



We Can Start to Work Together: Robert F. Kennedy, the 1968 Campaign, and Respect

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

1968 America was a turbulent time. On January 31, the Vietnam War changed when the North Vietnamese regular and guerrilla armies launched the surprise Tet Offensive in dozens of cities across South Vietnam and even stormed the U.S. Embassy in the capital of Saigon. While the United States ultimately re-took all the cities and won the battle, Americans were psychologically distraught as President Johnson had promised them that the war was almost won and nearing an end.

As a result, President Johnson announced that he would not run for a second term on March 31. On April 4, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, leading to race riots in more than hundred cities during the summer. In late August, violence erupted between young demonstrators and police in the streets of Chicago outside of the Democratic National Convention as television audiences watched. Meanwhile, inflation led to skyrocketing prices and factories closed as international competition began affecting American economic growth and jobs. It felt as if the fabric of American society was being torn apart.

Robert F. Kennedy lived during this era, and worked to ameliorate his nation's problems. He served as the Attorney General during his brother's presidency. In 1964, Kennedy won a massive electoral landslide to become a U.S. Senator from New York. In 1968, he decided to run for president with a message of hope and respect for all Americans, focusing on those who were dispossessed.

NARRATIVE

On Saturday, March 16, 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy (Bobby) walked up to the microphones in the Old Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C. He announced that he was entering the race for the Democratic nomination for president. He sought to evoke the memory of his brother, President John F. Kennedy, whose assassination in 1963 had left the American people with a widespread longing for the unfulfilled legacy of hope. Bobby Kennedy wanted to revive the idealism of his brother's presidency—before the turbulence of the Vietnam War, urban riots, student and anti-war demonstrations, and assassinations of important political figures brought turmoil and chaos to the United States. Kennedy promised, “I do not run for the presidency merely to oppose any man but to propose new policies.” At first, he did not articulate a list of specific policies, but rather a vision of unity and leadership in an America that seemed divided and awry. He continued, “At stake is not simply the leadership of our party or even our country, it is our right to moral leadership on this planet.”

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Kennedy had thrown his hat into the ring and had to distinguish himself among the Democratic candidates. Even though Democratic President Lyndon Johnson went on national television two weeks later to announce, “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president,” the field was still crowded with Vice-President Hubert Humphrey and progressive Democratic Senator Eugene McCarthy. Kennedy was born to an extremely wealthy family, but he based his campaign on an appeal to the powerless and dispossessed in American society. “I have to win through the people,” he told an aide. Kennedy organized his campaign for the Democratic nomination around a coalition of young people, African Americans, blue-collar whites, farmers, and Native Americans.

The campaign got off to a relatively slow start. On April 2, Kennedy won only six percent of the vote in the Wisconsin primary as a write-in candidate. On April 4, Martin Luther King, Jr., was tragically gunned down by an assassin outside his Memphis, Tennessee hotel. When Kennedy learned of the news, he put his face in his hands and lamented, “Oh, God. When is the violence going to stop?” That day, he was scheduled to deliver a speech in a poor section of Indianapolis, and several aides and the police advised him to cancel the appearance because of possible violence. He hated limousines, barricades, and police escorts that kept him away from the people. He courageously forged ahead with the appearance during the cold and windy evening, and even informed the shocked crowd of King’s assassination. He told the audience, “What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice towards those who still suffer within our country.”

Kennedy won the Indiana primary and spoke to increasingly enthusiastic and frenzied audiences. The Kennedy mystique, his good looks, and his appeal to ordinary Americans who wanted justice and stability and were struggling to make sense of the bewildering changes around them, all made him wildly popular. The media noted his appeal to “millions of people seeking hope out of despair.” Swollen crowds with ecstatic supporters desperately reached to shake his hand or touch his hair. One observer noted, “His hands were scratched where people were trying to touch him,” and actually saw they were bloody.

His campaign continued to reach out to common Americans and centered on the issues of poverty, hunger, injustice for African Americans and others, and opposition to the war. Although he remained somewhat vague about remedies and policies to address the problems, his rhetoric resonated with millions. He reiterated these themes over and over again on the campaign trail. He told one audience, “Every night we watch horror on the evening news. Violence spreads inexorably across the nation, filling our streets and crippling our lives.” He argued that the Vietnam War was being lost but the Johnson administration only offered “the ever-expanding use of military force.” Finally, he stated, “We are more divided now than perhaps we have been in a hundred years.” He wanted to “heal the deep divisions that exist between races, between age groups, and on the war.” He spread a general message of peace and unity as well as respect for all Americans.

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Kennedy won the Nebraska primary by appealing to farmers who felt the pinch of inflation in the economy. He barely lost the Oregon primary, but poured his great family resources into the California primary. One appearance with young black militants in Oakland again demonstrated his compassion and willingness to listen to the problems of the frustrated and discontented. He told his campaign advisers, "This may not be a pleasant experience. These people have got a lot of hostility and lots of reasons for it . . . But no matter how insulting a few of them may be, they're trying to communicate what's inside them." After the meeting, he said, "I'm glad I went . . . They need to know somebody who'll listen."

His desire to listen to the problems of his fellow citizens paid large dividends as he won the huge California primary. Once the victory was confirmed, he gave a speech at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles shortly after midnight on June 5. He delivered a victory speech and again appealed to unity. He pledged to help heal the country's divisions and wanted the nation to "start to work together." Kennedy left the ballroom amidst great celebration and applause. He took a shortcut through the hotel kitchen, where he was fatally gunned down by assassin Sirhan Sirhan. Kennedy died of his wounds, yet another heartbreaking tragedy in a tragic year. The nation's sense of hopefulness suffered another choking shock. Kennedy's body was carried to New York for a requiem mass and then sent by train to Washington, D.C., where he was laid to rest at Arlington Cemetery near his brother.

Kennedy had envisioned a nation in which all people were empowered to enjoy equal opportunity to participate in the prosperity of American society and the political system of self-government. This personal commitment to respect was rooted in his character. As he stated, "It's how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are . . . I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice."