



1964 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION

A Competing Contest for Legitimacy & Legacy

By Isabel Catanzaro '20

ABSTRACT

My paper attempts to demonstrate the significance of the 1964 Democratic National Convention in solidifying the Kennedy legacy and in symbolizing a political “passing of the torch” from John F. Kennedy to Robert F. Kennedy, the next in line in the Kennedy political legacy. This event acted as a critical turning point in American thought following the assassination, in which Americans decided to honor JFK through attributing a legacy and mystique to his aura, all displayed publicly at the convention. Thus, the 1964 Democratic National Convention remains a paramount event in that it acted as a decisive political crossroads, celebrating both the past through a sobering remembrance of the late John F. Kennedy, and paving the way for the future through a public celebration of Robert F. Kennedy. An exploration of the 1964 Democratic National Convention can both more narrowly demonstrate JFK’s formidable legacy, and pinpoint a critical historical segway in the transfer of political power from one Kennedy to the next. Through all of this can we see the importance of the 1964 Democratic National Convention as a critical event in the aftermath of the Kennedy Assassination.



On the evening of August 27th, 1964, Robert F. Kennedy stood before a grieving American public. Only nine months earlier, these men and women had lost their beacon of hope, their injection of political vitality, and their symbol of liberal idealism. Thus, when Bobby Kennedy took the stage at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City to deliver a tribute to his brother, the nation saw one of their own. They poured out every ounce of their condolences in screams, claps, and cheers; the crowd remained on its feet for twenty-two straight minutes. Once Kennedy finally spoke, he broke their hearts, saying, “When I think of President Kennedy, I think of what Shakespeare said in Romeo and Juliet: “When he shall die take him and cut him out into stars and he shall make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night and pay no worship to the garish sun.”¹ The crowd responded with more cheers and adoration. After Robert Kennedy left the stage, he sat on a fire escape and wept.²

The months leading up to the summer of 1964 set the stage for a captivating power struggle between Lyndon Johnson and Robert

Kennedy. Both stood in line as potential successors to JFK’s legacy: Johnson politically and Kennedy emotionally. Although the American people ultimately accepted Lyndon B. Johnson as their Democratic presidential nominee, amid a twenty-two minute standing ovation and an unprecedented show of collective emotion, they also offered Robert F. Kennedy the torch in continuing the legacy of his departed brother. Thus, the 1964 Democratic Convention proved a paramount event in that it acted as a decisive political crossroads, featuring both Lyndon Johnson’s determined quest to become a president on his own, and Robert F. Kennedy’s desire to solidify his brother’s memory, and to continue his political legacy. Almost from the moment of John F. Kennedy’s death on November 22nd, 1963, Lyndon Johnson turned his attention to winning the presidency in his own right. The 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City would name the party’s presidential nominee for the subsequent presidential election. Eyes fixed on the presidential prize, LBJ set forth to secure the nomination; however, Johnson was not the sole contender

in the succession of JFK's liberal idealism. The American public refused to let go of President Kennedy or at best the romanticized memory of his Camelot White House. Within this painful nostalgia emerged an immortalization of the late President Kennedy, and in this immortalization emerged a formidable obstacle to Johnson's re-election: Robert F. Kennedy.

Kennedy's assassination was a devastating blow to his younger brother, Robert. After dedicating almost all of his political life thus far to aiding his brother, RFK had yet to consider a career of his own. The only feeling more powerful than his grief, however, was the commitment RFK felt to furthering his brother's legacy. Bobby saw this legacy, this unfinished narrative, as his to continue. Following the assassination, Robert Kennedy intended to preserve his brother's dream, internalize his passion, and accept responsibility as his rightful heir. This newfound independence forced Kennedy, much like LBJ, to develop his own political identity independent of the late JFK. To both men, the presidency appeared to be the only plausible platform to accomplish their objectives. Timing, however, proved crucial. According

to Kennedy confidant Nicholas Katzenbach, RFK had named the 1968 Presidency as his ultimate goal, therefore leaving his role in the 1964 Election uncertain.³ Kennedy faced two choices entering the summer of 1964: to run for the Senate, or to be named as Lyndon Johnson's Vice President.

President Johnson recognized the necessity of the Kennedy spirit to his campaign. A Southern Democrat in the wake of a civil rights crisis, Johnson stood at odds with many of the party's Northern liberals. He knew all too well that he, a coarse Texan who attended community college, stood in the shadow of the handsome, wealthy, and East Coast educated Kennedy brothers. He thus jumped at the opportunity to seize JFK's death (and the nation's grief) to refashion the Kennedy liberal idealism as his own. With this reimagination of political identity, Johnson planned to win over the northern portion of the Democratic Party, thus securing his nomination at the upcoming convention. Already the people's leader by legal right, Johnson still felt a need to win political justification from his Democratic peers. Determined to submerge himself in the Kennedy

aura, LBJ could not escape the potential power of the Kennedy memory in his preparation for the summer of 1964.

