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The RFK File

IT IS PARTICULARLY disturbing to me that Godfrey Hodgson, in his June 25 review, implies that my book, *The Killing of Robert F. Kennedy*, is premised on 300 pages of "lying." Then, he quickly retracts that charge, because he knows he cannot support it. Still, planting the idea, Hodgson writes: "We might even be tempted to say, in Moldea-speak, 'This [expletive] guy [Moldea] has been lying to us all along.' That wouldn't be quite fair: teasing us, maybe, to make the most of a losing hand, but not lying."

Very cute.

Earlier in the review, Hodgson makes a statement about himself that brings this issue of "lying" into sharper focus.

Following Kennedy's emotional speech after winning the June 1968 California Democratic primary, his aides pushed to get the senator out of the hotel's jam-packed Embassy Room and over to a press conference in the adjacent Colonial Room. To get there quickly, they decided to take a short-cut.

Describing his proximity to Kennedy, Hodgson states in his review:

"Instead, as he was hustled through a kitchen pantry in the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles after a victory rally with his campaign workers, Robert Kennedy encountered a young Palestinian Christian called Sirhan Bishara Sirhan and was shot to death.

"As it happens, I was in that crowd, a few feet away from the senator, on my way to a promised interview with Kennedy for the London Sunday Times. I have an indelible memory of the grief and confusion of that moment" (emphasis added).

Clearly, Hodgson includes this personal account in his review to establish his authority when writing about the Kennedy murder and to give greater weight to his opinion of my work. After all, he appears to have been an eyewitness.

But was he really?

According to the LAPD's official list of the 77 known persons in the kitchen pantry at the moment of the shooting, Hodgson is not mentioned either as an eyewitness or as even being present in the room!

In fact, according to his own 1969 book, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968*, Hodgson detailed on pages 353-354 that he was on the floor below the kitchen pantry, perhaps even outside the hotel, while Kennedy was upstairs being gunned down!

Remarkably, a third version of these events comes from Hodgson's own statement to the FBI. According to the FBI's official report of the Hodgson interview—dated July 8, 1968, just over a month after the murder—Hodgson "furnished the following information. . . .

"As soon as KENNEDY finished his speech and before he began to move through the crowd,

HODGSON [and two colleagues] left the Embassy Room by going down an iron staircase to the parking lot. They did this to avoid getting trapped in the crowd. They did not know which way the Senator would go after making his speech or what his exact plans were.

"While outside HODGSON heard about the shooting and he went back inside the hotel. He went towards the kitchen area but was unable to enter the area because of the crowds. He did not see the Senator or SIRHAN at that time."

Hodgson's now-embellished claim that he was just "a few feet away from the senator" deceitfully gives the impression that he was an actual eyewitness to this terrible event. This gross exaggeration—debunked by LAPD and FBI records, as well as his own 1969 book—is as dishonest as his review of my work.

DAN E. MOLDEA
Washington

Godfrey Hodgson replies:

I can understand Dan Moldea being upset by my review of his book, but I would like to clear up some of the points in his intemperate letter. I was "in that crowd" and "a few feet away from the sena-

tor." I did not state that his book was premised on 300 pages of lying. I did not state or imply that I was an eyewitness or in the pantry when Kennedy was killed. My statements were neither deceitful nor dishonest, and I can only suppose Moldea is anxious to discredit me because he is upset by the substance of my review. The point I was trying to make was that I found it very unpleasant that, having spent 300 pages failing to overturn the conviction of Sirhan Sirhan, he fell back on coarse abuse of a man who is indeed a convicted murderer but has also served more than a quarter of a century of a life sentence. I still find that unpleasant.

was shot behind the right ear and from a distance of at most inches.

Dan E. Moldea is a professional freelance investigative reporter. He has published books about Jimmy Hoffa, about organized crime involvement in pro football, and about alleged mob influence on the MCA agency in Hollywood and thereby on Ronald Reagan. Moldea got involved in the Robert Kennedy murder in December 1986, and on June 1987 he published an article in *Regardie's* magazine that dwelled on the inconsistencies in the police evidence and featured an exclusive interview with Cesar.

Cesar, the article concluded, might be "an innocent bystander caught in the crossfire of history," but "a more sinister scenario cannot be dismissed." Now, eight years later, in more than 300 pages, Moldea has spoken from the bench of history, if I may borrow his quasi-judicial style, and dismissed that "more sinister scenario" (lawyerized language, presumably, for a suspicion that Cesar was the murderer).

Moldea's book can be described as a fine example of the nonfiction equivalent of the "police procedural" mystery novel. It abounds in interviews with cops, circles drawn around bullet holes, evidence bags, "land and cannelure" marks on bullets, and much more. This is all well enough done and would while away a flight, say, from Washington to Los Angeles.

The trouble is that Moldea's weapon breaks in his hand. In his own phrase he fixated on Thane Eugene Cesar "like a cruise missile." Inconveniently, to say the least, Cesar took and passed a polygraph

test. Abruptly, the quarry became Moldea's good buddy.

Suddenly, who should be back in the frame but Sirhan Sirhan? With the help of his brother, Adel Sirhan, Moldea arranged to interview him in jail. In the course of the interview, he decided that Sirhan was guilty after all. "As if I had been punched with a straight right hand. I suddenly thought to myself, 'This [expletive] guy has been lying to me all along'."

So, after further macho exchanges of obscenities through the prison wire, Moldea came to adopt the view that the police, the investigators and a court of law had adopted long before: that Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, acting alone, had indeed murdered Robert Francis Kennedy.

Some might say that Moldea has performed a public service by laying doubts to rest. Others might take the view that once he had decided that Sirhan was guilty after all, he didn't have a book. What do we make of a writer who, having spent 300 pages suggesting that the conventional view of a historical event is all wrong, suddenly turns around and tells us it was right all along? We might even be tempted to say, in Moldea-speak, "This [expletive] guy has been lying to us all along." That wouldn't be quite fair: teasing us, maybe, to make the most of a losing hand, but not lying. But we might legitimately ask whether the whole exercise was worth Moldea's and his publisher's time, expense and effort, or the reader's money. ■

Godfrey Hodgson has written numerous books on American politics.