These deletions are unnecessary, as illustrated by the fact that all forty names were released at Evelle Younger's press conference in 1969. These interviews have been part of the trial record for sixteen years. Most of these forty names also appear in the FBI reports which have been released. In addition, three of these individuals (Lloyd Hager, Rent Foss, Russell Doyle Weaver) are noted specifically in Chief Houghton's book.

The above examples are important primarily as illustrations of unjustifiably restrictive policies in recent censorship work. Such problems are by no means limited to the deletion of proper names, but apply to other important case information as well. Discovery of the exact information excised is occasionally possible for proper names, however, making possible precise before-and-after comparison. As shown, recent redaction work has been dramatically more restrictive than that of the FBI, the District Attorney's office, the former chief of detectives of the LAPD, and of past practices involving LAPD materials themselves.

Overwhelmingly more typical than these are cases in which the information censored is not otherwise available to the public. Such cases pose a fundamental and clear-cut test of access to the basic facts of the Robert Kennedy assassination.