The relationship of LBJ and RFK radiated tension; the two men did not get along. Their disagreement derived from conflicting perspectives of one another. Johnson saw Robert Kennedy as a spoiled brat, whose family wealth and connection had dropped political power effortlessly into his lap. Kennedy, on the other hand, saw Johnson as a rough and unprincipled bully. In Robert Kennedy's eyes, Johnson appeared the undeserving successor of John F. Kennedy's political legacy. The history of their hostility dated back to the 1960 Democratic Convention, in which the younger Kennedy ardently opposed Johnson as his brother's running mate. Johnson, well aware of Kennedy's attempts to thwart his White House dreams, started referring to him as the "Bobby problem."⁴ This so called "problem" developed over time into more of an obsession for Johnson. Forced to balance his need for Robert Kennedy's support with an utter disdain for his character, Johnson faced a difficult decision entering the summer of 1964: should he appease a mourning America

by embracing Kennedy, or should he avenge Bobby's 1960 snub by denying him a coveted chance at the vice presidency? Thus, with a critical convention fast approaching, John F. Kennedy still managed, even in death, to play a decisive role in the nation's politics. On January 11, 1964, the Democratic National Committee held a meeting in the Sheraton-Park Hotel of Washington, D.C., featuring a tribute to the late President Kennedy by Pennsylvania Governor David Lawrence.⁵ The dispirited committee members mourned the late president, reminiscing wistfully over the centrality of his idealism to the Democratic Party. They quickly turned to the future, however, noting both an "opportunity" and an "obligation" to memorialize JFK through an unwavering support of Lyndon Johnson.⁶

As president, Johnson inherited a turbulent political environment: a stark polarization existed between parties, and the looming civil rights crisis deepened regional differences within the Democratic Party itself. This tumultuous climate placed immense importance on Johnson's running mate in the upcoming election. Eyes fixed on reelection,

Johnson set out to find a vice presidential candidate who would soften his strong southern ties and ultimately help to reunite the Democratic Party. The pressure of the Kennedy mystique aside, Johnson entered the summer considering three main candidates: Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey, Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy, and, naturally, Robert Kennedy.

A continual player in Lyndon Johnson's political quest, the primary challenge to Johnson's choice proved none other than his rival, Robert F. Kennedy. Johnson knew that Kennedy would help secure him the North, and possibly even the Midwest, although not the South; however, Robert Kennedy's regional support was not his greatest asset. His image as the mourning brother, a pained inheritor of a political legacy, appealed to nostalgic Americans nationwide. These people felt a deep loss over JFK's death, a loss that Robert Kennedy could and wanted to share with them. His presence represented a comfort to a traumatized nation, and Johnson could not ignore that authority. Everything changed, however, on July 15, 1964, when the Republicans announced Barry

Goldwater as their presidential nominee. Goldwater, a highly conservative, derisive politician, had dedicated his political rise to an emerging neo-conservative movement. His platforms sought to reemphasize the conservative cornerstone of states' right and included an open opposition of the Civil Rights Bill. An example of Goldwater's polarizing character exists in one of his more inflammatory comments, "Sometimes I think this country would be better off if we could just saw off the Eastern Seaboard and let it float out to sea."⁷ This disposition made Goldwater of little threat to Johnson in the Northeast, the same region in which Robert Kennedy would help him the most. Turning, per usual, to the political polls of Oliver Quayle, Johnson found that with Goldwater as his opposition, his candidate for vice president would create a difference of only two percentage points.⁸ Johnson reveled in this liberating news, telling his brother, "I don't need the little runt to win. I can take anybody I damn well please."⁹

Knowing that RFK was unnecessary for reelection, Johnson now needed a way to break the news to the public. Not only would he have

to navigate the political ramifications of staunch Kennedy supporters, but the reality of Robert Kennedy's great emotional impact also lingered. The continual conundrum Johnson faced was whether he could become a president in his own right. He knew and Bobby knew that it was JFK's election that had put him in office. Thus, Johnson felt torn between a need to establish his own political legitimacy and the knowledge that Robert Kennedy represented to Americans the same idealism and vibrancy that had gotten Johnson to the White House in the first place.

