

The Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy: The Full Story of the Sirhan Sirhan Parole Hearing

Letter from RFK Jr. Supports New Investigation

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Global Research, February 17, 2016

[Who What Why](#) 16 February 2016

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#),
[Media Disinformation](#)

Featured image: Robert F. Kennedy and Paul Schrade Photo credit: [MALDEF / YouTube](#)

This article was first published by [WhoWhat Why](#)

The ban on video and audio recordings at Sirhan Sirhan's [parole hearing on February 9](#) meant the world depended on the one reporter allowed inside the hearing to tell us what happened. He had to condense "more than three hours of intense testimony" into 854 words.

Elliot Spagat's lively [account](#) of the proceeding for the Associated Press omitted one very important document that shooting victim and Kennedy family friend Paul Schrade presented to the parole board. This was [a letter](#) from Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (image right) to US Attorney General Eric Holder, dated September 25, 2012, supporting [Schrade's request](#) for a new investigation of his father's murder:

Paul was a close friend and advisor to my father. He was standing beside my father when Daddy was killed and Paul was himself wounded by a bullet. With boundless energy and clear mind, Paul continues to pursue my father's ideas, an endeavor to which he has devoted his life. He organized with the support of my mother and my family the building of the new Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools on the former Ambassador Hotel site. Paul and his team...strongly believe this new evidence is conclusive and requires a new investigation. I agree and support his request for a new investigation.



Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

The request for a new investigation was partly based on a new analysis of the Pruszynski recording, the only known audio recording of the shooting. After studying the tape, forensic audio expert Phil Van Praag concluded 13 shots and 2 guns were fired in the Ambassador Hotel pantry on the night of the shooting.

At Holder's direction, the FBI Laboratory conducted a very limited and deeply flawed examination of the Pruszynski recording and reportedly "could not confirm the number of shots or determine the identification of specific weapons."

The FBI refused to accept the papers Van Praag had written detailing his methodologies and

discoveries. In fact, the Bureau refused to communicate with him in any way.

The FBI's examination report, obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, shows the FBI used outdated methodologies and failed to provide their own analyst with critical background materials about the shooting scene. These included witness statements, the autopsy report and movements of key people, including Stanislaw Pruszyński himself, at the time of the shooting.

The analyst describes searching for videos of Van Praag's work on Youtube and working from low-resolution screen grabs of [my film](#) on Van Praag's discoveries in an effort to find out precisely where to look, how to look, and what to look for. These are details he could have discovered by simply picking up the phone and calling Van Praag or inviting him to the FBI's Quantico laboratory for a briefing.



Philip Van Praag

When he agreed to release the 2012 letter to the parole board at Sirhan's hearing, Robert Kennedy Jr. signaled publicly, for the first time, his support for a new investigation of his father's murder. "You're doing the right thing," he told Schrade, days before the hearing.

Three years ago, Kennedy Jr. told Charlie Rose that the evidence was "very, very convincing" that his uncle, President John F. Kennedy, was not killed by a lone gunman, and that his father had been privately dismissive of the Warren Commission findings.

As federal authorities have no criminal jurisdiction over Robert Kennedy's 1968 murder, at the end of Sirhan's hearing, Paul Schrade formally requested the Los Angeles County District Attorney, Jackie Lacey, to open a new investigation into the case:

I am requesting a new investigation so that after nearly 50 years, justice finally can be served for me as a shooting victim; for the four other shooting victims who also survived their wounds; for Bob Kennedy; for the people of the United States who Bob loved so much and had hoped to lead; just as his brother, President John F. Kennedy, had led only a few years before; and of course for justice, to which Bob Kennedy devoted his life.



Paul Schrade

Schrade addressed his remarks to David Dahle, a retired prosecutor representing the district attorney's office. Dahle had earlier said Sirhan was guilty of "an attack on the American political process...[and] has still not come to grips with what he has done."

Schrade reportedly chastised Dahle for the "venomous" statement from the D.A.'s office opposing Sirhan's release, and asked Dahle to inform District Attorney Lacey of his request for a new investigation. Schrade, who firmly believes a second gunman — not Sirhan — killed Kennedy, plans to make the same request to Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck.

As AP reported, Sirhan again stuck to his story that he didn't remember shooting Robert Kennedy. He felt remorse for the victims but couldn't take full responsibility for the crime: "If you want a confession, I can't make it now...I just wish this whole thing had never taken place."

At first, Sirhan didn't want to attend this week's hearing. According to one of his attorneys, Laurie Dusek, he was physically sick for hours after his mistreatment at the last hearing in 2011, but his brother Munir and Dusek urged him to reconsider. At the end of the hearing, he said, "This is such a traumatic...horrendous experience, that for me, to keep dwelling on it is harmful to me..."

AP noted that, if released, Sirhan hoped he would be deported to Jordan or could move in with his brother in Pasadena, "to live out my life peacefully, in harmony with my fellow man..."

Victims of a crime have the right to make a statement at the end of parole hearing. They can say what they want and have as much time as they want, so Paul Schrade's appearance Wednesday "provided much of the drama", according to the AP report.

Meeting Sirhan for the first time since the 1969 trial, Schrade apologized to Sirhan for not attending his previous parole hearings or doing more to win his release: "I should have been here long ago and that's why I feel guilty for not being here to help you and to help me."

AP reported that "Schrade's voice cracked with emotion during an hour of testimony" but what did he actually say? We won't have a transcript for 30 days, so drawing on the full text of his prepared remarks, here's a summary of his testimony below:

"While Sirhan was standing in front of Bob Kennedy and his shots were creating a distraction, the other shooter secretly fired at the senator from behind..."

I am here to speak for myself, a shooting victim, and to bear witness for my friend, Bob Kennedy. Kennedy was a man of justice. But, so far, justice has not been served in this case. And I feel obliged as both a shooting victim and as an American to speak out about this — and to honor the memory of the greatest American I've ever known, Robert Francis Kennedy. In order for you to make an accurate determination of Sirhan Sirhan's parole, you need to know my feelings on this case and the full picture of what actually happened.

When Schrade turned to address Sirhan, he "angrily ignored" the commissioner's instructions not to speak or make eye contact with the prisoner. He said he believed Sirhan did not know where he was or what he was doing and therefore was not responsible for his actions at the Ambassador Hotel:

Sirhan, I forgive you. The evidence clearly shows you were not the gunman who shot Robert Kennedy. There is clear evidence of a second gunman in that kitchen pantry who shot Robert Kennedy...The fatal bullet struck Bob in the back of the head...You were never behind Bob, nor was Bob's back ever exposed to you...the evidence not only shows that you did not shoot Robert Kennedy but it shows that you could not have shot Robert Kennedy.



Sirhan Sirhan

Sirhan nodded politely and seemed appreciative as Schrade told him he wasn't guilty and that Robert Kennedy would be appalled, not only by the parole board's unjust treatment of Sirhan, but by the fact that he was not being given parole based on his rights under law.

Schrade then directed the panel's attention to documents submitted in advance of the hearing, which proved "Sirhan Sirhan did not shoot — and could not have shot — Robert Kennedy":

A copy of the [autopsy report](#) describing the fatal shot fired from an inch *behind* Kennedy's right ear; [Phil Van Praag's declaration](#) showing evidence of 13 shots and 2 guns on the Pruszyński recording; and witness statements from Ambassador Hotel maître d's Karl Uecker and Edward Minasian confirming Sirhan's firing position several feet in front of Kennedy. Together, he said, these documents proved:

Sirhan only had full control of his gun at the beginning, when he fired his first two shots, one of which hit me. Sirhan had no opportunity to fire four precisely placed, point-blank bullets into the back of Bob Kennedy's head or body while he was pinned against that steam table and while he and Bob were facing each other.

After an hour, commissioner Brian Roberts reportedly asked Schrade to wrap up. "Quite frankly, you're losing us," he said. "I think you've been lost for a long time," Schrade replied, before concluding:

What I am saying to you is that Sirhan himself was a victim. Obviously, there was someone else there in that pantry also firing a gun. While Sirhan was standing in front of Bob Kennedy and his shots were creating a distraction, the other shooter secretly fired at the senator from behind and fatally wounded him...I hope you will consider all of the accurate details of this crime that I have presented in order for you to accurately determine Sirhan Sirhan's eligibility for parole. If you do this the right way and the just way, I believe you will come to the same conclusion I have: that Sirhan should be released. If justice is not your aim, then of course you will not. Gentlemen, I believe you should grant Sirhan Sirhan parole...And I ask you to do that today in the name of Robert F. Kennedy and in the name of justice. Thank you.

