

# Shock

Some are convinced these killings came as the inevitable expression of a violent streak in the American people, bred down to savagery by comic strips, the press, the movies, television and lawless youth. This theory forgets that assassination is an instrument of history which—long before Brutus and ever since—self-appointed executioners have used to obliterate political or social unorthodoxies that torment them.

In the U.S. in 1968 the assassinations of two distinguished men fell one atop the other in stunning sequence. Both were strong men and measurably unorthodox as well. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in the forefront of revolution, struggling to raise a people to dignity and status. Senator Robert F. Kennedy was campaigning for the Presidency with peace at home and peace in Vietnam as his banners. King was killed for his life work, Kennedy for a minor aspect of his political beliefs—American support for Israel.

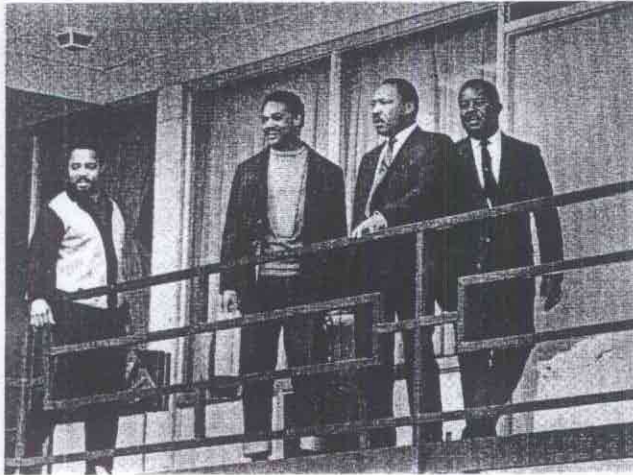
Except for their own doom, what did the assassins leave behind? Nothing. No triumph, no fundamental change, nothing except such weary comfort as the bereaved could offer to one another.



