1960: A Year That Changed America | Print |

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Friday, 19 February 2010 01:00

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The lives of most Americans in 1960 were markedly different from a decade earlier in at least one significant respect. A great many more of us were watching television.

Thanks largely to Milton Berle, Arthur Godfrey, Lucille Ball, and the who's who of stars appearing on the *Ed Sullivan* and other variety shows, people during the fifties bought TV sets — so many of them that by 1960, a mere dozen years since the dawn of commercial television, 87 percent of American homes were tuned in to one or more of the many local affiliates of NBC, CBS, and ABC, along with a number of independent channels. One year later the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, Newton N. Minnow, would deplore the vacuity of much of network programming, calling television "a vast wasteland."

Yet television, for all its silly sitcoms, game shows, and redundant cowboys, played a major role in the politics of 1960. And on January 2, 1960, the most telegenic candidate of his time, John F. Kennedy, the 42-year-old junior Senator from Massachusetts, announced, to the surprise of no one, that he was a candidate for that year's Democratic nomination for President. Two days later, far from TV cameras and newspaper headlines, an event occurred that few Americans were aware of at the time. A young Marine and ex-patriot, a defector to the Soviet Union, was sent by the Soviet authorities to Minsk, where he was given work as an assembler at a radio and television factory.

The Winter Olympics were held in Squaw Valley, California, and the host country captured three gold medals, all on ice. David Jenkins and the Queen of the Ice, Miss Carol Heiss, won the gold in men's and ladies' figure skating, and the USA hockey team captured a gold medal, beating the heavily favored Soviets along the way.

On February 1, the civil rights movement that would dominate much of the politics of the 1960s received a fresh impetus when four black college students sat down at a lunch counter reserved for whites at a Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina, and asked for service. They were asked to leave and politely refused, thus ensuring their arrest. Sit-ins would soon become a popular form of protest in the 1960s. So would freedom rides, with black and white passengers riding side by side on interstate bus trips that ended in Southern depots, often with angry white mobs waiting for the "outside agitators" trying to integrate old Dixie.

**The Prominence of Primaries**

Party primaries were beginning to play a deciding role in presidential politics and in March, Kennedy won New Hampshire in a walk, with none of the other contenders bothering to contest the first primary, since it was in Kennedy's neighboring state. The closest thing to an opponent the Massachusetts Senator had was Paul Fisher, a Chicago manufacturer of ballpoint pens. On the Republican side, Vice President Richard Nixon was the darling of the Party regulars. He also took New Hampshire in a landslide, with the man called "Tricky Dick" getting 89.3 percent of the vote. The name of New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller attracted a mere 3.8 percent.

Kennedy followed his win in New Hampshire with another in Wisconsin, finishing first against Minnesota's crusading liberal, Senator Hubert Humphrey, in Humphrey's neighboring state. The crucial test would come in West Virginia, however, a primary Kennedy entered in a huge gamble.

No assessment of the Kennedy candidacy seemed complete without a discussion of his religious affiliation. Only one other presidential candidate of either major party had been a Catholic. Governor Al Smith of New York was the Democratic candidate in 1928 and lost in a landslide to Republican Herbert Hoover. And in West Virginia, many of the backwoods Democrats had never seen, much less known, a Catholic. The denominations that swung the primary to Kennedy, however, were not religious but monetary. The tremendous Kennedy wealth was put to use with great effect in a small, poverty-ridden state where money did not normally abound. Many of those dollars were passed through the hands of mobsters who used them to buy off Humphrey supporters. After losing both

Wisconsin and West Virginia, Humphrey folded his tent and ended his campaign.

On May 1, a U-2 reconnaissance plane was shot down over Russia. At first, the incident seemed no big deal. As was standard practice whenever a recon plane was found flying in enemy territory, the White House issued a statement claiming it was a weather plane that had strayed off course. But both the plane and the pilot, Gary Powers, had been captured and when the contents of the plane had been examined, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev said he had no idea CIA chief Allen Dulles had such a keen interest in meteorology.

Later, Americans learned that the young Marine who had defected to the Soviet Union had previously been stationed by the Marines at the Atsugi, Japan, Naval Air Facility, where the U-2 flights originated. When he defected, did the turncoat give information to the Soviets that helped them bring down the reconnaissance plane? Powers later said he believed so.