Before Johnson made any public

announcement, however, he had to tell Kennedy the news. In their meeting, Johnson provided Goldwater's nomination as the basis of his decision. Johnson and Kennedy were not the only topics of conversation as the late President Kennedy once again emerged as a bargaining tool. In his reasoning Johnson made a direct appeal to Robert Kennedy's admiration of his brother, arguing that he made his decision out of an obligation that President Kennedy had shared, an obligation to make decisions "on the basis of what he thought was best for the country and for the party and for himself."¹⁰



The perpetual tension between the two politicians surfaced in the conclusion of this historic conversation. As Johnson recounted later that day to presidential aide Clark Clifford, the young Kennedy departed the meeting, smiling, with the comment, "Well, you didn't ask me, but I think that I could have done a hell of a job for us."¹¹ To this final remark, Johnson smugly returned the smile, replying, "Well, I think you will do a hell of a job for us. And for yourself too."¹²

Now, after speaking with Kennedy privately, Johnson still found himself tasked with having to deliver the news to the public. This would prove difficult, as Johnson knew the press held a certain affinity for Bobby Kennedy. Johnson had always felt a sort of insecurity in comparison to JFK, and this same insecurity extended to other members of the Kennedy family as well. Johnson acknowledged this, confiding to colleague Carl Sanders that while the Kennedys exuded style, he simply lacked class.¹⁵ Recorded phone calls replay an anxious Johnson pouring over newspaper articles in support of RFK. A New York News article from late July reported of both general Northern

favor and of political boss support for Kennedy. Johnson confidant and Mayor of Chicago Richard Daley tried to soften this discouraging news, labeling the reports as a mere press attempt to create party divides entering Atlantic City.¹⁴ Daley's explanations did little to ease Johnson's insecurity, however, and the media's incessant preoccupation with Robert Kennedy continued to haunt his pursuit for reelection.

The answer, Johnson soon discerned, lay in depriving Kennedy of any personal preference and instead categorizing his vice presidential candidates. Johnson planned to announce his decision to not consider any members of his Cabinet for the vice presidency. Instead, he would consider only senators, governors, and mayors, a broad category which allowed for Humphrey and McCarthy to remain in consideration. Johnson revealed his strategy in a conference call with colleagues shortly after his conversation with Kennedy. When Senator Richard Russell noted the success of the proposed plan in eliminating candidate choices, Johnson immediately chuckled, and smartly replied, "I just had to eliminate one."¹⁵ Thus, in an effort to remove the notion of Kennedy as a

serious candidate, Johnson safely shuffled the "Bobby Problem" among other respected names as Adlai Stevenson, Sargent Shriver, and Robert McNamara, in his intent to remove all cabinet members from vice presidential consideration.

With Robert Kennedy safely out of the running for the vice presidency, Johnson now narrowed his search, directing his attention as late as August 21 to Minnesotan Hubert Humphrey and a new candidate, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield. The press got hold of the information regarding these final two choices, a leak Johnson quickly blamed on a bitter Robert Kennedy.¹⁶ With the Convention beginning in only a few days, Johnson still lacked a concrete vice-presidential nominee. He had dodged the Kennedy bullet, however, and for Johnson this meant one less obstacle in his quest for Democratic power.

While Johnson and his team discussed the difficult question of the vice presidency, a developing crisis threatened to disrupt the convention: the Mississippi Freedom Democrats. The outward death of liberal idealism that accompanied the Kennedy assassination exacerbated the nation's already tense race

relations, a response seen clearly in the struggles of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The 1964 Democratic National Convention occurred at a critical point in the development of civil rights. While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had prompted important reforms in American civil society, the government had not yet addressed the issue of voting rights.¹⁷ When the Mississippi Democratic Party met to elect their convention delegation, they strategically excluded all of their African American citizens, thus denying their voting rights and sending an all-white delegation to Atlantic City. These marginalized Mississippians, led by civil rights activist Robert Moses, responded with the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, a group organized to bring awareness to the state's violation of voting rights. These "Freedom Democrats," as they were called, set out in the summer of 1964 to gain both active representation at the convention and a platform for their cause.

Lyndon Johnson understood the ultimatum posed by the MFDP. He could seat the MFDP at the Convention and lose the much needed support of white Southerners,

or he could seat the original Mississippi delegation and thus risk negative coverage over MFDP protest and demonstration. Johnson's initial plan was to seat the Freedom Democrat delegation as "honored guests."¹⁸ This way, he could attempt to please both parties, offering symbolic acknowledgement of the Freedom Democrats and their platform, yet still vesting the real voting power in the all-white Mississippi delegation, thus appeasing their elitist exclusion.

This preliminary plan for Democratic harmony stalled, however, when the MFDP would not accept symbolic recognition of their cause. Overwhelmed by the growing strength of this movement, Johnson delegated

the problem to Hubert Humphrey. Referring to the phenomenon as "white backlash," the controversy became a continual thorn in Johnson's quest to secure complete political support at the Convention. Johnson resented the disruption caused by the MFDP, calling the group "a bunch of Communists," and agreeing with majority whip Hale Boggs that "seating the MFDP would be 'a hell of a mistake' that 'destroys the party.'"¹⁹ He also claimed that government wiretaps showed twenty of the Freedom Party's top members to be Communist.²⁰

