The 1968 race for the presidency was contentious and chaotic. But during a televised speech on March 31, President Lyndon B. Johnson had shocked the nation by declining to run for a second term. The Democrats were caught off guard; they had assumed that Johnson would run, and it was impossible to imagine any other Democrat trying to unseat the president. But 1968 was an unusual year. The war in Vietnam was going badly and there were huge demonstrations during which some students burned draft cards and at least one Buddhist American monk had set himself on fire in protest against the war. There was tremendous social unrest as long held mores and institutions crumbled. The War on Poverty, undercapitalized from the beginning, suffered from the government’s preoccupation with Vietnam. Young people were challenging the status quo in ever increasing numbers. They made their displeasure known through their development of a counterculture that spurned long held American values regarding sex, clothing, and music. In spite of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans in the urban north had seen virtually no change in their living conditions. Beginning in 1964 there were urban rebellions—the media generally labeled them as race riots—that was so destructive some of these cities never recovered.

Some members of Congress were restive about the war in Vietnam, yet most did not publicly telegraph their differences with President Johnson. But Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-MN) entered the presidential race in 1967 with a platform that supported ending the war and withdrawing American troops. Even though he lost the New Hampshire primary to LBJ by seven percentage points, he rattled the president and the Democratic leadership. McCarthy’s showing prompted a dithering Robert Kennedy to join the race.
McCarthy and Kennedy crisscrossed the country battling for delegates. McCarthy drew thousands of young people who admired his stance on the war. Kennedy put together a coalition of liberal Democrats, blacks, Hispanics, and other marginalized groups who were touched by his concern for the downtrodden. Neither was able to deliver a knockout blow, and were focusing their attention on the primaries in South Dakota and California. Kennedy won the crucial California primary. He declared victory in a packed ballroom and told the crowd their next great test was the Democratic convention in Chicago.

As Kennedy stepped off the podium, there was some confusion as to where he would go next. Fred Dutton, one of the senators aids, decided they should go through the kitchen behind the ballroom to speak with the press. Kennedy stopped to check hands with a busboy, Juan Romero, when he was shot three times, once in the head, by a man later identified as Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, a Palestinian immigrant angry at RFK’s support for Israel. Kennedy slid to the floor, and Romero cradled his head in his lap in hopes Kennedy wouldn’t bleed as much. He also put a rosary in his hand. There was pandemonium in the ballroom as aids to RFK tried to subdue the gunman and Kennedy’s brother-in-law asked if there were any doctors in the house. RFK’s wife Ethel, three months pregnant with their eleventh child was finally able to reach him. Romero said Kennedy asked if everyone was alright, then assured Romero things would be OK. As he was placed on a stretcher he said “Don’t lift me,” and then fell unconscious.

In 1968 there was no Secret Service protection for presidential candidates. Kennedy had three supporters, NFL star Rosey Grier, Olympic track star Raefer Johnson, and a retired FBI agent, William Barry, who acted as informal security guards for him. But Kennedy drew such large and enthusiastic crowds who wanted to touch him and he them, it was difficult to protect
him. After a struggle, Sirhan was subdued, but not before he had emptied his gun and wounded several people.

He was put in an ambulance and taken the mile to Central Receiving Hospital; he was near death. A doctor manually massaged his heart which produced a strong heartbeat. He handed the stethoscope to Ethel Kennedy so she could hear it. He was then transferred to Good Samaritan Hospital a few blocks way. A little after 3:00 a.m. doctors begin surgery to remove the bullet from his head; it had hit a bone and shattered, spraying bone fragments throughout his brain. The Senator showed no improvement. On June 6, RFK died surrounded by his wife and other family members. His press secretary, Frank Mankiewicz, announced his death at 2:00 a.m., June 6. Robert Kennedy was forty-two years old.

Kennedy and his family were flown back to New York on a presidential jet. His body lay in repose at St. Patrick’s Cathedral; thousands of mourners waited in line to view the coffin. An honor guard of family and friends stood by his coffin. After the requiem mass, attended by family, friends, politicians—including President Johnson and Senator McCarthy—entertainers, and RFK acolytes, his body was placed on a train bound for Washington, D.C. The trip, which was scheduled to take four hours took eight. Ethel Kennedy and her oldest son, Joseph P. Kennedy III, walked through the train comforting mourners. Kennedy’s younger brother, Senator Ted Kennedy, and his mother, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, stood in the open car carrying his body, and sometimes acknowledged the massive crowds with a slight wave. The thousands of people lining the route paid tribute to RFK by singing, putting their hands over the hearts, and doffing their hats; many were crying. At Elizabeth, New Jersey, crowds spilled over onto the track, and a train going in the opposite direction killed two spectators and wounded several others. The
train arrived at Arlington National Cemetery four hours late. Amongst a crowd lit solely by candles, Kennedy was laid to rest not far from his brother’s grave.

His murder seemed surreal. On the night of April 4, Kennedy announced to a mostly black crowd at a campaign event in Indiana that Martin Luther King, Jr. had been murdered. He spoke eloquently and without notes. He also acknowledged that he understood the anger of the crowd; he, too, had lost a brother to a white man. But RFK soothed the crowd, quoting his favorite Greek poet, Aeschylus, and assured the crowd that they, too, would get through this horrible tragedy. He and his wife, Ethel, and his sister-in-law, Jackie Kennedy, attended King’s funeral. RFK and his wife marched behind the mule-drawn wagon that led King to his resting place. Two months later, Robert Kennedy was also gone.

Further Reading
