

Some Answers and Questions

Almost before the sound of the shots died away, conspiracy theorists began questioning whether Sirhan Bishara Sirhan acted alone on June 5, 1968 when he killed Senator Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel. Last week, a seven-man panel of forensic experts cleared up some of the controversies about the shooting. But their carefully hedged findings left unanswered other troublesome questions about what

by the manufacturer—while the others had two concentric grooves. If so, that would at least raise the possibility that two guns were used, since it could be argued that the assailant was unlikely to load his gun with two kinds of bullets.

But the experts demolished this hypothetical line of reasoning by determining that the Kennedy bullet had two grooves like the others. What was more, by comparing all three bullets closely, the panel was able to decide unequivocally that they all were fired by the same gun.

But was it Sirhan's gun? Trying to answer that basic question, the experts discovered that the bullet-marking characteristics of Sirhan's Iver Johnson .22-cal. revolver had changed since the night it was fired in the Ambassador Hotel. The panel found that the inside of the barrel was fouled by a thin layer of copper alloy that probably stemmed from test firings by the Los Angeles police. The panel squeezed off eight shots into a tank of water, compared the bullets with the original three, studied the barrel of Sirhan's gun, and finally gave up. They announced that they could not say for sure that the three bullets had been fired by Sirhan's gun. Nor, on the other hand, could they rule out that possibility.

When added to evidence previously established, the panel's findings did make it seem much more certain that

Sirhan's gun had done the damage. There is no question that he was shooting at Kennedy. Weisel and Goldstein were also in his line of fire. The bullets that hit all three men came from the same gun.

But some experts still recommend that further studies be made to settle once and for all whether or not Sirhan was acting alone. There are puzzling claims that another gun was firing that night during the melee. Although Sirhan's revolver had a capacity of only eight bullets, some critics argue that more than eight shots were fired, noting that Kennedy himself was hit three times, that five bystanders were wounded, and that there were a number of unexplained holes in the ceiling. There

is also the claim that Sirhan was at the wrong angle to—or distance from—Kennedy to have inflicted the wounds that killed him. Considering all of these unresolved possibilities, Robert Joling, president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, declared last week: "Let's take the next scientific steps and get all the answers out front once and for all."

What steps, if any, will be undertaken to tie up the loose ends remain unclear. Neither Godfrey Isaac, Sirhan's lawyer, nor Schrade now intends to push for further investigations. Says Schrade: "I feel tremendously relieved that we resolved the major question, essentially that there was one gun. We have eliminated as much doubt as possible." Enough skeptics remain, however, to virtually guarantee that questions about the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy—like that of his brother John—will continue to simmer for years.



FIREARMS EXPERT TESTING SIRHAN'S PISTOL
Blasting the two-gun advocates.

actually did happen during the flurry of violence that left Kennedy dying on the hotel pantry's concrete floor.

The study was ordered by California Superior Court Justice Robert A. Wenke at the request of CBS, which plans to do a documentary on the assassination, and Paul Schrade, a Kennedy campaign aide who was wounded in the head during the shooting. Schrade explained that he just wanted to get the questions about Kennedy's death cleared up. "I don't have a conspiracy theory," he said. "I'm neutral."

The experts were charged by Judge Wenke to determine if the bullets recovered from Kennedy's neck and from the wounded bystanders, Ira Goldstein and William Weisel, were fired from the same gun. The "two gun" advocates had relied heavily upon the 1970 findings of Pasadena Criminologist William W. Harper; using a Balliscan, a specialized camera used to photograph a cylindrical object rotated in front of it, he decided that the recovered Kennedy bullet had only one cannellure—a groove imprinted