Johnson's commitment to painting the controversy as a political conspiracy led him



to accuse none other than his original nemesis, Robert F. Kennedy, for the developing crisis. Still paranoid over Kennedy's potential to usurp his Democratic nomination, LBJ repeatedly referred to the issue as "Bobby's trap," musing that Robert Kennedy had himself engineered the MFDP controversy to disrupt the convention. In a conversation with Hubert Humphrey on August 20, Johnson bitterly argued of a Kennedy plan "to get this convention disturbed any way he can," arguing that RFK was "not interested in promoting harmony."²¹

As fervent conversations over the seating of the MFDP took place, circumstances finally required President Johnson to intervene. On August 22, 1964, Freedom Democrat Fannie Lou Hamer prepared to deliver a testimony before the DNC's Credentials Committee. Hamer, a Mississippi sharecropper and MFDP leader, planned to give a riveting speech describing the serious plight of her fellow black Mississippians. Aware of this planned testimony and the negative press it would bring to convention coverage, Johnson knew he had to somehow obstruct Hamer's speech. In an act of quick thinking, LBJ announced that he would hold a

spontaneous press conference—a public address to take place conveniently in congruence with Hamer's testimony. Therefore, while Fannie Lou Hamer delivered an impassioned account of her experience in a Mississippi county jail, Lyndon Baines Johnson cut into all major television networks, orating arduously for ten minutes, only to inform the press that he had not yet chosen a vice presidential running mate. The two speeches concluded simultaneously, and Johnson breathed a sigh of relief.

Hamer, however, would not be silenced. Johnson's plan backfired, as later that evening, in response to the reaction of an affected Credentials Committee, the three major television networks replayed Hamer's speech. Her story was truly harrowing: ruthless, continual beatings, horrible screams, and the dehumanizing demand, "Can you say, 'Yes, sir,' nigger?"²² (Watson, 2010, p. 248) She spoke with authority and with emotion, and with tears in her eyes concluded her testimony powerfully, saying, "And if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated- NOW- I question America. Is this America?"²³ Hamer's testimony ultimately reached more audiences than she would have

with the original airing, and despite Johnson's best efforts, Americans of all races and politics heard her message that night.

A very disconcerted America switched off their TVs that evening. President Johnson, however, could not let himself dwell on the turmoil caused by the MFDP. Amid the disarray surrounding Hamer's powerful speech, it would have been easy to miss another crucial news alert released that same day: Robert F. Kennedy had announced his intention to run for the U.S. Senate.²⁴ The Convention was set to open in only two days. Nonetheless, with many unanswered questions remaining and an important development in RFK's future, it was finally time to head to Atlantic City.

Atlantic City in the summer of 1964 was no longer the famed Atlantic City of the past. Once a hub of entertainment and escape for Easterners and visitors from across the country, Atlantic City had decayed, both physically and financially, transforming itself from a playground for the rich to a budget family getaway. The delegates arrived regardless, all in eager anticipation of the next three days.

The convention was scheduled to run

from Tuesday, August 25th, to Thursday, August 27th. Tuesday would kick off the event with general committee reports and a presentation of the Democratic Platform, while Wednesday would include the nominations for Johnson and Humphrey. Then, on Thursday, the much anticipated memorial to JFK would take place. This memorial was to be one of three that evening, the first two slated for Eleanor Roosevelt and Sam Rayburn.²⁵ This was not the original schedule. The initial convention agenda called for the JFK memorial film and tribute, which Robert Kennedy would deliver, to take place on Tuesday. Johnson, however, did not approve of this, and decided that it should instead be moved to Thursday, strategically placing it after all ballots for the vice presidential and presidential nominees had been cast. This way, Johnson could solidify his nomination as Democratic Presidential nominee before Robert Kennedy had any chance to sway the minds of the American delegates. Here, Lyndon Johnson found himself once again balancing the undeniable weight of the Kennedy mystique with his own desire to establish his political legitimacy.

Over the next few days the press and public would witness a monumental display of Democratic pride, party unity, and Johnson political success. What they did not see, however, was the immense amount of anxiety LBJ felt during this time. Amid fervent conversations over the MFDP and his vice presidential candidate, Lyndon Johnson found himself plagued by feelings of inferiority, the majority of which were spurred by Robert Kennedy. In describing this emotional burden to Texas Governor John Connally, Johnson once said, "when this fellow looks at me, he looks at me like he's going to look a hole through me like I'm a spy or something."²⁶ Kennedy's unremitting attitude of indifference towards Johnson infuriated the president, and contributed to a constant fear that Bobby would somehow manage to steal the Democratic nomination from his grasp. Although this fear proved doubtful considering RFK's recent announcement to run for the Senate, with nomination so close, Kennedy's popularity and influence still appeared to Johnson all the more frightening and real.

