



1968: A Tumultuous Year

MAIN IDEA

An enemy attack in Vietnam, two assassinations, and a chaotic political convention made 1968 an explosive year.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Disturbing events in 1968 accentuated the nation's divisions, which are still healing in the 21st century.

Terms & Names

- Tet offensive
- Clark Clifford
- Robert Kennedy
- Eugene McCarthy
- Hubert Humphrey
- George Wallace

One American's Story

On June 5, 1968, John Lewis, the first chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, fell to the floor and wept. Robert F. Kennedy, a leading Democratic candidate for president, had just been fatally shot. Two months earlier, when Martin Luther King, Jr., had fallen victim to an assassin's bullet, Lewis had told himself he still had Kennedy. And now they both were gone. Lewis, who later became a congressman from Georgia, recalled the lasting impact of these assassinations.

A PERSONAL VOICE JOHN LEWIS

“There are people today who are afraid, in a sense, to hope or to have hope again, because of what happened in . . . 1968. Something was taken from us. The type of leadership that we had in a sense invested in, that we had helped to make and to nourish, was taken from us. . . . Something died in all of us with those assassinations.”

—quoted in *From Camelot to Kent State*

These violent deaths were but two of the traumatic events that rocked the nation in 1968. From a shocking setback in Vietnam to a chaotic Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the events of 1968 made it the most tumultuous year of a turbulent decade.



John Lewis

The Tet Offensive Turns the War

The year 1968 began with a daring surprise attack by the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese army on numerous cities. The simultaneous strikes, while ending in military defeat for the Communist guerrillas, stunned the American public. Many people with moderate views began to turn against the war.

A SURPRISE ATTACK January 30 was the Vietnamese equivalent of New Year's Eve, the beginning of the lunar new year festivities known in Vietnam as Tet.

Throughout that day in 1968, villagers—taking advantage of a week-long truce proclaimed for Tet—streamed into cities across South Vietnam to celebrate their new year. At the same time, many funerals were being held for war victims. Accompanying the funerals were the traditional firecrackers, flutes, and, of course, coffins.

The coffins, however, contained weapons, and many of the villagers were Vietcong agents. That night the Vietcong launched an overwhelming attack on over 100 towns and cities in South Vietnam, as well as 12 U.S. air bases. The fighting was especially fierce in Saigon and the former capital of Hue. The Vietcong even attacked the U.S. embassy in Saigon, killing five Americans. The **Tet offensive** continued for about a month before U.S. and South Vietnamese forces re-gained control of the cities.

General Westmoreland declared the attacks an overwhelming defeat for the Vietcong, whose “well-laid plans went afoul.” From a purely military standpoint, Westmoreland was right. The Vietcong lost about 32,000 soldiers during the month-long battle, while the American and ARVN forces lost little more than 3,000.

TET CHANGES PUBLIC OPINION From a psychological—and political—standpoint, Westmoreland’s claim could not have been more wrong. The Tet offensive greatly shook the American public, which had been told repeatedly and had come to believe that the enemy was close to defeat. Now the Pentagon’s continued reports of favorable body counts—or massive Vietcong casualties—rang hollow. Daily, Americans saw the shocking images of attacks by an enemy that seemed to be everywhere.

In a matter of weeks, the Tet offensive changed millions of minds about the war. Despite the years of antiwar protest, a poll taken just before Tet showed that only 28 percent of Americans called themselves doves, while 56 percent claimed to be hawks. After Tet, both sides tallied 40 percent. The mainstream media, which had reported the war in a skeptical but generally balanced way, now openly criticized the war. One of the nation’s most respected journalists, Walter Cronkite, told his viewers that it now seemed “more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.”

Minds were also changing at the White House. To fill the defense secretary position left vacant by Robert McNamara’s resignation, Johnson picked **Clark Clifford**, a friend and supporter of the president’s Vietnam policy. However, after settling in and studying the situation, Clifford concluded that the war was unwinnable. “We seem to have a sinkhole,” Clifford said. “We put in more—they match it. I see more and more fighting with more and more casualties on the U.S. side and no end in sight to the action.”

