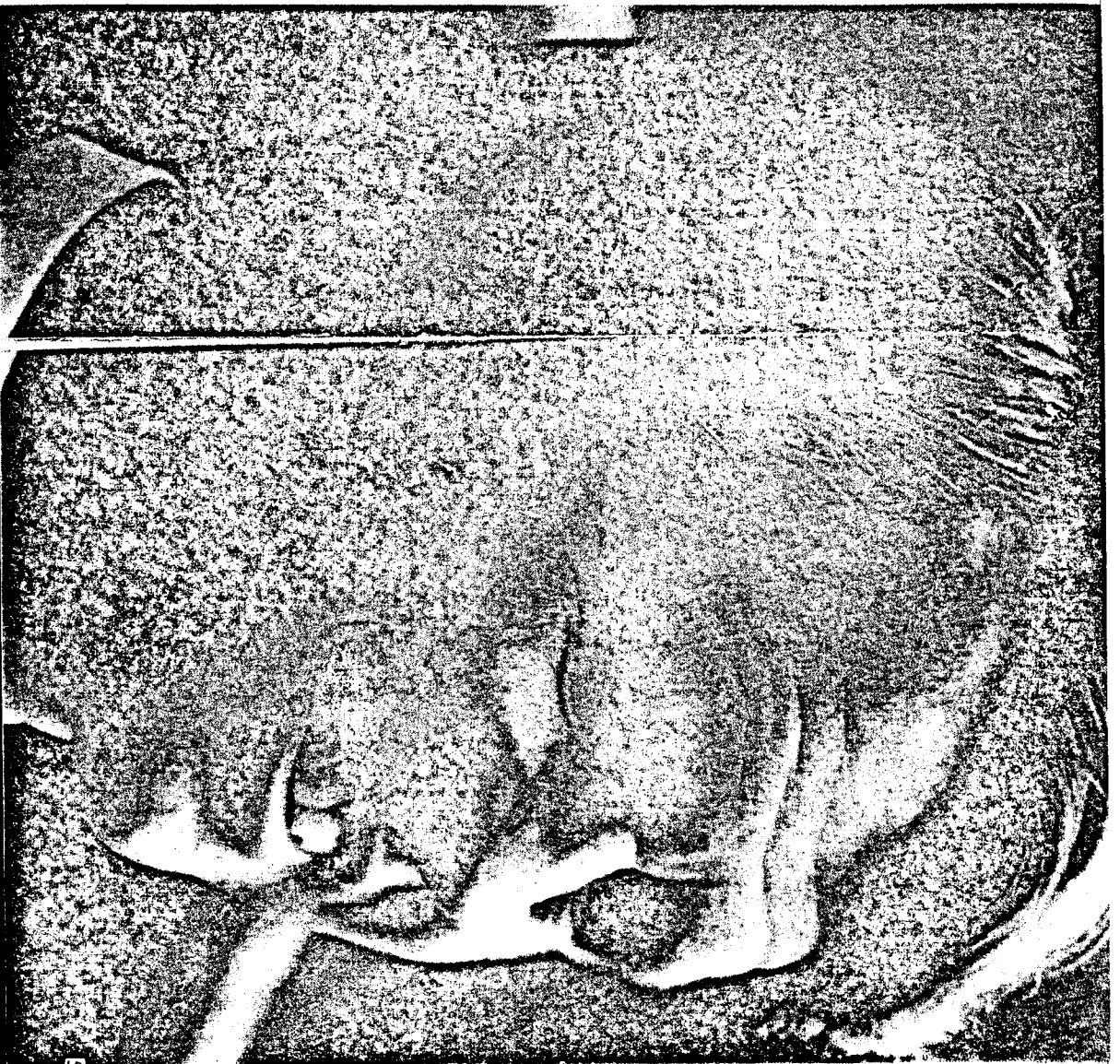


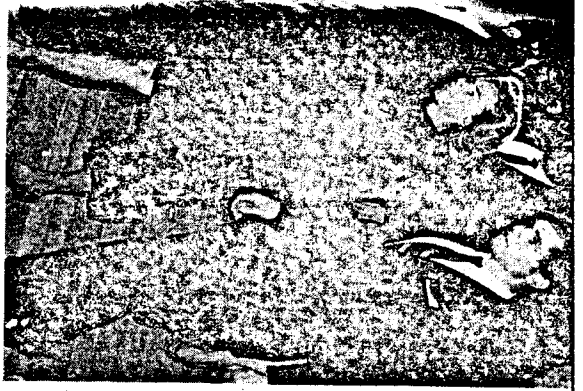
one year later: The Unanswered Questions About Bob Kennedy's Death

BY TIMOTHY HIGGINS

■ On Wednesday, June 5th, 1968, Bob Kennedy, flushed with victory in the Democratic presidential primaries in California, took a short cut through the kitchen of Los Angeles' Ambassador Hotel on his way to a celebration party. His path led to death. Self-confessed slayer Sirhan Sirhan was waiting, gun ready. When Bobby fell, he was already doomed. Doctors worked and his family prayed for heart-breaking hour after hour. But by Thursday it was over: Bob Kennedy had gone to join his two older brothers.