Johnson's insecurities prompted him to

enlist the help of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in monitoring and assessing the motives of Robert Kennedy, a request Hoover obligingly jumped to fulfill. Johnson was furious, for example, to hear at one point that Kennedy friend Paul Corbin had attempted "to promote a vice-presidential write-in for Kennedy in New Hampshire," an action Johnson immediately read as subversive to his presidential campaign.²⁷ Per Johnson's request, Hoover sent a team of thirty FBI agents "to assist the Secret Service in protecting President Johnson and to ensure that the convention itself would not be marred by civil disruption."²⁸ The reality, however, was that these agents were sent with the purpose of monitoring Bobby Kennedy and the members of the MFDP, or all parties whom Johnson feared threatened to cause "civil disruption." Kennedy knew of this surveillance, however, aware since his brother's death that the FBI had wiretapped a direct phone line of his. In a July phone conversation with Johnson, Kennedy confronted him, saying "I understand that he (Hoover) sends all kinds of reports over to you about me." Johnson played off the attorney general's accusation, replying, "Not any

that I have seen. What are you talking about?"²⁹ Thus, in a conversation wholly representative of their relationship, the tension between Johnson and Kennedy had been acknowledged, and just as quickly dismissed.

Johnson not only sought political support in quelling this Kennedy preoccupation, but emotional support, as well. On August 25th, only a day from his nomination, Johnson turned to his closest circle for reassurance and promises of loyalty. That morning, in a phone call with White House Press Secretary George Reedy, Johnson mentioned a "little statement" he had drafted containing remarks he planned to read either in a press conference or in Atlantic City itself. The statement was one of resignation, a withdrawal from the presidential race. One of many in a difficult press week, a critical New York Times article had questioned Johnson's accepting of a stereo gift set while Vice President, a gift which then led to a query into his personal finances. Spurred by this negative article and clearly weighed down by the pressure of the Mississippi Freedom controversy, Johnson needed a fortification of confidence. Lamenting to George Reedy that he was old and tired, a somber LBJ

admitted, "The nation ought to have a chance to get the best available. That's who I want my children to have, and I know that I am not."³⁰

From the minute he joined Jack Kennedy on the 1960 Democratic ticket, Lyndon Johnson tortured himself through perpetual comparison with the princely JFK. Born and raised in Texas and a graduate of Texas State Teachers College, Johnson remained an outsider to the East Coast hierarchy of Washington, D.C. The crude Texan was obsessed with power, control, and simply being on top, and had clawed his way through



the congressional ranks to reach his high position of power and authority entering the 1960 Presidential Election. All of this effort, however, suddenly rendered itself useless in the company of John F. Kennedy. In describing Kennedy, Johnson recalled, "It was the goddamnedest thing, here was a whippersnapper...He never said a word of importance in the Senate and he never did a thing. But somehow...he managed to create the image of himself as a shining intellectual, a youthful leader who would change the face of the country."³¹ Thus, culminating from years of insecurity and self-consciousness, it remained clear on the morning of August 25th that the convention had put Johnson's deep-seated feelings of inferiority to the test.

In another conversation the same day, Johnson spoke to aide Walter Jenkins of "younger men and better-prepared men and better-trained men and Harvard-education men."³² These were not the traits used to describe President Johnson, but rather provided an apt description of his rival, Robert Kennedy. The words of old friend Albert Moursund shocked President Johnson back into reality, however. After seeking Moursund's opinion on

his potential withdrawal, Johnson's long time confidant reminded him of the the consequences of such a political move: if he chose to withdraw, the torch would fall to none other than Bobby Kennedy. Thus, following a rare admission of mediocrity, Johnson's aides proved successful in abating the president's Kennedy-inspired insecurities. Reassured of his follower's loyalty, Lyndon Johnson quickly returned his focus to the two remaining issues at hand: the MFDP and his vice president.

The convention began just as its planning phase had concluded: dealing with the Freedom Democrat crisis. After three days of continuous negotiation, the Credentials Committee and Hubert Humphrey finally reached a compromise with the Freedom Democrats. Accepted Tuesday evening, the compromise read that "no Mississippi regular delegate could sit unless he pledged allegiance to the ticket; that two of the Freedom Party leaders would sit as delegates at large with full right of vote; and that at the Convention of 1968, and thereafter, no delegations would be seated from states where the Party process deprived citizens of the right to vote by reason of their race or color."³³

Johnson moved quickly to paint this victory as a demonstration of Democratic Party unity. Just as his convention had appeared to be falling apart mere days before with Fannie Lou Hamer's speech, Johnson could now deem this crisis critically averted.

The next day Johnson conquered his next big obstacle: his vice-president. From the moment Johnson had eliminated his Cabinet from the running, Hubert Humphrey emerged as a front-runner in vice presidential deliberations. A well-known Democratic politician, Humphrey's Catholicism would also help Johnson's campaign in the Midwest. Johnson had kept the press on their toes leading up to the convention, mentioning a variety of names during his iconic walks around the White House grounds.³⁴ The time had come, however, and finally Johnson delivered an official go-ahead, sending aide Jim Rowe to interrogate Humphrey for any lingering secrets, as well as to seek reassurance of the most important quality Johnson needed in a vice-president: loyalty.