As Sirhan got up to leave, Schrade reportedly shouted, "Sirhan, I'm so sorry this is happening to you. It's my fault." AP reported that Sirhan tried to shake hands with Schrade but a guard blocked him.

Schrade refused to shake hands with the commissioner. Addressing him directly, Schrade told Roberts, "What you've done to this man is appalling and Robert Kennedy would find what you did appalling" before turning away.

Schrade found the hearing "very abusive" and upsetting. He later told reporters waiting outside that "Sirhan was being tortured in there." In a [radio interview](#), he said the parole board was "cold and ruthless about keeping this guy in jail, knowing there's evidence [of his innocence] in the files". He found the panel's treatment of Sirhan "despicable," destroying his dignity with petty questions that made the commissioners "look like amateur psychiatrists."

Sirhan was again denied for five years because he “did not show adequate remorse or understand the enormity of his crime” – a statement which the transcripts of Sirhan’s [previous parole hearings](#) show is just not true.

Another important document submitted to the parole board two days before the hearing was a [new declaration](#) by Dr. Daniel Brown, a psychologist from Harvard Medical School. Since May 2008, Dr. Brown has spent over 100 hours with Sirhan, including a two-day visit last September.

The aim of these sessions was threefold: to “conduct a detailed forensic psychological assessment” of Sirhan’s mental status; to allow Sirhan “to develop a more complete memory...for the events leading up to and of the night of the assassination”; and to determine whether or not Sirhan was the “subject of coercive suggestive influence” at the time of the shooting and if this accounted for his amnesia.

The declaration states that, in Dr. Brown’s expert opinion, Sirhan is normal, does not have a psychiatric condition or personality disorder and shows no evidence of any violence risk if released (the primary consideration for any parole panel).

In his sessions with Sirhan, Dr. Brown found “a variety of personality factors that are associated with high vulnerability to coercive suggestive influence: an extreme dissociative coping style; hypnotically-induced altered personality states; extremely high hypnotizability; and high social compliance”:

Mr. Sirhan is one of the most hypnotizable individuals I have ever met, and the magnitude of his amnesia for actions not under his voluntary [control] in hypnosis is extreme. This unusual combination of personality factors makes Mr. Sirhan the type of individual extremely vulnerable to coercive social influence [and accounts for his] uncharacteristic behavior and strong amnesia for that behavior on the night of Senator Kennedy’s assassination...

Dr. Brown’s declaration traces the seeds of this “coercive suggestive influence” back to his experiences at a local race track, where “Mr. Sirhan regularly practiced self-hypnosis with fellow stable boys...Mr. Sirhan was observed to quickly enter a very deep state of hypnotic trance...and to then respond compulsively and uncritically to suggestions he behave in certain ways for which he subsequently became amnesic.”

“Mr. Sirhan recalls being in the hospital for several weeks. Sometime thereafter he was taken to a military firing range and trained to shoot upon command at vital human organs while in an hypnotic state.”

After a fall from a horse at a ranch in Corona in 1966, Sirhan was briefly hospitalized but, as Dr. Brown notes, “his mother and best friend both state that he was missing for two full weeks. Mr. Sirhan recalls being in the hospital for several weeks. Sometime thereafter he was taken to a military firing range and trained to shoot upon command at vital human organs while in an hypnotic state.”

Dr. Brown notes that Sirhan’s “dissociative vulnerability” causes him “on rare occasions to shift self-states”:

On more than one occasion, I was able to find the cue to induce 'range mode', wherein upon hypnotic cue, Mr. Sirhan takes his firing stance, hypnotically hallucinates that he is shooting at circle targets at a firing range, automatically starts shooting, and subsequently is completely amnesic for the hypnotically induced behavior.

This altered personality state only occurs while Mr. Sirhan is in a hypnotic or self-hypnotic state, and only in response to certain cues. This state never spontaneously manifests. While in this altered personality state, Mr. Sirhan shows both a loss of executive control and complete amnesia...This distinctive self-state is cue-specific and state-dependent...and is likely the product of coercive suggestive influence and hypnosis.

On the night of the assassination, Sirhan recalls being led in the Ambassador Hotel pantry by a girl in a polka-dot dress. As Robert Kennedy was approaching him, Dr. Brown writes, "this same woman tapped him on the elbow twice (a common hypnotic cue) [and] he immediately went into 'range mode', and believed he was shooting at circle targets at a local firing range."