Eisenhower, embarrassed, had to come clean and admit it was a spy plane, penetrating the closed society of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev, meanwhile, milked the U-2 incident for all it was worth. A guest of Eisenhower in the United States the previous summer, the Russian leader cancelled plans to host Ike in Russia and called off a planned summit between the United States and the Soviet Union in Paris. At the United Nations, Khrushchev appeared in person and pounded his shoe on a table to express his indignation.

Both Kennedy and Nixon won first-ballot nominations. Kennedy's came in Los Angeles, where he delivered his acceptance speech in a hoarse voice at the Los Angeles Coliseum, while squinting into a setting sun. His father, former Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy, not wanting to catch any of the media attention on his son's night in the spotlight, left L.A. that morning and flew to New York, where he watched the acceptance speech on TV at the home of *Time-Life* publisher Henry Luce.

**Carrying On a Campaign**

The convention had gone down very smoothly, but there were a few moments that previewed the politics of dissent that would become popular during the 1960s and '70s. A young Senator named Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota made the nominating speech for the old warrior, Adlai Stevenson. McCarthy in 1968 would lead the antiwar movement and score a stunning upset of President Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. Within a fortnight, Johnson withdrew from the race.

The only suspense surrounding Kennedy's nomination was his choice of a running mate. Choosing Senator Majority Leader Lyndon Baines Johnson, who had sought the nomination himself, was bound to be controversial. Bobby Kennedy, the nominee's younger brother and campaign manager, bitterly opposed it. Civil rights leaders were not happy with the choice of a Texan whose record on civil rights was checkered at best. Key elements of organized labor balked. But Kennedy knew if he wanted to carry any part of the South and West, he needed an old hand like Johnson, both a Southerner and a Westerner, to balance his appeal — and his liabilities — as a young Northeast liberal.

Nixon, meanwhile, was moving resolutely toward a coronation in Chicago. There were rumbles on the Right when Nixon tried to solidify his support from the Rockefeller wing of the party, visiting the New York Governor at his Fifth Avenue apartment on the weekend before the convention and agreeing to platform planks on civil rights and other issues important to the party's liberals and moderates, but which prompted the party's conservatives to raise their concerns about states' rights and a limited, constitutional role for the federal government. Leading the rebellion was U.S. Senator Barry M. Goldwater of Arizona, whose book, a slender volume called *The Conscience of a Conservative*, was published earlier that year and became a huge best-seller and one of the most interesting books of the decade. Goldwater scorned Nixon and Rockefeller's "Compact of Fifth Avenue," dubbing it "the Munich of the Republican Party."

The Goldwater rebellion created a move to challenge Nixon for the nomination itself. The feisty Arizonan allowed the Louisiana delegation to place his name in nomination. It was a short-lived rebellion. When the votes were tallied, it was 1,321 for Nixon and 10 for Goldwater. So Goldwater went to the rostrum and asked that Nixon be nominated by acclamation. It was a shrewd move, since a national television audience, much of it seeing and hearing the Arizonan for the first time, saw his gracious concession and heard him voice both his own and his party's conservative principles. Four years later, Goldwater would be the party's candidate for President. While his campaign was a spectacular flop electorally — he lost all but six states to Lyndon Johnson — his candidacy helped spark a

revival of conservatism in American politics.

As Kennedy moved into Nixon's home base of Southern California to accept his Party's nomination, Nixon raided Massachusetts to capture a running mate. The choice was United Nations Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, a scion of an influential Republican family, a fixture in the liberal to moderate wing of the GOP, and an establishment candidate whose impeccable foreign policy credentials included the obligatory membership in the Council on Foreign Relations, an organization dedicated to bringing about one-world government. Lodge had lost his Senate seat to Kennedy in 1952, but in 1960 he hoped to help Nixon keep the young millionaire in the Senate and out of the White House.

But the choice, while appealing to the political and journalistic establishment, would not help Nixon in the South, where he hoped to build on Eisenhower's appeal. Ike won four Southern states in the Democrats' solid South in 1956 and in what would likely be a close election, Nixon would need those states and more. The candidate, adept at walking political tightropes and keeping his convictions close to his vest, trod a fine line on civil rights. The Republicans had actually been out ahead of the Democrats on that issue for a long time, as most of the congressional Democrats came from the segregationist South. But Nixon could not go too far out on a limb without sparking another rebellion on the Right.

