



Tantalizing Echoes of 1968

A quixotic candidate exposed the vulnerability of LBJ.

By Frank Miele

IT IS AWKWARD BUT NECESSARY to draw comparisons between Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s campaign for president today with the 1968 Democrat campaign in which his own father was slain.

But it is not Sen. Robert F. Kennedy to whom we should be comparing RFK Jr., but rather Sen. Eugene McCarthy, the quixotic antiwar candidate who was able to expose the vulnerability of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

President Joe Biden's handlers may be acting as though they don't consider RFK Jr. a credible threat, but that's exactly what it is — acting.

They know that their octogenarian candidate has dangerously low favorability numbers, an arrogance perhaps not seen in Washington since LBJ retired to his Texas ranch, and as many putative supporters in his party as Julius Caesar had assassins.

Meanwhile, Kennedy comes from a beloved political family, yet at the same time is a fierce outsider.

That is a combination rarely seen in a candidate and gives him at least the potential to achieve enough success to demonstrate to Democrat donors and primary voters that Biden is the emperor with no clothes.

At this point in the 1968 race, LBJ seemed untouchable to the establishment media and the political class. McCarthy, however, recognized that the nation was at a tipping point. And though he failed to capitalize, his campaign was the beginning of a new era of grassroots politics.

As described by PBS in an article for American Experience:

"He didn't win the White House. He didn't even win his own party's nomination. But in 1968, Eugene McCarthy revealed major divisions among Democrats, changing the political landscape in a way few American politicians ever have."

McCarthy was an unlikely national candidate. An aloof intellectual from Minnesota, he reluctantly challenged LBJ mainly over Vietnam. But McCarthy also represented a much more radical approach to politics than the Democrat establishment at the time.

McCarthy's platform included a smorgasbord of liberal policies, some of which have since been accomplished and some of which are still being sought: guaranteed jobs, guaranteed minimum income, a federally subsidized health insurance program, affirmative action in education (although based on poverty, not race), and guaranteed quality housing.

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candidate wasn't his domestic agenda, however; it was his promise to end the unpopular war in Vietnam, which had already cost nearly 20,000 American lives by the time McCarthy announced his candidacy.

And at a philosophical level, McCarthy was boosted by his pledge to unite the country at a time when riots and protests were televised on the nightly news with regularity:

The role of the presidency — at all times, but particularly in 1968 — must be one of uniting this nation, not by adding it up in some way, not by putting it together as a kind of jigsaw puzzle.

To unify this nation means to inspire it, to encourage the development of common purposes and shared ideals, and to move toward establishing an order of justice in America.

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ness of America in 1968 was as great as at any time since the Civil War. Confidence in the institutions of government was at an all-time low, partly as a result of doubts surrounding the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and



RFK Jr.'s father, and President John F. Kennedy's killing five years earlier. And partly because of the war itself.

These two great themes — polarization and war — are at the center of RFK Jr.'s campaign.

As in 1968, we are seeing an unbridgeable gap between those who trust the institutions of government and those who don't.

Much of that doubt has been brought about by the government's heavy-handed response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the mask mandates, lockdowns, and vaccine mandates.

RFK Jr. has cornered the market among Democrats who still treasure civil rights and fear an oppressive government.

Just as in 1968, we are also fighting an increasingly unpopular war, not with our soldiers but with our national treasure, and as the Biden administration sends billions of dollars to Ukraine with no end in sight, RFK Jr. promises to put an end to that spending, and much more.

As for Ukraine itself, Kennedy said he "will find a diplomatic solution that brings peace . . . and brings our resources back where they belong. We will offer to withdraw our troops and nuclear-capable missiles from Russia's borders. Russia will withdraw its troops from Ukraine and guarantee its freedom and independence."

Kennedy, like McCarthy, has also made uniting the country one of his primary goals. His campaign website states:

"America is more polarized and divided now than at any time in living memory. Both sides seem to agree that the basic problem is the horrible people on the other side. Both sides are wrong.

"The basic problem is the division itself. A divided public lacks the strength to resist exploitation or to overcome the inertia of the status quo. The classic American can-do spirit exhausts itself in endless battles. So let's heal the divide."

Like McCarthy, RFK Jr. is given no chance to win the nomination, but

should he break 30% in New Hampshire, where he has a natural constituency, Biden's handlers may panic.

Biden's dirty little secret is that he doesn't even have much of a reelection campaign. As Politico reported, "The president has hired fewer than 20 campaign aides. His team hasn't yet announced a 2024 headquarters."

This has some in Biden's camp nervous, but only in regard to an anticipated rematch with Donald Trump. But the real Achilles' heel of the Biden campaign is that it is overlooking RFK Jr.'s potential impact.

Although Biden was able to muscle the Democratic Party into accepting his revised schedule of primary and caucus states, he may live to rue the day he tried to jimmy the system. The goal was to put South Carolina's primary ahead of New Hampshire and Iowa because Biden owed his 2020 nomination victory to South Carolina dealing a death blow to most of his serious opponents.

The logic of 2023 suggested that it would be a good thing for Biden to start off with a healthy win, but New Hampshire refuses to play second fiddle.

Despite being threatened by the Democratic National Committee with losing their delegates, the state's officials intend to leapfrog ahead of South Carolina to stay first in the nation.

At least one writer has speculated that this will force Biden to stay off the ballot in New Hampshire, providing a huge window of opportunity for Kennedy and the other second-tier candidate, Marianne Williamson.

Either way, RFK Jr., like McCarthy did, is pinning his hopes on New Hampshire. Kennedy grew up in neighboring Massachusetts, and his family's mystique is still strong throughout the region.

Don't count him out. □



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