Humphrey passed the test, and found himself summoned to Washington late on Tuesday. Hubert Humphrey arrived at the

White House to see a jovial, almost relaxed Lyndon Johnson awaiting him. Johnson curtly described the position to Humphrey as "like a marriage with no chance of divorce," and then casually asked the Minnesota man, "Hubert, how would you like to be my Vice-President?"³⁵ Humphrey's affirmative reply wed the two politicians into a remarkable Democratic ticket, and Johnson's arduous selection process came to an end. The day flew by with a multitude of press conferences and administrative housekeeping. By late afternoon it came time to depart for Atlantic City, and Johnson and Humphrey appeared just in time to receive their respective nominations.

Governor John Connally of Texas and Governor Pat Brown of California delivered Johnson's nominating speeches. Connally was the same Connally who had been wounded alongside JFK by Lee Harvey Oswald's bullets on November 22nd, 1963, his presence an eerie reminder of the Democratic Party's tumultuous last year. Following these speeches came Johnson's chance to share his vice presidential nomination, offering the convention Hubert Humphrey's name. Atlantic City eagerly

accepted both suggestions, and the convention concluded its second night with a thunderstorm of applause and cheer. Little did anyone in Atlantic City that evening know, however, that the convention's greatest moment had yet to occur.

Despite the festive display of harmony at the close of Wednesday night's session, one more event remained: the tribute to John F. Kennedy. In the last forty-eight hours Lyndon Johnson had dodged a civil rights crisis, navigated the tangled politics of choosing a vice president, and managed to secure himself a nomination as the Democratic candidate in the 1964 Presidential Election. On the night of Thursday, August 27th, however, all of this appeared obsolete. Through the words of his dotting brother and the image of

his iconic personage, John F. Kennedy emerged from death to eclipse the legacy of the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

After nine months of agonizing grief, Robert Kennedy finally stood to address a grieving nation. Washington Senator Henry M. Jackson introduced Kennedy to the crowd as "the man who stood closer to him in times of crisis and in times of fun than anyone else,"³⁶ thus reaffirming the public's notion of Bobby as the closest tangible remains of JFK, and subtly placing him in the role of political successor. As soon as his name left Jackson's mouth, the people roared, and roared, and for a complete twenty-two minutes, they did not stop.

In that moment the convention saw Robert F. Kennedy as themselves. He embodied



the sorrow they felt, the anguish they had endured, and on August 27th, they simply kept on cheering. He tried to silence the masses, but was prevented by Senator Jackson, who pleaded with him, saying, "Let it go on...Just let them do it, Bob....Let them get it out of their system."³⁷ After the twenty-two minute ovation finally calmed, RFK spoke. The speech began a political memorial, opening with a summary of the late president's achievements. Robert detailed his brother's social and military policies, and described the cornerstones of his Presidency which gave, as Senator Jackson had previously described, a "new vitality to our highest office."³⁸ Following this summary, he launched into the emotional nucleus of the speech. In thinking about President Kennedy, Bobby mused, he thought of a line from *Romeo and Juliet*: "When he shall die take him and cut him out into stars and he shall make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night and pay no worship to the garish sun."³⁹ These tragic lyrics, a last minute addition from Jacqueline Kennedy, left the convention in tears.⁴⁰

Following this seismic wave of emotion, Kennedy made sure to pay his proper respects,

delivering a small yet effective endorsement of LBJ, and reminding convention attendees that they must confer the same passion and commitment they felt towards President Kennedy to the new Johnson-Humphrey ticket. Bobby did not end his speech on the topic of Lyndon Johnson, however, but instead made careful note to conclude with his own ominous allusion to the future. Sharing one of President Kennedy's favorite Robert Frost quotes, he ended, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep."⁴¹ With this conclusion, not only had Americans across the country been rocked emotionally by the nostalgic memory of John F. Kennedy, but they also knew that this was not the last they would see of Robert F. Kennedy.

After RFK's impassioned address, a tribute film to the late President appeared before the convention. The film, entitled *A Thousand Days*, was a melange of commentary on the late President, interspersed with the words of others. Guest speakers included Chief Justice Earl Warren, Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, and even a brief clip of Jacqueline Kennedy speaking in

Spanish, all to remind viewers of the romantic Camelot days.⁴² The short film closed with an image as heartbreaking as his brother's words, showing "the dead President teaching his baby boy how to tickle his chin with a buttercup."⁴³ After his speech, Robert Kennedy left the stage, sat on an outdoor fire escape, and for fifteen long minutes, he wept.⁴⁴ The power of his words and the reaction of the convention had hit him all at once. In that moment, America saw not a mourning brother, but a rightful heir. In that moment, Robert Kennedy had forever preserved the legacy and the myth of his departed brother.

