

Ex-Photographer Sues Over Story on Assassination

■ **Libel:** Trial offers a glimpse into the life and times of conspiracy theorists and supermarket tabloids.

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TIMES STAFF WRITER

Kholid Khawar's hands trembled as he held the latest copy of the *Globe*.

It was the spring of 1989, and the supermarket tabloid blared headlines about how Marlon Brando was near death, how baldness could be cured with a combination of vodka and Alka Seltzer and how the Iranian secret police had killed Bobby Kennedy in Los Angeles 21 years before.

And inside was a picture of Khawar, and a caption identifying him as an Iranian agent who pulled the trigger. Khawar—then a photojournalist and now a Bakersfield farmer—was standing next to Kennedy on that night long ago, only minutes before the assassination. Khawar was wearing a yellow sweater and a camera hung around his neck. In the tabloid, a large black arrow was pointed at his head, blaming him for the crime.

The story, based on a book by conspiracy theorist
Please see **LIBEL, B20**

Former CIA agent claims:

IRANIANS KILLED BOBBY KENNEDY FOR THE MAFIA

BOBBIY KENNEDY was assassinated by an Iranian secret police hit squad under orders from the Mafia, a former CIA agent charges.

Dramatic new evidence reveals that convicted killer Sirhan Sirhan was merely a decoy, says Robert Morrow, author of *The Senator Must Die: The Murder of Robert F. Kennedy* (Roundtable).

Morrow claims the Mafia engineered the murder of President John F. Kennedy, then ordered his brother killed five years later because they feared he would renew JFK's war against organized crime if he became president.

"Incredibly, the mob hired the notorious Iranian secret police agency, SAVAK, to do the job," he says.

At the time, Iran was under the iron-fisted rule of The Shah. Officially, he was an ally of the United States. But privately, he despised the Kennedys, Morrow claims.

"He was a proud man and felt humiliated when President Kennedy and his brother snubbed him on a visit to the U.S.," the author explains. "He also feared a



Author Robert Morrow claims an Iranian agent (center), not Sirhan Sirhan (right), killed Kennedy with a gun disguised to look like a camera.



new Kennedy administration would cut off U.S. aid to Iran because corrupt officials were siphoning off the money for their own use.

At least a dozen shots were fired on the night Kennedy was gunned down at a Los Angeles ho-

tel — right after a speech celebrating his victory in the California presidential primary, Morrow says.

But police reports say that Sirhan was only carrying an eight-shot 22-caliber handgun.

"Not counting the slugs that wound up in the walls and ceilings as Sirhan fired wildly while being subdued, five bystanders were hit by bullets," Morrow says.

"Kennedy himself was hit four times — at point-blank range."

The shot that killed him, a coroner's report said, was fired from

behind the senator. Sirhan confronted Kennedy from the front at a distance no closer than three feet, says Morrow.

The rival assassin, he says, was a young man who called himself Ali Ahmad and posed as a Kennedy campaign worker.

"There are even photographs showing him standing next to Bobby just a few minutes before the fatal shots were fired," he says.

"He's wearing a camera around his neck — a camera that was really a gun loaded with four .22-caliber bullets."

Morrow says he accidentally learned of the Mafia-SAVAK plot against Robert Kennedy while pursuing leads in the 1970s for a congressional committee looking into the JFK assassination.

He reveals that one of his sources, a high-ranking SAVAK agent, was willing to testify to a congressional committee if he were granted immunity from prosecution.

"However," he adds, "just a few weeks after talking to me, before he could tell his story publicly and under oath, he was murdered."

— JOHN BLACKBURN

Kháild Khawar, now a Bakersfield farmer, is pictured in a 1989 article that he says is erroneous.

Continued from B13

Robert Morrow, said an Iranian agent—not Sirhan Sirhan—was the real killer and that the camera was really a gun loaded with four bullets.

Khawar was in turn stunned, then afraid. At first he kept his mouth shut and hoped that no one would notice.

But they did. This week, his libel suit is being played out in Santa Monica Superior Court. It has turned into a lively reprise of Robert Kennedy's assassination, complete with video clips and testimony from the likes of football great Rosey Grier, who was at Kennedy's side the night he died.

It has offered a glimpse into the strange life and times of conspiracy theorists, the supermarket tabloids and, more than anything else, the Man in the Yellow Sweater.

It was odd how things could change in an instant. For years, the picture of Khawar standing next to Kennedy had held a place of honor in the office of his Bakersfield farm. He treasured the few minutes he had shared the spotlight with the heir to the Kennedy legacy.

Minutes after Kennedy left the podium at the Ambassador Hotel, he was led through the pantry on the way to a news conference. There, a Palestinian named Sirhan Sirhan lunged toward Kennedy firing a .22-caliber pistol. Kennedy lay dying in a pool of blood, an image that remains fixed in the American consciousness.

Sirhan was convicted of the assassination. But the story in the Globe suggested that Khawar was the killer. It ran his picture and said he was an agent sent by the Shah of Iran on behalf of the Mafia, no less, to kill Kennedy. (Curiously, though, the man in the picture was identified as Ali Ahmand, a variant of Khawar's father's name.)

"I just couldn't believe it. I was in a state of shock," Khawar said. "I had to sit down in a chair before I could read the article."

