November 1968: Richard Nixon Elected President

By the time of the Democrats convened in Chicago in August, the party was in disarray. The Tet offensive in the Vietnam war kicked off a season of massive antiwar protests, and the two Democrats in the race, Senator Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy battled over who would control the party’s antiwar message. On the last day of March, Johnson gave a televised speech during which he announced a bombing halt in some areas of Vietnam, and said he would not run for another term as president. Days later, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated; two months later so was Robert F. Kennedy. Vice President Hubert Humphrey was supported by the party establish as the Democratic nominee, although he had not run in any primaries. Chaos reigned in the streets around where the convention was held as police brutally beat, gassed and arrested hundreds of antiwar protesters. When Humphrey won the nomination, the crown he received was badly tarnished.

George C. Wallace broke away from the Democratic party and formed the American Independent Party. As its standard bearer, Wallace was supported by whites who loved his stand against segregation, busing, antiwar demonstrators, the federal judiciary, and the permissiveness of American society. He was the candidate of the angry voters.

In the Republican party, three prominent governors vied for the nomination: George W. Romney of Illinois, Nelson Rockefeller of New York, and Californian Ronald Reagan. Richard Nixon, the former Vice President of Dwight D. Eisenhower, was also in the race. Nixon lost the presidential race of 1960 to Senator John F. Kennedy (D-MA). In 1962 he was trounced by the Democrat Pat Brown. Nixon’s concession speech was one for the ages; he was angry, bitter, and
petulant, and congratulated the crowd for no longer being his foil, because the press conference was to be his last.

Nixon’s comeback from the political wilderness was astonishing. He had licked his wounds for several years and campaigned hard for other Republicans in the midterm election of 1966. His help was instrumental in several campaigns. Nixon had the support of the party establishment, and vanquished every candidate who took him on. By the time of the Republican convention in August, he needed fewer than a dozen votes to clinch the nomination.

United States Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) had run against President Johnson in 1964 and lost. But he had picked up five deep South states, and laid the groundwork for a southern wing of the Republican party. In 1968 these delegates were the more conservative and southern than the Eisenhower Republicans. Nixon won on the first ballot.

As he hit the hustings, Nixon campaigned hard for the votes of the white working class; they were the people who were tired of the cultural excesses of the decade, dismayed over equal rights with blacks, and suspicious of the federal judiciary whom they blamed for integration and busing. They clamored for law and order in the streets and opposed antiwar demonstrators. Wallace and Nixon split these votes, but Nixon won the hearts of what he called the Silent Majority, Republicans who were in the middle of the political spectrum. He also promised to scuttle the draft, thereby siphoning strength from antiwar voters. Unlike the hot Nixon of 1960, the new Nixon was calm and deliberate.

Humphrey had been badly behind in the race, but by October he had gained and was closing in on Nixon. He built a coalition dominated by labor leaders and party regulars, called out Wallace for his racism, and slowly began to distance himself from the war policy of President Johnson.
By October there looked to be a headway in the Vietnamese peace talks. Sure that this would throw the election to Humphrey, Nixon enlisted the help of Anna Chennault, a wealthy, prominent Republican and former war correspondent. Chennault advised the Ambassador of Vietnam that Nixon would win the election, and they should not make any agreement with President Johnson. The president had confirmed this information through the National Security Administration (NSA); it wiretapped Nixon campaign workers, the South Vietnamese embassy, and had Chennault under surveillance. The peace talks stalled and the South Vietnamese left the negotiating table. Johnson refused to make the information public; he was afraid that it would damage the institution of the presidency and possibly lead to a charge of treason against Richard Nixon.

Richard Nixon was elected the 37th president of the United States. The difference in the popular vote was less than one percent. Nixon, however, won 64 percent of the votes in the Electoral College. Afterward, Congress drew up legislation to abolish the Electoral College and rely solely on the popular vote. It failed.

Further Reading