Amid the fierce sensation of RFK's monumental speech, many forgot about another significance: it was Lyndon Johnson's birthday. The President of the United States turned fifty-six on August 27th, and he intended to celebrate it. The birthday celebration included over 4000 people and a massive cake. Festivities continued late into the night, all culminating at one in the morning with a firework show, in which patriotic colors painted Johnson's image onto the late Atlantic City sky.⁴⁵

By morning it was over. Johnson and Humphrey returned to Washington to

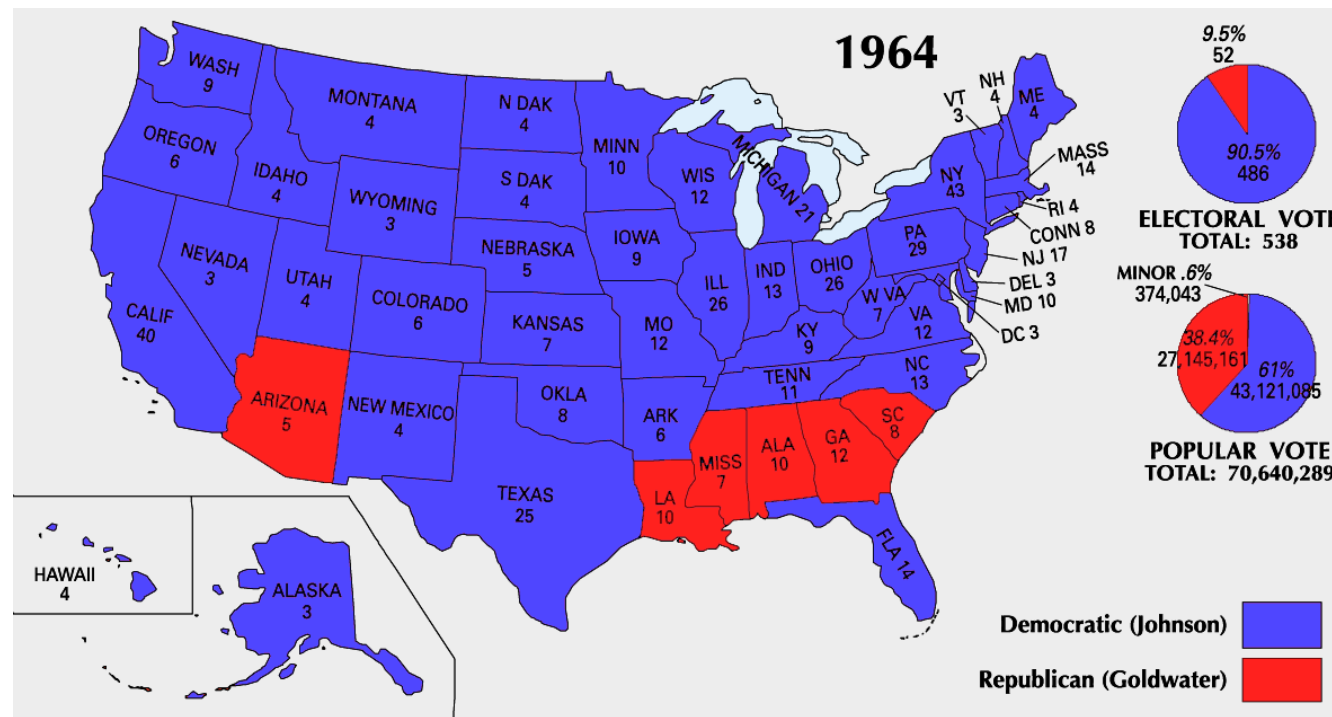
begin a monumentally successful presidential campaign. Robert F. Kennedy embarked to launch a campaign of his own, a trying journey that would also end in success later that year. Atlantic City was left to pick up the pieces of the past three days, returning once again to its depressed image as a fleeting symbol of the past. Although the people and the chaos departed Atlantic City that day, however, a certain memory still remained. To all convention attendees, the last three days had been a whirlwind. The Convention had witnessed a near civil rights crisis, and Lyndon Johnson had finally broken the silence to choose Hubert Humphrey as his running mate. And, most importantly, the Democratic Party had overcome national tragedy and internal friction to produce a viable ticket for the coming election. Within these momentous feats, however, one event stood above the rest. Robert Kennedy's tribute to his brother touched a nation. Ever since the tragic events of November 22nd, the American people had attempted to reconcile the passing of an iconic personage. John Kennedy had been for many a piece of American royalty, and, as in any

royal family, his untimely abdication called for a worthy successor. With his moving words on that warm summer evening, it was Robert Kennedy, not Lyndon Johnson, who accepted the title of heir to the Kennedy legacy.