The Globe says it is blameless, that it merely printed allegations made by Morrow in his book. And they also say it is not their responsibility to re-investigate the allegations made in the book.

"We're here simply as a deep

pocket," Globe lawyer Anthony Glassman said. "We reported a newsworthy event and feel we shouldn't be here."

Morrow, who lives in Cincinnati, has not bothered to come to the trial. He said he has not libeled anyone and that it would not make any difference in any event because he is an old man who does not have any money.

"I stand by the book because this is the way I understood it," he said.

This is not the first time Morrow has come up with theories that have had a bizarre twist to them. He also says he has unwittingly supplied the CIA with the guns used to assassinate John F. Kennedy and wrote another book about how that happened.

The chain of circumstances that landed the dispute in the Santa Monica courthouse started in 1962

when Khawar came to Los Angeles from Pakistan to study at a technical school, then at Pacific States University.

Over time, he said, he began writing articles for a Pakistani magazine, covering such topics as agriculture, baseball and politics. As the 1968 presidential campaign warmed up, he covered speeches and took pictures of presidential candidates as they made their way through Los Angeles.

On June 4, Khawar walked to the Ambassador Hotel, only a few blocks from where he was living, to cover the Kennedy camp as the primary results rolled in. As the time approached for Kennedy to claim victory, Khawar stepped on stage with dozens of other reporters and photographers.

Cameras clicked, flashes blinked, catching not only the image of

tried to back away from the wild-eyed gunman," Morrow wrote in his book "The Senator Must Die," which sold few copies. "Then as Bobby literally backed into him, Ahmand pushed the lethal camera up behind the senator's ear and pulled the release mechanism."

It is interesting to note that Morrow says he has gotten his information about the assassination from a high-ranking member of the Iranian secret police. Morrow said the informant told him he was willing to testify before a congressional committee but, as fate would have it, was murdered a few weeks later.

While Morrow paints one picture of what happened, Khawar paints quite another. He said he was not able to get to the pantry after shots were fired because the way was blocked by the time he got there. In court, Khawar displayed a number of pictures taken after the killing, most of them of people weeping upon learning that Kennedy had been shot.

Khawar said that after the shooting, police interrogated everyone remaining in the ballroom, including him. He said he left the Ambassador Hotel at 2 a.m. and walked home.

As for the camera that was supposedly a gun, there was also footage of Khawar loading film as he stood on the podium, further debunking that theory. Khawar said he still owns the Nikon that he wore around his neck that night. In court, one of his three lawyers, Richard Knickerbocker, walked down the row of jurors with the lens removed from the camera body.

"Now I don't see a gun inside there," he said, incredulously.

In the coming months, Khawar hardly acted the role of assassin on the lam. He continued to live in Los Angeles. Later in the summer, he went to Mexico City to cover the Olympics.

In November, with his education complete, Khawar returned to the Pakistani town of Faisalabad, where he had grown up. But before he left, he said, he called the police and gave them a forwarding address in case they needed to talk to him further.

Three years later, Khawar returned to Los Angeles with

his new wife. The opportunities in Pakistan had been limited and the political climate was unsettled. After working for six years in the electronics field, Khawar struck out on his own, buying 150 acres of farmland near Bakersfield. He eventually expanded the farm to 320 acres of citrus and grapes.

The family prospered. Three children arrived. Khawar's father came from Pakistan to live with them. For all to see, Khawar and his family were moving through life in relative obscurity, making no waves, paying taxes and, eventually, becoming U.S. citizens.

That changed in April, 1989, when the latest edition of the Globe hit the supermarkets.

A friend called Khawar to tell him about the story. Khawar thought at first he was joking, but it quickly became apparent he was not.

His next instinct was silence, hoping that no one would notice that the Bakersfield farmer was the same person in the Globe picture. But his oldest son came home one day asking what was going on, what was all this about his father and the assassination of Robert Kennedy?

Then came the telephoned threats, his son's car being vandalized, the house being pelted with eggs, the fear that something serious would happen to his family. There was another threatening phone call only last month.

Khawar paid a visit to Bakersfield lawyer Craig Edmunson. Now, there are six lawyers lining the tables in the courtroom, three for each side.

The trial is expected to last at least another week in the court of Judge Richard Harris.

Meanwhile, the Globe is working to keep intact its record of never having lost a libel suit. Lawyer Glassman said the publication of the story in the Globe is akin to People magazine's printing the accusations about figure skater Tonya Harding by her ex-husband, Jeff Gillooly.

As for Khawar, he believes he was singled out by Morrow because of his dark complexion and the fact that he left for Pakistan, telling police he would not be returning to the United States.

Kennedy, but also of Khawar. He stood so close that he could have reached out and touched Kennedy as the presidential candidate delivered what turned out to be his last public utterance: "Now it's on to Chicago and let's win there!" Khawar said there was a reason he was standing so close to Kennedy.

"I wanted to have my own picture taken with the man I admired so much," he said.

Then came the terrible events of the next few minutes, with Sirhan killing Kennedy. But according to Morrow, someone else was firing as well—a man he called Ali Ahmand but identified in several of the book's pictures as the photographer in the yellow sweater: Khalid Iqbar Khawar.

"Ahmand watched through his viewfinder as the startled and dodging presidential candidate