

Instant History

By Chuck Ross

Lyndon Johnson wanted to be loved. But, despite the fact that he had instituted more social programs than any other President, the American people could not, would not, give him the affection they had bestowed upon Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy. Johnson had attempted to build a "Great Society", but, to quote columnist Tom Wicker, the President "found instead an ugly little war that consumed him."

The Forth-Sixth Election (1968)

As the war in Vietnam dragged on, the President's popularity plummeted precipitously. Torn over the decision to win the war or seek peace, LBJ believed that he could achieve neither while actively campaigning for reelection. On March 31, 1968, at the end of a nationally televised policy address, he said, "I shall not seek and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your President."

(1) Political considerations also had much to do with Johnson's decision. What group, waving the war as a hated banner, contributed the most toward the downfall of LBJ?

(2) The three frontrunners for the Democratic nomination were a poetic Senator from Minnesota, a young New York senator with a magic name, and the Vice-President of the United States. Suddenly, tragically, there were but two candidates. What had happened?

(3) Among the Republicans, the top contenders were the handsome and liberal Governor of New York, the handsome and conservative Governor of California, and a former Vice-President considered attractive by the party if not by the press. Who was nominated?

(4) At Chicago, the site of the Democratic Convention, events in the streets overshadowed events in the convention hall. These events would damage the candidacy of the nominee and eventually consign his chief rival to political oblivion. What happened?

(5) Who won the election of 1968...and why?

Answers

(1) They were the college students who supported the candidacy of Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota. Disillusioned over the war in Vietnam — and perhaps a bit fearful that they might find

themselves in it — they swarmed to New Hampshire by the thousands to help "Clean Gene" in his primary battle with Lyndon Johnson. They nearly won, as McCarthy, expected to get around 12% of the vote, achieved 42.4% to Johnson's 49.5%. Then it was on to Wisconsin, where the polls now said that the "peace candidate" would beat LBJ. On the eve of the Wisconsin primary, the President withdrew from the race and, 2 days later, McCarthy racked up 56.2% of the vote.

(2) On June 5, 1968, the night of his victory in the California primary, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. It was a senseless act, to this day no one knows why — except, perhaps, just because "Bobby" was a Kennedy. This left the two Minnesotians, Hubert Humphrey and Gene McCarthy, to vie for the nomination.

(3) It was no contest. Richard M. Nixon was nominated on the first ballot with 692 votes to Nelson Rockefeller's 277 and Ronald Reagan's 182. Nixon was the healer of wounds after Goldwater's crushing defeat in 1964. Mainly through his efforts, the GOP had made a comeback in 1966, a gain of three seats in the Senate and 47 in the House.

(4) Student dissidents, some of them supporters of McCarthy, but most of them an execrable assortment of hippies, yuppies and malcontents, assembled in Chicago to disrupt the convention. They rioted, looted and burned under the watchful eyes of TV cameras, and when they attempted to march on the Convention, the Chicago Police and the National Guard descended on them in fury. It was a bloody mess, and television film repeats, but not identified as such, made the carnage appear worse. The image of the Democratic party was virtually destroyed. Humphrey won the nomination but was made the scapegoat, and backlash against McCarthy would eventually shear him of political power.

(5) Richard Nixon was elected, but the election was razor close. Although the Republicans carried 32 states with 302 electoral votes to 13 states and 191 electoral votes for the Democrats, the popular vote margin was less than 500,000. Hubert Humphrey attributed his defeat to the Chicago riots, lack of money during the early part of the race, and bad campaign

organization during the initial stages. The Democrats made great gains in October, but they were too far behind to catch up. Some believe that George Wallace's candidacy affected the outcome, but this is unlikely, or at least, unknown. 4 of the 5 Southern states that Wallace carried this time around went to Goldwater in '64, and his popular vote, 10 million strong, was mainly right wing and racist. Had Wallace not run, it is doubtful that his followers, if they had even bothered to vote at all, would have supported a "pointy-

head" liberal, their judgement of Humphrey.

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