Test Case

In the trial of Sirhan Sirhan there are two defendants. The first, of course, is the 25-year-old Jordanian immigrant accused of murdering Sen. Robert Kennedy. The second is the clinical psychologist and his ability to diagnose diseases of the mind. To save Sirhan's life, defense lawyers hope to prove that the youth was unable to "maturely and meaningfully" understand the nature of his crime during that violent moment last June in the pantry of the Ambassador Hotel. "The medical testimony," says chief defense lawyer Grant Cooper, "is the guts of our case."

In presenting the arcana of psychological measurement before a jury of laymen, defense lawyers for Sirhan assumed a formidable task. At best, psychological testing is as much an art as a science, and even experts disagree about their findings. "The personality cannot be measured quantitatively like body temperature," notes a New York psychiatrist, "and there is no standard of a 'normal' personality."

Psychotic: Two key defense witnesses were Drs. Martin M. Schorr and O. Roderick Richardson, both of whom subjected Sirhan to a battery of psychological tests. Unfortunately, Schorr also provided the defense with its first serious setback; the 45-year-old clinical psychologist, who practices in San Diego, was forced under cross-examination to admit that he had taken passages from "Casebook of a Crime Psychiatrist" by Dr. James Brussel of New York to add color to his own description of Sirhan's personality. The admission, together with the fact that Schorr had volunteered to enter the case for the defense, gave prosecution attorneys reason to question his expert conclusions and professional detachment. However, the integrity of Dr. Richardson, a former clinical tester for the California Youth Authority, has not been challenged by the prosecution lawyers—and his findings support those of his colleague. Both psychologists concluded that Sirhan is definitely psychotic, showing traits of both schizophrenia and paranoia.

To arrive at their diagnosis, Schorr and Richardson gave Sirhan five standard psychological tests. The first was the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, an IQ test that can also be used to detect psychotic tendencies. The Wechsler measures vocabulary, general knowledge, mathematical ability and other, nonverbal, skills. Test subjects, for example, are asked to examine pictures, such as a door without a knob, and detect the items that are missing. In this part of the Wechsler, Sirhan regressed to infantile behavior, and Schorr said he "fragmented" under conditions of stress.

A second "objective" test for studying Sirhan's psyche was the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. The MMPI is a series of 551 statements requiring true or false answers. The way a subject answers groups of questions—or avoids them—is supposed to divulge abnormal tendencies including hypochondria ("I frequently have bad headaches"), depression ("I am worried about something all the time"), and schizophrenia ("Sometimes my soul leaves my body"). Schorr based his conclusion that Sirhan was paranoid partly on the fact that he avoided responding to such statements as "I have not lived the right kind of life," "The top of my head is tender," and "I like to know important people because it makes me feel important."

Limitations: The MMPI, which has been widely used in hospitals, is open to serious criticism. Some psychologists consider that some of the test statements present an oversimplified picture of the personality. A desire to be a soldier, for instance, is equated with masculinity. Moreover, some statements can be misinterpreted. "Because of the test's limitations," notes Dr. Robert Holt, co-director of New York University's Research Center for Mental Health, "the judgment and interpretive ability of the psychologist are of paramount importance."

The MMPI and Wechsler tests seem crude because they are objective tests requiring simple "right" answers. For this reason, Sirhan's defense experts placed most emphasis on the results of "projective" tests, which purportedly provide a deeper insight into a subject's mind because they require him to draw upon his imagination and experience. Of these, the most familiar one used on Sirhan was the Rorschach "ink-blot" test.

Forms: In the Rorschach, the subject is shown ten cards and asked what the blots suggest. Most people, for example, will see a butterfly in one card; the same card seen as a hawk diving on a bird or two men fighting might suggest an aggressive personality. The number of different forms a subject sees in each card is as important to the test as the actual descriptions.

Sirhan's Rorschach responses, according to the two defense psychologists, pointed to paranoia, schizophrenia—or both. Hostility and aggression were evident, they said, from the animal forms that Sirhan said he saw—"a monster charging at me," "scarred seals," and "a crushed frog." The tendency to see figures at the top of ink blots, according to Richardson, indicated the grandiose "flight to the heights" of paranoid thinking. Schorr even detected pathology in an apparently innocent description of "two Watusi" on one of the cards. Watusi, Schorr testified, are black, and a tendency to stress blackness suggested depression and homicidal and suicidal impulses.