Tet Offensive, Jan. 30–Feb. 24, 1968

INTERACTIVE



GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER

Location What were the geographical destinations of the Tet offensive attacks? What does this suggest about the Vietcong forces?

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Issues

A Why did American support for the war change after the Tet offensive?

Following the Tet offensive, Johnson's popularity plummeted. In public opinion polls taken at the end of February 1968, nearly 60 percent of Americans disapproved of his handling of the war. Nearly half of the country now felt it had been a mistake to send American troops to Vietnam.

“If I’ve lost Walter [Cronkite], then it’s over. I’ve lost Mr. Average Citizen.”

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

War weariness eventually set in, and 1968 was the watershed year. Johnson recognized the change, too. Upon learning of Cronkite's pessimistic analysis of the war, the president lamented, “If I’ve lost Walter, then it’s over. I’ve lost Mr. Average Citizen.”

Days of Loss and Rage

The growing division over Vietnam led to a shocking political development in the spring of 1968, a season in which Americans also endured two assassinations, a series of urban riots, and a surge in college campus protests.



▲ The Vietnam War and the divisiveness it caused took its toll on President Johnson.

JOHNSON WITHDRAWS Well before the Tet offensive, an anti-war coalition within the Democratic Party had sought a Democratic candidate to challenge Johnson in the 1968 primary elections. **Robert Kennedy**, John F. Kennedy's brother and a senator from New York, decided not to run, citing party loyalty. However, in November of 1967, Minnesota senator **Eugene McCarthy** answered the group's call, declaring that he would run against Johnson on a platform to end the war in Vietnam.

McCarthy's early campaign attracted little notice, but in the weeks following Tet it picked up steam. In the New Hampshire Democratic primary in March 1968, the little-known senator captured 42 percent of the vote. While Johnson won the primary with 48 percent of the vote, the slim margin of victory was viewed as a defeat for the president. Influenced by Johnson's perceived weakness at the polls, Robert Kennedy declared his candidacy for president. The Democratic Party had become a house divided.

In a televised address on March 31, 1968, Johnson announced a dramatic change in his Vietnam policy—the United States would seek negotiations to end the war. In the meantime, the policy of U.S. escalation would end, the bombing would eventually cease, and steps would be taken to ensure that the South Vietnamese played a larger role in the war.

The president paused and then ended his speech with a statement that shocked the nation. Declaring that he did not want the presidency to become “involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year,” Lyndon Johnson announced, “Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.” The president was stepping down from national politics, his grand plan for domestic reform done in by a costly and divisive war. “That . . . war,” Johnson later admitted, “killed the lady I really loved—the Great Society.” **B**

VIOLENCE AND PROTEST GRIP THE NATION The Democrats—as well as the nation—were in for more shock in 1968. On April 4, America was rocked by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Violence ripped through more than 100 U.S. cities as enraged followers of the slain civil rights leader burned buildings and destroyed neighborhoods.

Just two months later, a bullet cut down yet another popular national figure. Robert Kennedy had become a strong candidate in the Democratic primary, drawing support from minorities and urban Democratic voters. On June 4, Kennedy won the crucial California primary. Just after midnight of June 5, he gave a victory

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Motives

B Why did President Johnson decide not to run again?

speech at a Los Angeles hotel. On his way out he passed through the hotel's kitchen, where a young Palestinian immigrant, Sirhan Sirhan, was hiding with a gun. Sirhan, who later said he was angered by Kennedy's support of Israel, fatally shot the senator.

Jack Newfield, a speechwriter for Kennedy, described the anguish he and many Americans felt over the loss of two of the nation's leaders.

A PERSONAL VOICE JACK NEWFIELD

"Things were not really getting better . . . we shall not overcome. . . . We had already glimpsed the most compassionate leaders our nation could produce, and they had all been assassinated. And from this time forward, things would get worse: Our best political leaders were part of memory now, not hope."

