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What If Robert Kennedy Wins 1968 Democratic Primary?

We know how this night unfolded. On June 5, 1968, Robert Kennedy is fatally shot in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel. The perpetrator is Sirhan Sirhan who was a Palestinian extremist who had disdain for Kennedy because of his view supporting Israel. On that night Kennedy had secured a momentous victory in the California primary as well as pulling even in South Dakota. After his victory speech instead of going through the ballroom to another group of supporters, it was decided that Kennedy would hold a press conference and so he was led through the kitchen to the press area[[1]](#footnote-1) where he would meet his fateful end. What if Kennedy isn’t fatally wounded or even goes to that second gathering instead? He would presumably go on to secure the democratic nomination at the convention and battle Nixon in the general. I will attempt to show where history would take it from there in this essay.

I’ll refer to our timeline as “timeline A” and the counterfactual timeline as “timeline B” from here on out. In timeline A we know that an anti-war coalition started the “Dump Johnson” movement to find a candidate to replace LBJ. They settled on Eugene McCarthy. McCarthy came close to beating LBJ in the New Hampshire primary causing LBJ to leave the race leaving a void for Kennedy to enter. Kennedy would call out Johnson and endorse Eugene McCarthy in the primaries he failed to qualify for. At this point, the “Dump Johnson” movement had two candidates in the race at this point. In timeline A we know there were anti-war demonstrations in Chicago, the site of the democratic convention, which was a result of Kennedy’s assassination and the entrance of Hubert Humphrey. At this point, the primaries were not as important as the convention so Humphrey got the nomination without ever taking part in the primary. Also, Humphrey was unwilling to compromise at all with McCarthy which caused McCarthy not to endorse him. This combined with Humphrey being closely tied to president Johnson all but ruined his appeal to the highly activated youth and minority group and as such ruined any shot he had at the presidency. In timeline B, Kennedy would take his momentum from the California primary win all the way to the convention in which he would be endorsed by McCarthy and grab the nomination with flying colors. Kennedy is almost the opposite of Humphrey and LBJ in that he was not only anti-war but he was charismatic and well-received with minorities. Of course, him being a Kennedy wouldn’t hurt either. This would set up a showdown of Kennedy vs. Nixon again in which Kennedy’s popularity and contrast with Nixon would see him win out again. The country was yearning for a candidate like Kennedy and they would get it. In terms of VP, I don’t think Robert Kennedy would be interested in repeating the same thing his brother did in selecting a ”southern democrat” as his running mate. I think he would’ve gone with George McGovern who would join the race after Kennedy’s assassination. Another option would be Stuart Symington who was a senator from Missouri who JFK originally picked as his VP but was persuaded into choosing LBJ instead. Symington himself even believed JFK would ultimately reverse course and choose LBJ[[2]](#footnote-2). The important thing of note here is that RFK lobbied for his brother to keep Stuart Symington as his running mate. Clearly, he thought highly enough of Senator Symington and so it would stand to reason that he would at least approach him with an offer. I believe Kennedy would want to keep people around him he could trust. Also, George Wallace running as an independent can’t be ignored as this made it unlikely Robert would pick up the south even with a more conservative running mate and so the choices of VP more similar to his policy leanings would be the way to go here. Humphrey, even with his shortcomings came within a half a million votes of Nixon in the popular vote and so Kennedy would definitely would’ve been in good shape with his anti-war stance, and because of his courting of the black vote would’ve been seen more as a unifier than his opponents Nixon and most certainly Wallace. So Kennedy wins and becomes president-elect with his running mate George McGovern.

Kennedy would be sworn in at his inauguration in 1969 which would still see the moon landing as he would want to carry on that legacy for his brother. Of course, NASA’s budget would still be bloated at this time as a result. One immediate change in timeline B would be the Vietnam War. Kennedy was anti-war and his position was to reach a peace deal between north and south Vietnam as soon as possible. Training the South to fight for themselves and leaving them be while getting American troops out of there. I think that holds serve here and the U.S. is out of Vietnam within a year. Although president RFK would still need to deal with the fallout of the Pentagon Papers as I feel even though the ending may have been more palatable in timeline B there is still a bad taste the war left in citizens. Secondly, the war on drugs never happens. According to Nixon’s Domestic Affairs Advisor, John Ehrlichman the war on drugs was in reality a war on hippies and black people[[3]](#footnote-3). Kennedy of course would not have done this considering those people were essentially his base. We know how disastrous the war on drugs would get in the following decade with Reagan in power using this war on drugs as a pretense to over-police and over-punish the black community. Of course, the Iran-Contra affair added a whole other layer to the situation. Speaking of which in timeline A the black community saw incredible growth in the 1970’s even under mostly Republican presidents and I think this would be the case in an even stronger sense. The OPEC oil crisis would still carry on as did in timeline A being that Kennedy supported Israel as did most U.S. politicians at the time so no big change there. RFK was also a big labor advocate and so there are some positive developments there. Kennedy would undoubtedly run for re-election and win easily becoming a steadying force after the turbulent sixties.

Where this scenario gets interesting again is what happens after his two terms are up, however. I’ve already established that George McGovern would be his VP during all eight years of Kennedy’s presidency. In timeline B, McGovern would run off the back of a popular president Kennedy vowing to continue his mission as he would say in timeline A after Kennedy is assassinated. This is fascinating now because Jimmy Carter and George McGovern are both “doves” when it comes to their anti-war policy. This of course is leading to how Jimmy Carter handled the Iran hostage situation and how that tanked his presidency. Not to mention the antics[[4]](#footnote-4) of Jimmy Carter’s brother during his presidential campaign against Ronald Reagan. In timeline B however, it really is an open question as to how a president McGovern would handle the Iran hostage situation as that would be another huge turning point in our alternate history. Regardless even if history in timeline B comes to mirror timeline A in that Reagan still gets into the white house, the removal of the war on drugs off the table would be absolutely huge and cannot be understated one bit. The Iran-Contra affair looks different or doesn’t happen at all if there isn’t a community(black) to sell their(Contra) drugs to raise money for their fight against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

In wrapping up this counterfactual I think one stands out to me most is what the moment of Robert Kennedy’s assassination meant to the nation as a whole. The one last glimmer of hope at the end of a dark tunnel in the sixties was taken away and threw the country back into more turmoil. A calming presence of Kennedy as well as never seeing the war on drugs become a thing would have already had a lasting impact on the country regardless of whatever else he would do. I’d like to think he would step in with FBI surveillance but that cat would be already out of the bag by the time he would take office.

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1. Assassination of Robert Kennedy. Wikipedia Retrieved June 14, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stuart Symington. Spartacus Educational Retrieved June 15, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “…We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or Black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities..” 1971: Nixon’s War On Drugs. The Baltimore Story Retrieved June 15, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Truth About Jimmy Carter’s Sketchy Brother. Grunge Retrieved June 15, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)