

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #27

On June 4, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy, a popular Democrat presidential candidate, waited all day for the election results to come in from his party's primary in California. At 11:30 p.m. PDT, he and his wife, Ethel, and the rest of his entourage left the Royal Suite of the Ambassador Hotel and headed downstairs to the ballroom, where about 1,800 supporters waited for him to give his victory speech after convincingly defeating Eugene McCarthy, a Democrat from Minnesota. As a result of this major primary win, Kennedy was about to assume leadership of the anti-war forces in the race for the Democrat nomination for president of the United States.

Shortly after midnight on June 5<sup>th</sup> he concluded his speech with the exhortation: "Now on to Chicago, and let's win there!" Then Kennedy turned and exited the ballroom through a side door that led to a kitchen pantry. He was using this pantry as a shortcut to reach the Colonial Room, where members of the press were waiting for him.

The pantry corridor was filled with people trying to catch a glimpse of the potential future president. As Kennedy travelled down the pantry corridor, a 24 year-old Palestinian, Sirhan Sirhan, stepped up to him and opened fire with a .22 pistol. While Sirhan was still firing, bodyguards and others tried to contain him. However, the gunman managed to fire all eight bullets before being subdued. Six people were hit. Robert Kennedy fell to the floor bleeding. Speechwriter Paul Shrade had been hit in the forehead. Seventeen year-old Irwin Stroll was hit in the left leg. ABC director William Weisel was shot in the stomach. Reporter Ira Goldstein's hip was shattered. Artist Elizabeth Evans was also grazed on the forehead.

Most of the focus was on Kennedy, who had been shot three times. As he lay bleeding, his wife rushed to his side and cradled his head. Busboy Juan Romero brought over some rosary beads and placed them in Kennedy's hand. Kennedy, who had been seriously hurt and looked in pain, whispered, "Is everybody all right?" Dr. Stanley Abo quickly examined the downed candidate at the scene and discovered a hole just below his right ear.

An ambulance first took Kennedy to the Central Recovery Hospital, which was located just eighteen blocks away from the hotel. However, since Kennedy needed brain surgery, he was quickly transferred to Good Samaritan Hospital, where he arrived at 1 a.m. PDT. It was there that doctors discovered two additional bullet wounds – one under his right armpit and another one just 1½ inches lower. Kennedy underwent a three-hour brain surgery, during which doctors removed bone and metal fragments. Over the next few hours, however, his condition continued to worsen. He died from his wounds on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1968, at 1:44 a.m. PDT He was 44 years old.

The American nation was severely shocked at the news of yet another assassination of a major public figure. His brother, President John F. Kennedy, had died from an assassin's bullet five years earlier. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated just two months

earlier in 1968.

Once police arrived at the Ambassador Hotel, Sirhan was escorted to police headquarters and questioned. At the time, his identity was unknown, because he was carrying no identification papers and refused to give his name. It was not until his brothers saw a picture of him on television that the connection was made.

It turned out that Sirhan Sirhan had been born in Jerusalem in 1944 and had emigrated to the United States with his parents and siblings when he was 12 years-old. He had eventually dropped out of community college and had worked a number of odd jobs, including as a groom at the Santa Anita Racetrack.

Once the police learned his identity, they searched his house and found handwritten notebooks. Much of what was written inside them was incoherent. But amidst the rambling they found these assertions: “RFK must die.” and “My determination to eliminate RFK is becoming more [and] more of an unshakable obsession...[He] must be sacrificed for the cause of the poor exploited people.” Sirhan resented Kennedy’s strong support of Israel.

Sirhan was put on trial for the murder of Kennedy and assault with a deadly weapon for the others who had been shot. Sirhan pleaded not guilty but was convicted on all counts and sentenced to death on April 23, 1969. Sirhan was never executed, however, because in 1972 California abolished the death penalty and commuted all death sentences to life in prison. He has remained imprisoned ever since that time at Valley State Prison in Coalinga, California.

Amid the national mourning for yet another political murder, one newspaper columnist declared that “the country does not work anymore.” *Newsweek* asked, “Has violence become a way of life?” Years later, looking back at the 1960s, political reporter David Halberstam of the *New York Times* wrote: “We could make a calendar of the decade by marking where we were at the hours of those violent deaths.” Robert Kennedy’s assassination was a calamity for the Democrat party, because only he seemed able to surmount the divisions within the party over Vietnam. In the space of eight weeks American liberals had lost two of their most important national figures – King and Kennedy. A third, President Lyndon Johnson, was unpopular and politically damaged by American policy in Vietnam. Without these leaders the crisis of liberalism in the United States became unmanageable.

Just as in the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., many people believe there was also a conspiracy involved in the murder of Robert Kennedy. For the latter’s assassination, there are three main conspiracy theories, which are based on inconsistencies found in the evidence against Sirhan Sirhan.

The first conspiracy involves the location of the fatal shot. Los Angeles Coroner Thomas Noguchi conducted the autopsy on Robert Kennedy’s body and discovered that, not only

had Kennedy died from the shot that entered just below and behind his right ear, but that there were also scorch marks around the entry wound. This meant that the shot must have come from behind Kennedy and that the muzzle of the gun must have been within an inch or so of Kennedy's head when it was fired. By nearly all accounts, Sirhan had been in front of him and had never gotten closer than several feet to him. Was it possible that there was a second shooter?

The second piece of evidence that easily lends itself to conspiracy theories is the multiple witnesses who saw a young woman wearing a polka-dot skirt running from the hotel with another man, exuberantly exclaiming, "We shot Kennedy!" Other witnesses say they saw a man who looked like Sirhan talking to a woman in a polka-dot skirt earlier in the day. The police reports bypassed this evidence, because the police believed that, in the chaos that followed the shooting, it was more likely that the couple was crying out, "They shot Kennedy!" The question, however, remains: "Who was the girl in the polka-dot skirt?"

The third conspiracy theory requires a bit more of a stretch of the imagination. But it is one advocated by Sirhan's lawyers during pleas for his parole. This theory claims that Sirhan was "hypno-programmed" – hypnotized and then told what to do by others. If so, this would explain why Sirhan asserts that he cannot remember any of the events from that night. Who could have hypno-programmed Sirhan?

Irrespective of these conspiracy theories, Robert F. Kennedy was buried near his brother, President John F. Kennedy, in Arlington National Cemetery.