

Closing the Case of Sirhan

An investigator abandons conspiracy theories, his own included.

THE KILLING OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY

*An Investigation of Motive, Means,
and Opportunity.*

By Dan E. Moldea.

Illustrated. 342 pp. New York:
W. W. Norton & Company. \$27.50.

By Gerald Posner

THE assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 seemed a relatively straightforward case for police investigators. Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, a 24-year-old Palestinian immigrant, was tackled as he emptied his eight-shot .22-caliber revolver in a crowded pantry of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, killing the Senator and wounding five bystanders. At his mother's house, where he lived, Mr. Sirhan had left a damning trail of notebooks that were larded with declarations like "R.F.K. must die!" He was convicted of murder by a Los Angeles jury, but his death sentence was voided by the California Supreme Court and he remains incarcerated in a special housing unit at a state prison.

But what initially appeared an open-and-shut case gradually became the subject of persistent conspiracy speculation, as apparently contradictory ballistics evidence and eyewitness testimony raised the haunting suspicion that two guns had been fired on the night of the celebration of Senator Kennedy's victory in the California Democratic Presidential primary.

The steadfast refusal of both the Los Angeles Police Department and the District Attorney's office to release any files heightened the public skepticism. A major critic of the official investigation was Dan E. Moldea, a self-described "mob reporter," who first wrote about the possibility of two guns in 1987 for *Regardie's* magazine.

In "The Killing of Robert F. Kennedy," a persuasive re-examination of the assassination, Mr. Moldea does what many journalists would lack the courage for — admit that his earlier work was wrong. "I must painfully disassemble the evidence of a second gunman that I have both collected and uncovered over the years," he writes. His new conclusion — "Sirhan Bishara Sirhan consciously and knowingly murdered Senator Robert Kennedy, and he acted alone" — is amply supported by prodigious research, including many first-time interviews with dozens of police officers involved in the investigation.

This book presents a remarkable turnaround for a writer who had partly staked his reputation on the existence of a second shooter. But because of the honesty and logic with which he approaches his study, Mr. Moldea's journalistic instincts have never looked sharper.

If students of the assassination or fans of Mr. Moldea's earlier work think that this less sensational resolution of the case is not as interesting as a conspiracy theory, they're mistaken. Mr. Moldea presents the story in three stages: the actual assassination, together with Mr. Sirhan's background and the official investigation; the growth of controversies and conspiracy theories; and the author's re-examination. How Mr. Moldea separates good leads from bogus ones, how he eliminates key suspects (he arranges for a polygraph of Thane Eugene Cesar, a security guard conspiracy theorists long suspected as the second shooter, for example), and his climactic prison confrontation with Mr. Sirhan in 1994 make for far more interesting reading than any conspiracy theory based on hearsay and speculation.

Gerald Posner is the author of "Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK."



FROM THE KILLING OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY
Senator Robert F. Kennedy claiming victory in the
California Democratic Presidential primary on the
night of June 4, 1968.

Beyond presenting what is likely to be the best understanding of what actually happened on June 5, 1968, Mr. Moldea is stinging in his criticism of shoddy work by the Los Angeles Police Department. One is left with little doubt that the police mishandling of the investigation set the precedent for much of the later conspiracy conjecture. Moreover, despite repeated vows by officials investigating Senator Kennedy's murder that they would not repeat the mistakes of the inquiry into the assassination of his brother, government and law enforcement resistance to any public release of information about the case insured just the opposite: that a public already suspicious of "official" conclusions and eager to embrace conspiracy theories concluded the secretiveness was evidence of a cover-up. Mr. Moldea pinpoints much incompetence and negligence, but not the cover-up of a murder.

MR. MOLDEA dedicates the book to his writing coach, Nancy Nolte, and properly so, because this is the best written of his books, finished in a clear and easy style. The book does stumble from time to time, however, with occasional repetition, a couple of outdated paragraphs about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and a few instances of unnecessarily dramatic prose; for example, Mr. Moldea's description of himself in interviews, becoming fixed on someone "like a cruise missile" or ready to "go for his throat." But these are minor glitches in a treatise that over all is a notable success for its solid reporting.

At the end of his book, in a brief but critical portion, Mr. Moldea speculates about why Sirhan Bishara Sirhan killed Robert F. Kennedy. Rejecting Mr. Sirhan's previous justification — Robert Kennedy's pro-Israeli politics — he paints a disturbing portrait of the assassin. Mr. Moldea reveals Mr. Sirhan as having a "confused life," flirting with "fringes of the occult and an individualized but unsophisticated form of left-wing politics." In Mr. Moldea's picture, Mr. Sirhan was a "desperate young man, somehow losing all hope" — someone who had, Mr. Moldea writes, "decided to make his mark, even if it was by committing a terrible and violent act." The description is remarkably like that of another 24-year-old sociopath, Lee Harvey Oswald, who had crossed the path of another Kennedy five years earlier. □