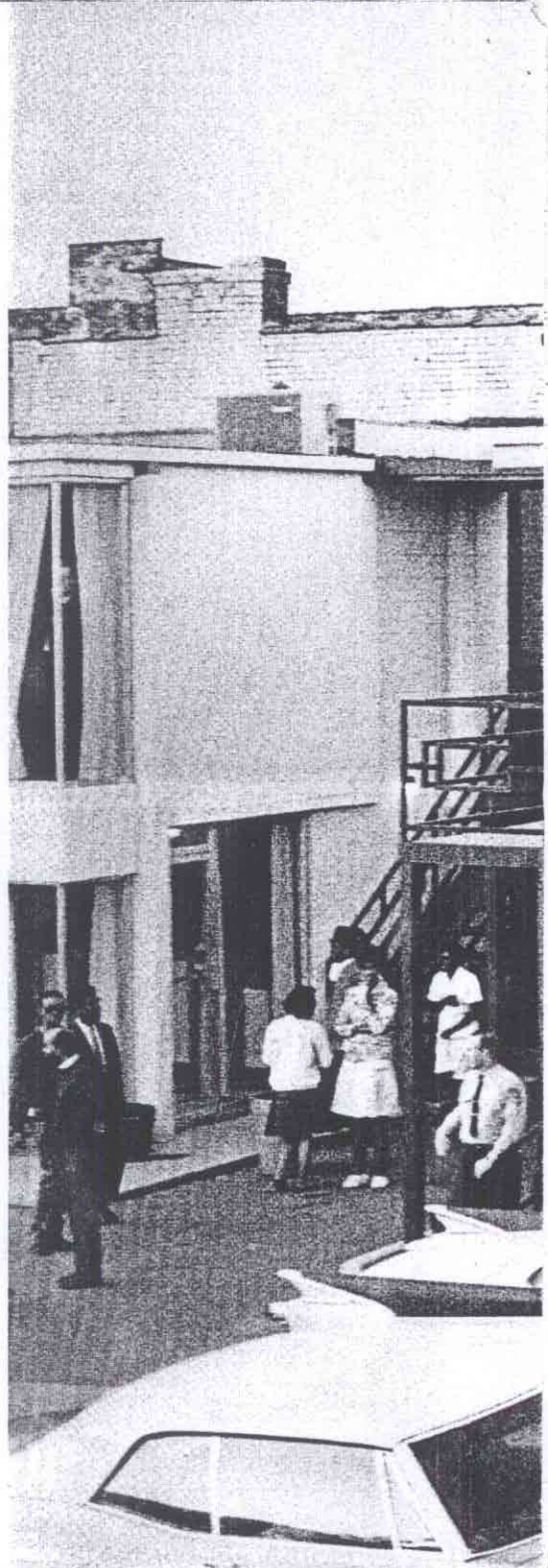


The ambush overtook Dr. King in what, for him, was a casual and pleasant spring evening before the dangerous work ahead—a protest march to support Negro workmen in Memphis. Inside his room in the Lorraine Motel—a room which has since been set aside as a shrine by Walter Bailey, the manager—he was dressing to go out for dinner at the home of a young Memphis civil rights worker. He had berated his shirt collar for being too tight and cussed at his necktie for being absent without leave. And he had kidded his host that his bride was probably too young to know how to cook “soul food” to his liking.

“Maybe some of you people have a worry,” he had told his friends. “Not me. I faced the question of my death a long time ago.” Others faced it less calmly than he did. Rioting set off by Dr. King’s assassination, by a Department of Justice count, cost 46 persons killed, 2,561 injured and 21,271 arrested in 76 American cities.



King stood with followers (above). A moment later he was down. As one tried to stanch blood with a towel, others frantically pointed to where the shot had come from.



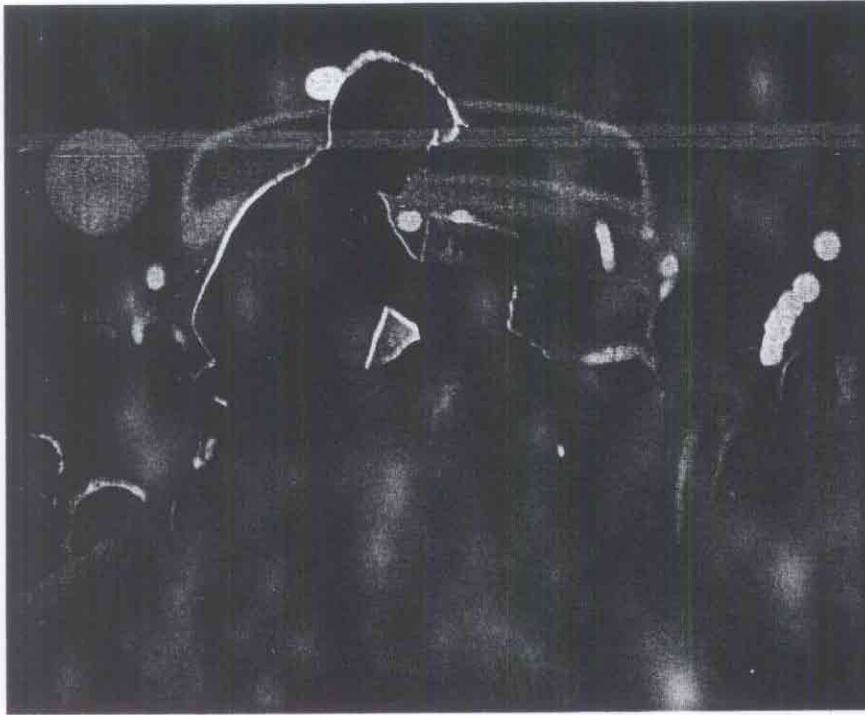


Senator Kennedy's political career had come to crisis—and to physical exhaustion. He had driven himself to fight for Oregon, had lost it and he was bone weary. But then, finding some untapped wellspring of the spirit, he responded with beseeching arms and pleading fervor to the wild and scary adulation of California's Mexican-American throngs. Toward the end he had to quit, unable to finish a speech in San Diego.

On the day of the California primary he slept late, then swam with the kids and got a bump on his forehead hauling his son David from under the surge of a huge roller. His personal tide came in that

night as, at first, he watched the returns alone in his Ambassador Hotel bedroom or conferred with Ted Sorensen in the bathroom. South Dakota came in; it was his. California was coming and somebody asked him what he would do if he won it—he had already. He grinned tiredly, "Have a drink. Maybe three."