A telling moment came when Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested for leading a prayer vigil during one of his protest demonstrations against Jim Crow laws in the South. Many feared he would be abused, possibly even killed, in jail. By at least some accounts, it was Kennedy's brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, who convinced the Senator that he should make a phone call to King's wife, Coretta Scott King, to offer his sympathy and moral support. When Kennedy did, Shriver leaked the news to the press. Bobby Kennedy was said to be furious, thinking it would sink the campaign in the South. But millions of black voters heard or read Martin Luther King Senior's praise of Kennedy. The elder King had already endorsed Nixon, but he quickly and publicly changed his mind. He had never thought he would vote for a Catholic for President, he said, but he was now for Kennedy. "Because this man was willing to wipe the tears from my daughter [in-law]'s eyes, I've got a suitcase of votes, and I'm going to take them to Mr. Kennedy and dump them in his lap."

The religious issue was thrust to the forefront by a group of prominent Protestant clergymen led by popular preacher Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, the best-selling author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*. The group expressed a number of concerns about having a Catholic as President. The issues of divided loyalty, separation of church and state, etc., came up all over again. Former Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, twice the Democratic candidate for President, was both dismissive and contemptuous of Peale's position. "I find Paul appealing and Peale appalling," he quipped. But Kennedy met the objections head-on by going to Texas to address the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12.

"I do not speak for my church on public matters — and the church does not speak for me," Kennedy told the Protestant clergy. "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute — where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source — and where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials — and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all."

Kennedy repeated his stands against having an ambassador to the Vatican and against federal aid to parochial schools. He noted pointedly that no one had accused him or his brothers of divided loyalty when they served in Word War II. And for the benefit of his Texas audience, Kennedy remembered the Alamo, where men with names like Fuentes, McCafferty, Bailey, Bedillo, and Carey fought and died alongside men named Crockett and Bowie. No one knows if they were Catholics, Kennedy said. "For there was no religious test there."

On the very next day, September 13, 1960, another event that seemed insignificant at the time took place. That young defector, still in the Soviet Union, was given an undesirable discharge from the United States Marine Corps.

Kennedy was increasingly getting "face time" on national television, helping him catch up in recognition with the more familiar Vice President. Television began to play a dominant role in presidential campaigns when the first ever face-to-face presidential debates were held that fall. Millions watched the first debate and were impressed as the young, attractive, articulate Senator from Massachusetts showed a command of the facts and issues that surely equaled, if not surpassed, that of his more experienced

opponent. And Nixon, who was known for his debating skills and the pride he took in them, appeared pale, haggard, and overworked, while Kennedy was tanned and relaxed. The first debate, focusing on domestic issues, went by most accounts to Kennedy, as the nation began to sense the momentum was moving his way as well.

Another man in his early forties took the spotlight for a brief time in late September. Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox, who began his major league career in 1939, played his last game at Boston's Fenway Park and, in dramatic fashion, homered in his final at bat. "Turbulent" Ted, famous for his flare-ups at sports writers and booing fans, took his .344 career batting average into retirement, leaving the baseball world, as one writer put it, like England after the loss of its colony in India — diminished, yet somehow relieved.

There would be two more presidential debates. Kennedy did well in both, but there was no sure consensus about a winner. Still, ever confident, he clamored for a fourth debate. Nixon was trying to fulfill the promise he made in accepting the nomination: to personally carry the campaign into every state in the nation. It was a promise to which he stuck doggedly, flying to Alaska and Hawaii and losing time in the air that could have been spent on the ground in swing states with more electoral votes.

Nixon's campaign hopes surged when Eisenhower joined the fray, campaigning the last two weeks for the man he had elevated to the Vice Presidency. But in the end, it was a photo finish, with Kennedy narrowly victorious, due in part to the posthumous vote in Chicago Mayor Dick Daley's Illinois and LBJ's Texas. Some of those men at the Alamo must have voted for Kennedy, after all.

