1968:The Assassinations

Perspective #61 John Teevan June 7, 2024

The memory of 1968 is alive again as our political system heads towards summer conventions and all the more so as the Democratic Convention will again be held in Chicago. I graduated from university in 1968 and knew the times well including the assassinations of JFK, MLK and RFK. I knew the protests on the campuses, and I knew about the convention in Chicago because I worked at it during those violent days in August, 1968. Here's the first of three essays that will give my memories and my comments.

1968 was a turning point in the political process for presidential elections. The contention at the 1968 convention in Chicago was entirely within the Democratic Party. The issue in those first years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the antiwar movement. This was coupled with the rising Boomer generation who all but forgot WW2 and was no longer content for political parties to make their major decisions in the old 'smoke-filled rooms'. After 1968, the presidential primary method began with those early primaries in New Hampshire and Iowa followed by Super Tuesday and the eventual choosing of candidates. Now even that system is as long in the tooth as the smoke-filled rooms were two generations ago.

Assassinations: The assassination of John F Kennedy, our extremely articulate and popular president, occurred during my senior year in high school. I was going to my English class on the 3rd floor of Maine East High School when a well-known loudmouth shouted out that Kennedy had been shot. It turned out to be true, we were all sobered and classes were dismissed. Then we silently watched the events unfold on television only adding to the trauma. We had recently been thinking of bomb shelters during the Cuban missile crisis. However, living in Chicago we thought shelters wouldn't be necessary because Chicago would be among the first cities bombed. Kennedy had been easy to imitate on late night tv, but it ended. Nothing like that was funny after his assassination.

As for MLK, I remember seeing the evening news on the August day in 1963 when ML King delivered the "I Have a Dream" speech. It was important and memorable even then. On April 4, 1968, I was in full student all-nighter mode finishing my senior thesis (a driveling but well documented 150 pages on the balance of payments) for the Economics Department at Princeton that was due the next morning. What news as I finished. Months earlier I had gone to the speech by George Wallace in the gym next door to my dorm room. I walked out when Wallace got up to speak. I was almost an MLK fan, partly because I had also traveled through the South and seen the black shanties in Gov. Wallace's Montgomery railyards.

RF Kennedy: I hiked with my friends to the top of New York's Mt Marcy during the June week between comps and graduation. Above the tree line and occasionally in deep fog with only my friends to protect me, it was thrilling and exhausting. When we finally got back, we wanted a hot breakfast at the first restaurant, a pretty tough-looking one. What we got instead was news that RFK had been assassinated the night before (June 5) in L.A. We thought we might just as well go back and live on the mountain. Instead, we came down and graduated. This is the mountain where Teddy Roosevelt hiked the day he became the new president.

The mid-1960s were sobering times with Vietnam, riots in many cities, and these assassinations. My best friend was in Vietnam and also was called in for the riots in DC. Generations were shifting, times were changing, moral norms were evaporating, drugs were becoming fashionable. Many were affluent and free. In the midst of this I became a Christian in my Lockhart dorm room in 1966. I did not associate my new faith with trauma over the times but due to my own need to make sense of my own lost life. I was convinced that many would have a similar response to Christ. Happily, the Jesus People followed; they were featured on the cover of Time magazine the June week in 1971 when we were married in Iowa.