As the nation, stunned and unbelieving, watched, his death and final rest played themselves out across our TV sets. Yet, despite all the coverage—on television, in newspapers, in magazines and now in hard-cover books—there are still many questions about Bob Kennedy's death that lie troubled in our hearts. It has been a year—but it has not been a year that produced all the answers.





After private services at St. Patrick's Cathedral on June 6th, 1968, Ethel Kennedy left with Ted and her son Joseph, 15.

Some of the queries are niggling. In a time of such national sorrow, how could people turn the events to their private—and criminal—gain? Yet some did. On June 9th, when Kennedy's personal chauffeur, 45-

year-old Lee Morrow, was returning to his Washington home after nearly 24 solid hours serving the family, he was stopped by seven young men and asked for cigarettes. He told them he had none and was then beaten and robbed.

Some questions are from sentiment. When everything was over... when the last speech had been made... the last flag lowered... the Kennedy family left Arlington

Cemetery... and they left Bob Kennedy unburied. "It was," said one tear-streaked TV observer, "the loneliest thing I ever saw." Bob's mahogany coffin was not finally lowered into the earth until 11:34 P.M. on June 9th, long after the graveside services had finished. To this date, only the family knows the reasons why.

About the circumstances of the burial there is a further conundrum. At the time of the funeral, a family spokesman said that this would not be Bob's final resting place. He would repose eventually in the same general area, it was announced, but with a simple marker (not yet designed) and landscaping (not yet mapped out). So far, no further re-burial plans have been made public.

Going back to those poignant half-hoping, half-knowing-there-was-no-hope hours in June, there are two basic questions that trouble one: Was there ever any chance for Bob? And exactly who was responsible for the planning of the rites once the facts were faced?

New York City's Post answered the first question under the headline, "The Losing Fight On The Operating Table". According to reporter Thomas O'Toole, Bob Kennedy was on the operating table three hours and twenty minutes. When the operation began he was not moving a single superficial muscle. While the surgery was in progress doctors tried to stimulate his reflexes by pricking him with pins. He was given two pints of blood during surgery and

removed from the table at 6:30 A.M. Seven hours later, despite mechanical help with his breathing, he was pronounced dead.

The answer to the question, was there ever any real hope seems to be obvious. Bob Kennedy was dead when he fell to the floor of the Ambassador Hotel.

About the funeral itself, there was careful planning by several people Bob loved—and who loved him. It was not quite the same as his brother's death in Dallas, Texas some five years before. "It was not," said press aide Frank Mankiewicz, "as if he had been shot five minutes before." As Bob lay dying, Mankiewicz, Steve Smith (Bob's brother-in-law), John Siegenthaler (former Justice Department aide and a key Kennedy advisor), Pierre Salinger and Fred Dutton (a former White House aide) made the plans they hoped they would never have to use.

Ted Kennedy was with Ethel at the time. When he joined the group of Kennedy advisors, he had Ethel's wishes for the funeral written down. "He was a New York Senator," he told them. "He will be buried from New York." And the funeral train from New York to Washington was Ethel's idea. "He loved the whistle stops," she said.

Which brings up another problem. The train that bore Kennedy's body from New York south to Washington attracted unprecedented and unexpected crowds. They stood in fields and sang "We Shall Overcome"; they stopped their cars at crossings and waved black-bordered flags; they

pushed and shoved on railroad platforms just to see the funeral train go by. And in Elizabeth, New Jersey there were too many who pushed too hard.

Two people were killed when they were shoved into the path of a passenger train traveling north. Horrified mourners on the Kennedy train witnessed the deaths of John Curia and Mrs. Antoinette Severini, both 56. Mrs. Severini's three-year-old granddaughter, Deborah Anne Kwiatek, was severely injured in the same accident.

An immediate investigation of the tragedy was launched—quite unsuccessfully. At a hearing the following June both the engineer and the conductor of the death train refused to appear. So did the engineer of the Kennedy train. In October a somewhat frustrated grand jury handed down a ruling; there was to be no indictment—but lots of blame. They criticized the crowds who'd filled the station (they had ignored police warnings to clear the track), the railroad, the secret service (their

Later that same month she attended Mass at St. Luke's in Melrose, Virginia with Matthew (left) and Christopher (right).



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low-flying helicopters drowned out the warnings) and the state Public Utilities Commission (for "extremely hazardous condition to passengers and pedestrians" in the Elizabeth station).

Last March, there was a nightmare development in the Kennedy case. Thomas Noguchi, the coroner who performed the autopsy on Bob was discharged from his job amidst a flurry of sensational charges. Eastern newspapers reported that the 42-year-old pathologist "had threatened subordinates with a scalpel, had spoken of performing autopsies on living people and had prayed for disasters". The actual charges were not quite that macabre. Dr. Noguchi, it seems, in a moment of anger had threatened to perform an autopsy on one of his associates. Dr. Noguchi's case is still being decided (observers feel it is mainly a matter of a personality clash between a stubborn and dedicated man and the establishment) but, after all the criticism over the autopsy on John F. Kennedy it is unsettling to have doubts cast on the professional ability of the man who was responsible for Bob's.

Even the trial of Sirhan Sirhan did not answer all the questions it raised. More than 2,000 people were quizzed by investigators from the district attorney's office and the trial itself was the most expensive in Los Angeles' history. Yet there are doubts.

For one, who really was the polka dot girl? Right after the shooting witnesses testified that a pretty girl in a polka dot dress had been seen

talking to Sirhan and then running, apparently exultant, out of the hotel shouting something that sounded like "We got him, we got him". A topless dancer named Kathy Fulmer, 23, originally came forward and identified herself as the mystery woman. Police questioned her, then released her saying that they felt she was only seeking publicity. At the trial a totally different girl, Valerie Schulte, testified that she had been at the Kennedy rally wearing a green dress with yellow polka dots and believed she was the woman who'd been seen. (Though she denied either talking to Sirhan or running out of the hotel shouting "We got him".)

But while the trial was still in session Kathy Fulmer was found dead. She scrawled the inexplicable message "Lord, you gave me a moun-tain and I'm loved to climb" on a motel room mirror in lipstick and then apparently took an overdose of sleeping pills. Her brother-in-law isn't so sure. Kent Fioerke told reporters, "Kathy got several death threats after she came forward in the Kennedy case. Her death may or may not have something to do with it but it certainly should be more thoroughly investigated. Up till now," he went on, "the handling of the case has been lousy and there's been an awful lot of hush-hush." The hush-hush continues; the investigation doesn't seem to.

The trial itself—or rather the fact of a Sirhan Sirhan—poses a dilemma for which there doesn't seem to be an answer. Lacey Fosburgh writing in the New York Times put it this way:

"The long trial did not answer the ultimate question of why some men build and others destroy."

For Bob Kennedy was a builder. And one of the best things he built was his family. Ethel Kennedy and his eleven children (including the baby daughter he didn't live to see) are his greatest memorial. They do him proud.

Ethel has observed the traditional year of mourning. But she has refused to play the martyr. She is constantly busy ("An awful lot of her energy and drive now comes from a desire to keep herself occupied," says a friend. "The rare times her face is in repose, it's sad.") with her children, sports, carrying on serious projects Bob started and just the plain mechanics of running what is virtually a small hotel called Hickory Hill. "Sometimes a seed has to die before it takes," she says of her life. "I will bring up the children the way Bob would have wanted."

And this means doing. During the daytime it's sports (tennis is Ethel's game); after dinner it's charades or quizzes on news subjects. She's out of bed each morning by seven for breakfast with the kids, driving them to various schools and then, almost daily, Mass in her local parish church. The three older children attend boarding school; the others share every meal with Ethel and sit with her each night as she reads aloud from the Bible and says the rosary.

Bob's friends (and brother Ted) have rallied around to do what they can for the fatherless family. Columnist Art Buchwald is a frequent

visitor; so is LeMoyné Billings, a friend of the Kennedys' since prep school days. And when it's Father's Day in any of the children's schools, Dave Hackett represents the Kennedys.

But mostly it's Ethel who's not just holding the family together but pushing it forward. Like her son Joe she found the strength to walk through all the cars of that long funeral train comforting those who had come to comfort her. When she wept, finally, it was alone in the family's coach. Despite what has happened to her—the death of her beloved brother-in-law and then the shattering murder of her own husband—she is giving Ted her full support in his continuing life in politics. Although he is the only surviving male Kennedy (Joe Kennedy Sr. is completely incapacitated due to a stroke) she does not feel he should play it safe and retire from office. "There was never a thought of that," she says. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

The strength of Ethel is one thing that has emerged positive and sure in this year following the assassination. She was once considered the cut-up of the family (when any pushing into pools fully clothed was done, Ethel was usually the instigator). But that was on the surface. Underneath, bolstered by perhaps the strongest religious beliefs in the Kennedy clan, was determination—and greatness.

Ethel's philosophy is simple. "You're only on this earth once. You must give it all you've got." She is. And Bob must be proud of her. ■