Lyndon Johnson had been to some degree correct in his anxiety over RFK's influential role in the 1964 Convention. While Bobby neither stole the nomination, nor succeeded in causing the disruption that Johnson so ardently believed he would, he did manage to seize the memory of those three days. There was no denying that John Kennedy had been a looming presence in the atmosphere

of Atlantic City, however, and this presence manifested itself in the poignant performance of RFK. The nation saw his sorrow, they saw his pain, and in that moment, just as John Kennedy had once been theirs, now he was too. Thus, although the Democratic Party accepted Lyndon Johnson as their official nominee, the American people accepted Robert Kennedy as the successor to the Kennedy political legacy. As the colorful fireworks lit up the evening sky that final evening, Johnson could finally rest assured that the Convention was his. And as these streaks shot into the night, Robert Kennedy knew that it was time to move forward. He was

ready to carry the torch, and the next chapter in the Kennedy tale would be his.



ENDNOTES

1. "Tribute to John F. Kennedy at the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 27, 1964 | JFK Library," accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/tribute-to-john-f-kennedy-at-the-democratic-national-convention-atlantic-city-new-jersey-august-27>.
2. Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 296.
3. Nicholas deB Katzenbach, *Some of It Was Fun: Working with RFK and LBJ*, 1st ed.. (New York: WWNorton & Co, 2008), 149.
4. Michael W. Schuyler, "Ghosts in the White House: LBJ, RFK and the Assassination of JFK," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1987): 507.
5. Democratic National Convention Atlantic City, N.J.), Democratic National Committee (U.S.), *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, Resulting in the Nomination of Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas for President, and in the Nomination of Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota for Vice President.* (Washington: Democratic National Committee, 1968)., 391.
6. Democratic National Convention Atlantic City, N.J.), Democratic National Committee (U.S.), 396– 97.
7. Theodore Harold White, *The Making of the President, 1964*, [1st ed.]. (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1965), 109.
8. Schuyler, "Ghosts in the White House," 507–8.
9. Schuyler, 507–8.
10. "Lyndon Johnson and Clark Clifford on 29 July 1964," accessed March 4, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/v1/documents?uri=4002758.xml>.
11. "Lyndon Johnson and Clark Clifford on 29 July 1964."
12. "Lyndon Johnson and Clark Clifford on 29 July 1964."
13. "Lyndon Johnson and Carl Sanders on 26 August 1964," accessed March 17, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4002918>.
14. "Lyndon Johnson and Richard Daley on 21 July 1964," accessed March 3, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4002751>.
15. "Lyndon Johnson, Richard Russell, Jack Valenti, and White House Secretary on 30 July 1964," accessed March 4, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4000577>.
16. "Lyndon Johnson and Walter Jenkins on 21 August 1964," accessed March 7, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/v1/documents?uri=4002812.xml>.
17. These voting rights would not be addressed until the following summer, with the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
18. Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season That Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy* (New York, N.Y.: Viking, 2010), 250.
19. "Lyndon Johnson, Hale Boggs, George Reedy, and White House Operator on 15 August 1964," accessed March 5, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/v1/documents?uri=4000602.xml>.
20. "Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey on 20 August 1964," accessed March 5, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/v1/documents?uri=4002794.xml>.
21. "Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey on 20 August 1964."

22. Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 248.
23. "Lyndon Johnson and James Eastland on 22 August 1964," accessed March 10, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/v1/documents?uri=4002818.xml>.
24. Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 297.
25. Democratic National Convention Atlantic City, N.J.), Democratic National Committee (U.S.), *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, Resulting in the Nomination of Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas for President, and in the Nomination of Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota for Vice President.*
26. Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 295.
27. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 58.
28. Dallek, 163–64.
29. Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 295.
30. "Lyndon Johnson and George Reedy on 25 August 1964," accessed March 15, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/v1/documents?uri=4002852.xml>.
31. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 7.
32. "Lyndon Johnson and Walter Jenkins on 25 August 1964," accessed March 17, 2019, <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4002897>.
33. White, *The Making of the President, 1964*, 295.
34. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 158.
35. Dallek, 159.
36. Democratic National Convention Atlantic City, N.J.), Democratic National Committee (U.S.), *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, Resulting in the Nomination of Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas for President, and in the Nomination of Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota for Vice President.*, 105.
37. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 165.
38. Democratic National Convention Atlantic City, N.J.), Democratic National Committee (U.S.), *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, Resulting in the Nomination of Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas for President, and in the Nomination of Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota for Vice President.*, 105.
39. Democratic National Convention Atlantic City, N.J.), Democratic National Committee (U.S.), 107.
40. Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 296.
41. "Tribute to John F. Kennedy at the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 27, 1964 | JFK Library," accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/tribute-to-john-f-kennedy-at-the-democratic-national-convention-atlantic-city-new-jersey-august-27>.
42. Democratic National Convention Atlantic City, N.J.), Democratic National Committee (U.S.), *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, Resulting in the Nomination of Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas for President, and in the Nomination of Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota for Vice President.*, 493–96.
43. White, *The Making of the President, 1964*, 306.
44. Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 296.
45. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 166.