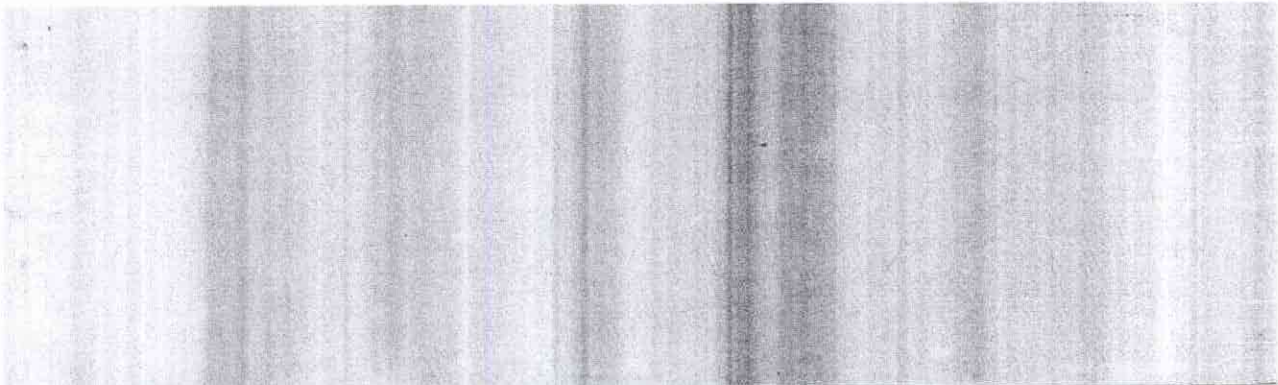
When triumph was certain, Kennedy and those closest to him went down in two elevators to the Embassy Room and he made a victory speech. Then he wanted to see reporters. It was decided that he should avoid crowd pressure by going through the kitchen corridors. A man with a gun was there.



Robert Kennedy needed the touch of people and they needed his. Here, in the glare of campaign lights, they exchanged. And then (right), in the back hallways of

the Ambassador Hotel, a hand he had just touched, that of busboy Juan Romero, was stretched out again to give him help where no help could any longer be of avail.





**I**f assassination be reckoned an act of high moral—though mad—passion, it is next to impossible to see James Earl Ray in the role. After 107 days of pursuit, the accused killer of Dr. King was led back to Memphis in shackles, clumsy in bulletproof vest and pants. But more telling was his demeanor: meek, glumly downcast, defeated and drained. Could this be a killer, an avenger with fire in his heart?

His trial, to begin in March, may reveal more of the man. But little in his record could mark him zealous. He had been a loser most of his life, even when he was a 13-year-old sixth-grader in Ewing, Mo. (below). He had dropped out of all schooling at 16. Much of his life had been lived in jails and prisons, mostly for relatively petty crimes. His most violent deed was armed robbery. He had been serving time for this when, in April 1967, he succeeded on his third attempt to escape from the Missouri State Penitentiary.

There was no hint anywhere that he might have felt a personal urge to kill Dr. King—except the vague one that, in prisons, he had often been abused by stronger prisoners, some of them Negro. A prison psychiatrist said only that Ray seemed "obsessed" by strange fears which he could sometimes expiate by "ritualistic acts."

Ray's colorless and hangdog presence has led some to give credence to a theory that King's killing was a conspiracy and that Ray's part in it was, at most, that of a hapless decoy. This theory may be developed as his defense.





**I**f there exists a classical mold for the assassin, Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, Senator Kennedy's accused killer, would fit it in a way Ray never could. Sirhan is thin, wiry, intense, brooding, often a loner and obsessed with an idea and a passion.

Sirhan, a Christian Arab, was born in Jerusalem. His family was uprooted by the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, when he was only 4. He got his first schooling, as a virtual charity case, in a Lutheran institution in the Arab city. Unlike Ray, he was a bright student. "He was a clever boy—very quick—but unstable and very unhappy," his former pastor-schoolmaster recalls. Unhappiness might have been Sirhan's lot in any case: he came of a large and difficult family. His mother was an inflexible religious zealot, his father a harsh man who beat his sons. The family came to the U.S. in 1957 but the father, uneasy in an alien land, returned to Palestine.

In the U.S., Sirhan again did well in school. But he was sensitive and quick to take offense. When an employer criticized him mildly, he stiffened up and said, "You're telling me I'm a liar. I'm quitting."

Sirhan was taken with gun in hand within feet of where Kennedy lay dying. He struggled against his captors and demanded—fruitlessly—to be allowed to explain. Possibly the explanation lay in his room at home where a notebook, it has been reported, was found bearing a notation: "Kennedy must die by June 5"—the anniversary of 1967's Arab-Israeli war.