—quoted in *Nineteen Sixty-Eight*

Meanwhile, the nation's college campuses continued to protest. During the first six months of 1968, almost 40,000 students on more than 100 campuses took part in more than 200 major demonstrations. While many of the demonstrations continued to target U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, students also clashed with university officials over campus and social issues. A massive student protest at Columbia University in New York City held the nation's attention for a week in April. There, students protesting the university's community policies took over several buildings. Police eventually restored order and arrested nearly 900 protesters.

Recalling the violence and turmoil that plagued the nation in 1968, the journalist and historian Garry Wills wrote, "There was a sense everywhere . . . that things were giving way. That [people] had not only lost control of [their] history, but might never regain it." 🗣️

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Issues

🗣️ Why was 1968 characterized as a year of "lost control" in America?

Vocabulary

platform: a formal declaration of the principles on which a political party makes its appeal to the public



▲ **Hotel busboy Juan Romero was the first person to reach Robert Kennedy after he was shot June 5, 1968. Kennedy had just won the California Democratic primary.**

A Turbulent Race for President

The chaos and violence of 1968 climaxed in August, when thousands of antiwar demonstrators converged on the city of Chicago to protest at the Democratic National Convention. The convention, which featured a bloody riot between protesters and police, fractured the Democratic Party and thus helped a nearly forgotten Republican win the White House.

TURMOIL IN CHICAGO With Lyndon Johnson stepping down and Robert Kennedy gone, the 1968 Democratic presidential primary race pitted Eugene McCarthy against **Hubert Humphrey**, Johnson's vice-president. McCarthy, while still popular with the nation's antiwar segment, had little chance of defeating Humphrey, a loyal party man who had President Johnson's support. During the last week of August, the Democrats met at their convention in Chicago, supposedly to choose a candidate. In reality, Humphrey's nomination had already been determined, a decision that upset many antiwar activists.

As the delegates arrived in Chicago, so too did nearly 10,000 protesters. Led by men such as SDS veteran Tom Hayden, many demonstrators sought to pressure the Democrats into adopting an antiwar platform. Others came to voice their

Chicago police attempt to disperse antiwar demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic convention. Protesters shouted, “The whole world is watching!” ▶



displeasure with Humphrey’s nomination. Still others, known as Yippies (members of the Youth International Party), had come hoping to provoke violence that might discredit the Democratic Party. Chicago’s mayor, Richard J. Daley, was determined to keep the protesters under control. With memories of the nationwide riots after King’s death still fresh, Daley mobilized 12,000 Chicago police officers and over 5,000 National Guard. “As long as I am mayor,” Daley vowed, “there will be law and order.”

Order, however, soon collapsed. On August 28, as delegates cast votes for Humphrey, protesters were gathering in a downtown park to march on the convention. With television cameras focused on them, police moved into the crowd, sprayed the protesters with Mace, and beat them with nightsticks. Many protesters tried to flee, while others retaliated, pelting the riot-helmeted police with rocks and bottles. “The whole world is watching!” protesters shouted, as police attacked demonstrators and bystanders alike. **D**

The rioting soon spilled out of the park and into the downtown streets. One nearby hotel, observed a *New York Times* reporter, became a makeshift aid station.

A PERSONAL VOICE J. ANTHONY LUKAS

“Demonstrators, reporters, McCarthy workers, doctors, all began to stagger into the [hotel] lobby, blood streaming from face and head wounds. The lobby smelled from tear gas, and stink bombs dropped by the Yippies. A few people began to direct the wounded to a makeshift hospital on the fifteenth floor, the McCarthy staff headquarters.”

—quoted in *Decade of Shocks*

Disorder of a different kind reigned inside the convention hall, where delegates bitterly debated an antiwar plank in the party platform. When word of the riot filtered into the hall, delegates angrily shouted at Mayor Daley, who was present as a delegate himself. Daley returned their shouts with equal vigor. The whole world indeed was watching—on their televisions. The images of the Democrats—both inside and outside the convention hall—as a party of disorder became etched in the minds of millions of Americans.

