

# Why Robert Kennedy Was Killed

The Story of Two Victims.  
By Godfrey Jansen.

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By J. ANTHONY LUKAS

As Robert F. Kennedy lay dying on that kitchen floor in Los Angeles, Rafer Johnson, the former decathlon champion then acting as one of Kennedy's bodyguards, turned to the young assassin he had pinned to the steam table and shouted a question which soon reverberated in the minds of millions of Americans:

"Why did you do it?"

As with much that happened in that terrible hour, there is considerable disagreement about Sirhan Sirhan's response. Some eyewitnesses say he didn't answer at all. Some say he shouted "Let me explain. I can explain," but gave no explanation. Others say he then added: "I did it for my country. I love my country."

In this book, Godfrey Jansen calls those "the missing words" because they were not reported by most of the American press (including The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, Life and Time), although they were initially dispatched by The Associated Press and The United Press. Jansen notes that Jesse Unruh, leader of Kennedy's campaign in California, at first reported Sirhan told him the same thing in a police car on the way to the station house; but later Unruh wasn't sure just what Sirhan said, and the two policemen in the car said they couldn't recall any such words.

Jansen sees a pattern in these shaky memories and the resultant omissions. He believes the missing words "make clear that Sirhan's was a political action undertaken from patriotic feelings for his homeland, Palestine" and that those who deny the words were ever spoken may be trying to play down that aspect of the assassination.

This book is an effort to rectify such "distortions" up to and through Sirhan's trial, to establish that the assassination was the result of misguided American support for Israeli aggression, and to warn the American public that it can expect further repercussions on its own soil unless it changes its Middle East policies.

Jansen makes no claim to scholarly or even journalistic dispassion.

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The book is openly written from the Arab point of view. Its foreword is by Abdeen Jabara, a Michigan lawyer of Lebanese descent, who assisted the defense team in the trial but grew increasingly frustrated in his attempt to stress the Arab-Israeli issue there. Jansen, though born in Burma and educated in India, has lived for many years in the Arab world (first as head of the Indian legation in Beirut and now as a correspondent for Indian newspapers) and plainly shares its antipathy for Israel and her supporters in the West.

Despite this obvious bias, much of what he writes has the ring of truth. Through interviews with Sirhan's family and friends in Jordan, he builds a convincing picture of what it must have been like to grow up in the midst of a civil war: Sirhan, not yet 4 years old, witnessing a raid by Jewish terrorists near the Damascus Gate; seeing his brother hit and killed by an Army truck during a gun battle; finding their grocer dead in a pool of blood. But he is less convincing when he tries to show how this early trauma swelled and festered into a determination to kill Robert Kennedy.

Without difficulty Jansen documents Kennedy's efforts to woo Jewish voters in the primary states that spring. He cites speeches the Senator made in several temples, often wearing the yarmulke, calling for increased United States support for Israel. He points to the television program, "The Story of Robert Kennedy," which told of Bobby's 1948 visit to Israel while an Israeli flag fluttered on the screen for nearly 30 seconds. And he noted the Senator's "promise" to send 50 Phantom jets to Israel.

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runs head on into one fact: Sirhan's decision to kill Kennedy was recorded in his notebook ("RFK must die. RFK must be killed. Robert F. Kennedy must be assassinated.") on May 18—before most of the temple appearances, two days before the famous television show was aired in Los Angeles, eight days before the promise about the jets.

Still, on the witness stand, Sirhan sometimes took the "Arab patriot" line himself. He denounced the "Zionist takeover" in the Middle East, saying Kennedy's pro-Israel views "burned me up; if he were in front of me, the way I felt then, so help me God, he would have died right then and there."

But others saw him differently. Dr. Bernard L. Diamond, a psychiatrist who testified at the trial, said: "Sirhan would rather believe that he is the fanatical martyr who by his noble act of self-sacrifice has saved his people and become a great hero. . . . However, I see Sirhan as small and helpless, pitifully ill, with a demented psychotic rage, out of control of his own consciousness and his own actions, subject to bizarre, dissociated trances."

Even Sirhan suggested at times that his motivation was far more complex. When Al Fatah, the Arab Commando organization, distributed thousands of posters featuring pictures of Sirhan over the words, "I did it for my country," Robert Kaiser, a writer serving on the defense staff, asked him how he felt about that. "Well," Sirhan said, "the shot was expended. I might as well make the best of it."

That is just what Godfrey Jansen has done. Once the shot was fired and Kennedy was dead—an act which, in itself, did nothing to aid the Arabs—advocates of the Palestinian cause sought to make the best of it by turning Sirhan's act into an object lesson in Middle East politics. Perhaps that makes good politics; it makes a bad book. ¶

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