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TESTING THE RFK MURDER GUN

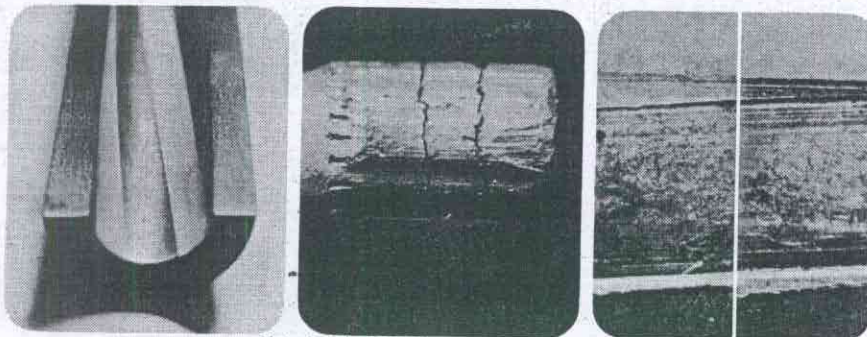


In the seven years since Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was murdered by Sirhan B. Sirhan in a Los Angeles hotel kitchen, stubborn skeptics have insisted that Sirhan did not act alone—and the main evidence they cite is a set of ballistics studies in 1970 that seemed to show that one of the bullets that struck Kennedy did not match a bullet that wounded a nearby newsman. The protagonists of the “second gun” theory have demanded new studies, including a refiring of Sirhan’s .22-caliber revolver, and they want the results checked by specialists independent of the Los Angeles district attorney’s office. Last summer, a superior court in Los Angeles ordered a re-examination of the ballistics evidence—and this week a panel of ballistics experts will begin work.

First, the experts will have to decide if the revolver is still in condition to be fired and the original bullets still in good enough shape for fresh comparisons. The district attorney’s office insists that an accurate new test is impossible because both the bullets

and the weapon have deteriorated. If the experts think the test would be valid, they will then conduct a test firing and compare the newly discharged bullets with the two bullets taken from Kennedy’s body and the one taken from the newsman. The main ballistic markings they might check are (1) the striations, or linear scratches, made on the bullets by imperfections in the pistol’s barrel; (2) the rifling marks made by the spiral grooves in the barrel that give the bullet its spin; (3) the knurled grooves (known technically as cannelures) built into some bullets by the manufacturers.

The experts may also decide to conduct a spectrographic analysis of the metallic content of the bullets from Kennedy and the other victims to see if they can determine whether all the bullets came from the same batch. The new tests, if they are made, could take several weeks.



Photos by Robert R. McElroy—Newsweek

NYPD

Sirhan’s gun (above); examples (l to r) of barrel rifling, cannelures and striations