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

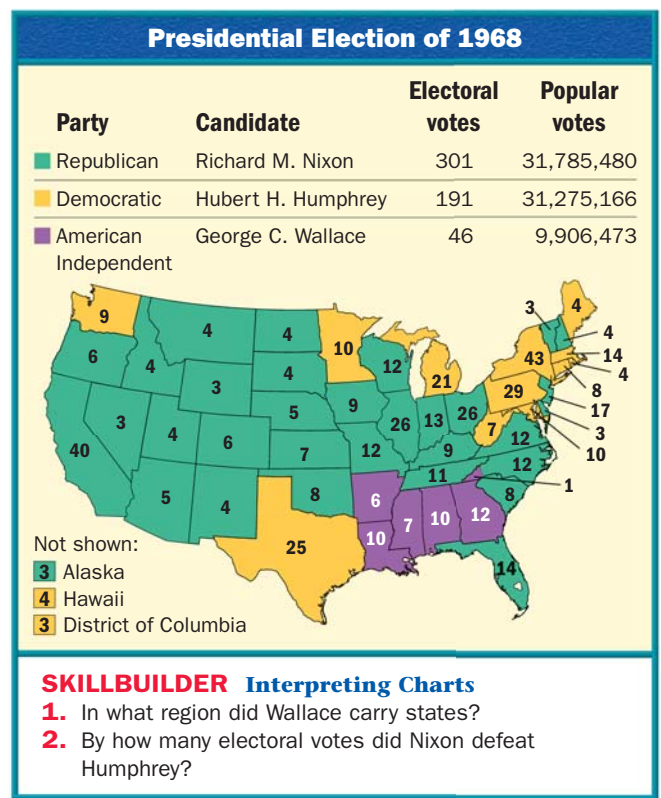
D What were the reasons protesters demonstrated in Chicago?

NIXON TRIUMPHS One beneficiary of this turmoil was Republican presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon, who by 1968 had achieved one of the greatest political comebacks in American politics. After his loss to Kennedy in the presidential race of 1960, Nixon tasted defeat again in 1962 when he ran for governor of California. His political career all but dead, Nixon joined a New York law firm, but he never strayed far from politics. In 1966, Nixon campaigned for Republican candidates in congressional elections, helping them to win back 47 House seats and 3 Senate seats from Democrats. In 1968, Nixon announced his candidacy for president and won the party's nomination.

During the presidential race, Nixon campaigned on a promise to restore law and order, which appealed to many middle-class Americans tired of years of riots and protests. He also promised, in vague but appealing terms, to end the war in Vietnam. Nixon's candidacy was helped by the entry of former Alabama governor

George Wallace into the race as a third-party candidate. Wallace, a Democrat running on the American Independent Party ticket, was a longtime champion of school segregation and states' rights. Labeled the "white backlash" candidate, Wallace captured five Southern states. In addition, he attracted a high number of Northern white working-class voters disgusted with inner-city riots and antiwar protests.

In the end, Nixon defeated Humphrey and inherited the quagmire in Vietnam. He eventually would end America's involvement in Vietnam, but not before his war policies created even more protest and uproar within the country.



SECTION 4

ASSESSMENT

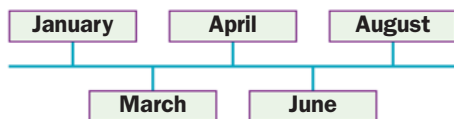
1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Tet offensive
- Robert Kennedy
- Hubert Humphrey
- Clark Clifford
- Eugene McCarthy
- George Wallace

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

Create a time line of major events that occurred in 1968. Use the months already plotted on the time line below as a guide.



Which event do you think was most significant? Explain.

CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING EVENTS

Why do you think the Tet offensive turned so many Americans against the war? Support your answer with reasons.

4. MAKING INFERENCES

Refer to President Johnson's quote on page 750. What do you think he meant when he said "If I've lost Walter [Cronkite], then it's over. I've lost Mr. Average Citizen"? Explain.

5. MAKING INFERENCES

Do you think there might have been a relationship between the violence of the Vietnam War and the growing climate of violence in the United States during 1968? Why or why not?