The prosecution argued that some of the supposedly pathological images that Sirhan saw in the ink blots could be explained by common sense. Sirhan's references to blood, and body parts, prosecuting attorney David Fitts argued, might simply reflect the youth's avowed interest in biology. "If the only meaning I could find is that he wants to be a doctor," snapped Richardson, "my colleagues would tell me to turn in my blots."

Another clinical psychologist called by the defense, Dr. George DeVos, admitted under cross-examination that the Rorschach may not clearly separate the nor-

Los Angeles Times Photo

Using the Rorschach in the psychological defense of Sirhan: The 'Watusi' blot and the 'charging monster' blot

mal from the merely neurotic, but added that it is more accurate in diagnosing severe psychosis. He also agreed, when confronted with a passage from a clinical psychology text, that although the test may uncover a pathological personality structure, it can't predict whether an individual will definitely show the defect in his behavior.

There was less criticism of the fourth test given to Sirhan, the so-called Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), in which the subject is asked to tell a simple story about the people in a picture. To the defense psychologists, one of the most revealing cards shown Sirhan depicted a man standing next to a bed on which a half-nude woman lay. "He just did this thing with the girl and he feels bad about it," Sirhan told Schorr. "He's going right home to mother." The psychologist's interpretation: Sirhan's mother has dominated his life and made him feel ashamed of sexual feelings. Richardson supported this view with the results of his own tests. When shown the same card by Richardson, the accused speculated about whether the girl had been strangled or raped, indicating strong feelings of aggression and hostility in connection with sex.

Mind: One limitation of the TAT, some examiners think, is that the stories a subject makes up may be affected more by his cultural background than the state of his mind. "You show a card with a birthday cake on the table to a kid in the ghetto," notes psychiatrist Brussel, "and he won't know what's going on."

Sirhan's final test was the Bender Gestalt in which he was asked to copy a series of nine line or dot drawings. The tendency of Sirhan's figures to overlap one another indicated to the psychologists signs of psychosis. Some of these interpretations were quickly attacked on cross-examination. When Schorr attached great significance to the fact that Sirhan had redrawn a horizontal figure in a vertical position, prosecuting attorney John Howard suggested that he might simply have run out of room on the paper.

In the courtroom wrangling over the accuracy of individual tests, an important fact about their usefulness may have been overlooked. Nearly all psychologists agree that no one test is enough to establish the mental state of anyone. All must be evaluated together with the insight gained from detailed psychiatric interviews. This point became clear when Dr. Bernard L. Diamond, one of California's leading forensic psychiatrists, dramatically described his study of Sirhan while under hypnosis and corroborated the findings of the psychologists. From the evidence he produced, Diamond argued that Sirhan killed Kennedy because he was in a "dissociated state" induced by self-hypnosis. Whether or not the jury decides that Sirhan was not consciously able to control his actions the night of June 5, the most important tenet of clinical psychology will remain: the test is no better than the tester.

TRANSITION

Died: JOSEPH KASAVUBU, 56, the "father of Congolese independence," a quiet ex-civil servant who led the campaign for freedom from Belgian colonialism, became the Congo's first President in 1960 and brought off a miracle of African politics simply by hanging onto his job for five years, doggedly fending off rivals and riding out civil wars and other turmoil until Gen. Joseph Mobutu finally ousted him; of a stroke, in Boma, the Congo, March 24.

■ MAX EASTMAN, 86, author, poet and flaming radical of the era surrounding World War I, though he mellowed drastically enough to become an ardent anti-Communist who spent his last 28 years in the Establishment camp as a roving editor for Reader's Digest; of a stroke, in Bridgetown, Barbados, March 25. Son of parents who were both Congregationalist ministers in upstate New York, the young

Newsweek—Robert R. McElroy

Max Eastman: From left to right

Eastman was a prototype of today's rebellious youth, minus the four-letter words and plus a fine writer's wit and style. He campaigned against the draft, crusaded for women's suffrage and embraced all the isms from pacifism to Marxism, along with all the girls who shared his view that "lust is sacred." Visiting Russia in the 1920s, he took a penetrating look at what was going on and launched what turned into a massive shift to the right by writing a book denouncing Stalin. Strangely enough, considering that political and social controversy were his real meat, Eastman's most memorable encounter was a physical clash—his 1937 shoving match with Ernest Hemingway, who was enraged by an Eastman essay demeaning Papa for "a literary style, you might say, of wearing false hair on the chest."

■ B. TRAVEN, 79, pen name of the author of "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" and other novels, a man so secretive that he never admitted his identity, though he was believed to have been a Chicago-born ex-seaman named Berick Traven Torsvan, who settled in Mexico; of a heart attack, in Mexico City, March 27.

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