**A Coronation**

The Kennedys went home to Hyannisport to prepare for a new administration and the birth of their second child, John, Jr. Nixon returned to California, where he would run for Governor in 1962. He lost, and with that defeat, his career seemed over. "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore," he bitterly told reporters at his farewell press conference, exactly 10 years to the day before he would win reelection as President, carrying 49 states against Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota. The fall of 1962 was also the time of a tense and dramatic missile crisis in Cuba. A year earlier, the wall had gone up in Berlin. The Cold War showed no sign of thawing. Kennedy radiated optimism when he announced the goal of landing an American on the moon and bringing him safely back to Earth by the end of the decade. Later he pressed for a nuclear test ban treaty and observed solemnly that every man, woman, and child on Earth was living under "a nuclear sword of Damocles."

Nixon went from his defeat in California to a law practice in New York. Nelson Rockefeller was still the Governor and would be heard from as a presidential hopeful in 1964. So would the junior Senator from Arizona, the candidate who led with his jaw, "Mr. Conservative," Barry Goldwater. Bobby Kennedy became the Attorney General, getting a little experience in that office, the President-elect joked, "before he goes out to practice law." Ted Kennedy, having just turned 30 in February 1962, would run for and win his brother's Senate seat that fall with the slogan "Kennedy can do more for Massachusetts." On stage, records, and occasional television appearances, a mimic from New England named Vaughn Meader parodied the Boston accent and political success of America's new political dynasty as he urged citizens everywhere to "vote for the Kennedy of your choice, but do vote."

On Broadway, *Camelot* was playing and would soon become the theme of an administration in Washington that radiated youth, energy, and glamour. Also on Broadway, a new play had its grand opening in November 1960. Like the year's real-life political drama, it, too, had a Catholic as its main character. Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, would not, and in conscience could not, accommodate King Henry VIII by signing the oath of allegiance to the tempestuous monarch as head of the Church in England. More also refused to endorse the King's decision to divorce his wife Catherine and wed Anne Boleyn. Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* presented More, a Catholic saint, as a martyr for freedom of conscience. The play would later be made into a motion picture and would win six Academy Awards.

As Richard Nixon grew restless in political exile, Lyndon Johnson remained largely forgotten as Vice President, and Barry Goldwater thundered occasionally in the Senate, Kennedy dealt with a botched Bay of Pigs invasion, more trouble with Cuba, a nuclear test ban treaty, and a widening war in Vietnam. But he listened with obvious pleasure to Marilyn Monroe singing "Happy Birthday" to him at his 45th birthday party at Madison Square Garden in New York in May of 1962 and no doubt allowed himself to gloat just a bit that Marilyn probably never sang that way to Vice President Nixon, and certainly not to President Eisenhower. And that young Marine who had defected to the Soviet Union had a change of heart and was allowed to come home, bringing his Russian-born wife and children with him. The former defector found work in Dallas, Texas, and settled there.

**Camelot Crumbles**

Meanwhile, the Kennedy administration went after enemies, both foreign and domestic, with ruthless abandon. Attorney General Robert Kennedy used the Justice Department to hound executives of U.S. Steel over price hikes, as well as kingpins of organized crime. Attempts to assassinate Cuban leader Fidel Castro reportedly shocked even Vice President Johnson, who was later quoted as saying the CIA was running “a g**damn Murder, -Incorporated!”

Neither were allies safe from the schemes in Washington. In 1963, Henry Cabot Lodge, now the New Frontier’s man in Saigon, had given the go-ahead to a coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam. Diem was overthrown and assassinated on November 1. A mere three weeks later, another assassination took place in Dallas that would shock America and the world. Lee Harvey Oswald, the former defector to the Soviet Union and a member of Fair Play for Cuba, was arrested and would be charged with the murder of President John F. Kennedy and Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippett. Oswald was killed two days later by nightclub owner Jack Ruby, who somehow gained entrance to the basement of the Dallas police station and shot Oswald at close range while the alleged assassin was in police custody.

Suddenly Camelot had ended and a new era was underway in America, an era characterized by political assassinations, a protracted and undeclared war in Asia, the government spying on its citizens, riots in cities, a growing drug culture, and a sexual revolution. It was an era that might have been described decades earlier by an Irish poet named William Butler Yeats:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
>
> — *“The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats.*

*— Photo of JFK: AP Images*