January 1968: President Lyndon B. Johnson Declines to Run for Another Term

On New Year’s Day 1968 no one knew what was in store for the United States. The decade of the 1960s had been tumultuous, and with a presidential election coming, the political landscape was somewhat troubling. More than half of the public disagreed with the job he was doing as president. However, it was unthinkable that someone in the party would challenge a sitting president; it was just not done. Yet there was disagreement over the war in Vietnam, and the American people and their government were increasingly frustrated by the lack of a knockout punch. Furthermore, his signature domestic program, the War on Poverty, was sputtering, in part because the social and financial cost of the Vietnam war were spiraling out of control. Even his two finest achievements in civil rights, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, were no longer solaces to him. Every summer since 1964 civil disorders racked northern urban America. Their lives were barely touched by the passage of the landmark legislation. Polling data determined that there was a white backlash; the intensity of the freedom movement and the wrenching social change it brought was becoming too much for many whites to accept. The country was becoming more conservative as social mores in America began crumbling. Yet Democrats certainly expected LBJ to run for another term, but it was clear that his popularity had diminished.

The Democratic party was fraying, and the Republican party was making inroads in the so-called Solid South, a reliably Democratic region since the Civil War. George C. Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama, a Democrat, formed and third party and was already picking up support from disaffected, white, working-class Alabamians. Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-MN) began to openly criticize the president’s handling of the Vietnam war, and jumped into
the race as the antiwar candidate. Johnson’s nemesis, Senator Robert F. Kennedy (D-NY) disagreed with Johnson on the war, but was leery of speaking out lest he be accused of allowing his personal dislike of LBJ override his loyalty to the president, the Democratic party, and the country. McCarthy entered the March 12 New Hampshire primary, the first primary in the presidential race, and the second most important political test for any candidate running for the office. He garnered 42 percent of the vote to Johnson’s 49 percent. It was a disappointing showing for the sitting president, and a portent of what was to come. On March 16, Senator Kennedy announced his candidacy; LBJ’s worst nightmare had come true. On March 31 LBJ delivered a long address to the American people. At the end he dropped what can only be called a bombshell: he would not run for another term. Finally, Vice President Hubert Humphrey entered the race.

At first blush LBJ’s refusal to run again looked like a magnanimous, masterful stroke. By eschewing politics he could concentrate on cementing his legacy and bring all his energy to ending the war in Vietnam. After the speech, his approval rating shot up to 57 percent, but a mere four days later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated while he was helping striking garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee. On June 4, two months to the day King was shot, Robert F. Kennedy was shot after claiming victory in the Democratic primary. In spite of almost four hours of brain surgery, Kennedy died in the wee hours of the morning on June 6.

King’s assassination was met with civil unrest across America. Kennedy’s assassination was the fifth murder of an American leader since 1963. It seemed to suck all the air out of the Democratic party. With a badly split party, an intractable war, and seismic social unrest, America could only watch and wait for the November election.
Further Reading