Given the new evidence of a second gunman found on the Pruszyński recording, it is Dr. Brown's expert opinion "that Mr. Sirhan was trained through a variety of coercive persuasion techniques to serve as a distractor on the night of the assassination, so that a second professional shooter could render the fatal shot..."

Sirhan fired his gun on cue, carrying out an involuntary post-hypnotic suggestion and his "strong dissociative coping style...would cause him to be 'out of it' and be confused and amnesic for such actions":

Given the likelihood that Mr. Sirhan was in such a state at the time of the assassination, it should not be assumed at the parole hearing that he should manifest either knowledge of, remorse for, or clear memory for an event wherein his behavior was likely compulsively induced, involuntary, and for which he still has little memory.



The self-incriminating writing in Sirhan's notebooks has always been cited as primary evidence of premeditated murder. The most famous page begins: "May 18 9.45 AM - 68 My determination to eliminate R.F.K. is becoming more the more of an unshakable obsession." Underneath it are a series of concentric circles that bear a strong resemblance to targets at a firing range.

After exploring Sirhan's "responsiveness to automatic writing in hypnosis," Dr. Brown concluded that the automatic writing in his notebooks was "a product of coercive persuasion by a third party":

Mr. Sirhan was an avid enthusiast of short wave radios. He had a short wave radio in his bedroom, and spent most nights before the assassination communicating on his short wave radio to third parties. Mr. Sirhan frequently entered a hypnotic state while communicating with other parties on the short wave radio. While in trance, Mr. Sirhan would automatically write down what was communicated to him, and subsequently was amnesic for the content of his automatic writing in the spiral notebooks.

Dr. Brown compares the notebooks to "a coerced internalized false confession" and claims they should have been ruled inadmissible at trial. He concludes:

Mr. Sirhan has been in prison for over four decades for a crime that in all likelihood he never committed...Extensive psychological testing by me and others shows no evidence for any clinically significant psychiatric condition and low evidence for violence risk, combined with the new evidence that raises reasonable doubt that Mr. Sirhan was the assassin of Robert F. Kennedy, and also reasonable doubt about his previous written and verbal self-incriminating statements being voluntary and reliable, there is, in my opinion, no justifiable reason to deny his parole.

Since he has spent all of his adult life in prison for a crime that he may not have committed, nor has volition about, knowledge of, nor memory for, the compassionate response would be to let Mr. Sirhan live the remainder of his life free. There is little risk here.

On Thursday, after 16 days, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) finally responded to [my request](#) seeking the legal justification for the ban on televising parole hearings: "It is at the Executive Officer's discretion to decide which, if any, media members or other observers to allow into a parole hearing."

This non-answer is clearly at odds with the relevant title code of CDCR regulations, which states:

2032. (b) Television and radio coverage of Board of Prison Terms' parole hearings will be authorized, unless such coverage would create a risk to the security of an institution, obstruct the hearing process, pose a risk to the personal safety of any person, or have the potential for prejudicing judicial proceedings...

Without such access, several TV reports on Wednesday ran misleading footage from Sirhan's 2011 hearing, uncaptioned, and none ran any quotes of what Sirhan said at his own hearing.

Five years ago, the CDCR suddenly stopped allowing televised parole hearings. My question — which they still refuse to answer is — why?



Jackie Lacey

With the support of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Paul Schrade has now formally requested a new investigation from the L.A. County District Attorney. Sirhan's attorneys will take his case to the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit and Sirhan will continue to work with Dr. Brown to solve the mystery of what happened to him nearly 48 years ago.

2018 will mark the 50th anniversary of Robert Kennedy's death and 50 years of Sirhan's confinement. The release of the remaining [JFK assassination records](#) next year may give some insight into Robert Kennedy's private skepticism regarding the Warren Report. It may also lead to growing public acceptance that the Kennedy assassinations were more complex than they seemed, and that one of the victims is still being held in prison in San Diego.

Shane O'Sullivan is an author, filmmaker and researcher at Kingston University, London. His work includes the documentary [RFK Must Die](#) (2007) and the book [Who Killed Bobby?](#)

(2008). He blogs on the Sirhan case at <http://www.sirhanbsirhan.com>

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