

1968 – The Best and the Worst of Times

By John Fiorillo

By the middle of 1967 the war in Vietnam was tearing the nation apart as it became clear we were losing thousands of American lives in a war we were unlikely to win. Dissention grew within the Johnson Administration as the Generals tried to convince the public that we were winning, President Johnson struggled to find a way out of the trap he was in between the war and his Great Society domestic goals with his reelection only a year away. Senator Robert Kennedy had become an outspoken critic of the war and many believed he would be a potential rival for the Democratic nomination in the upcoming election.

In October 1967 my former boss in the Johnson Administration and a close friend and aide of Senator Kennedy told me Steve Smith had called a meeting of the inner circle at his apartment in the UN Tower last night to discuss the upcoming race. Bill told me the decision had been made. “The Senator is not going to challenge Lyndon for the Presidency. His decision is final.” The rest of us, including the younger members of “the family” like me, were all free to work for other potential candidates for the nomination. Bob was sure our talents would be sought out and he would understand whatever steps we might take to oppose the war.

What other candidates? There were none. I’d been out there with Bob and Ethel in the crowds during his 1964 campaign for Senate. I’d seen how people adored him; how they placed their hopes in him; and how they expected him to deliver on their dreams. Crowds of thousands followed wherever he went, threw themselves at the convertible and struggled to just touch him. As if he could somehow make things right, whatever “right” meant to them. What did Smith mean, “other candidates”?

Life went on at my job in the Lindsay Administration where I was Assistant Commissioner of Commerce for Resource Development when a few weeks later Assemblyman Al Blumenthal asked me to attend a meeting. When I arrived, I found a small, but very influential, group of leaders of the reform movement that included Victor and Sara Kovner, Congresswoman Bela Abzug and Allard Lowenstein as well as Blumenthal. We were apparently there to discuss potential candidates to challenge Lyndon’s bid for reelection.

The discussion wandered while names of potential candidates were put on the table and dismissed. Then Lowenstein revealed that he’d just returned from Minnesota where he’d had a long talk with Senator Eugene McCarthy, an economics professor and poet turned

politician. McCarthy was willing to challenge the President and seek the nomination. I'd heard his name but had no idea of what he stood for or whether he had any national following. Why him? "Because he's a very bright man and he's willing to take on the fight", Lowenstein responded.

Our discussion ran late into the evening. It ended when we realized we had no other viable options and trusted Lowenstein's judgement that this McCarthy fellow could carry the antiwar banner successfully. It was decided that Victor would draft New York incorporation papers for the "McCarthy For President" organization. For reasons I never understood and cannot remember, Sara and I were asked to be the incorporators of record. And so was born the challenge for the Presidency that was to engulf the Democratic Party and the country for the next twelve months.

Several days after McCarthy's surprising showing in New Hampshire where he lost to President Johnson by just over 200 votes, I received a call from Bill. "You need to be in Washington tomorrow morning. Take the eight o'clock shuttle and get to the Senate Caucus Room. Bob is announcing his candidacy at noon and we want everyone on the team there." I argued that announcing during McCarthy's fifteen minutes of fame would appear ill-willed and mean. It would poison the atmosphere for Bob's announcement and that didn't need to happen. McCarthy was a one trick pony whose candidacy wouldn't, in my opinion, go very far. I suggested waiting for two or three weeks. Bill rejected the idea, so I told him I wouldn't be in Washington the following day.

Although I thought Kennedy's announcement was a timing mistake, I had already begun to be disillusioned with McCarthy. I had many chances to talk with him because Paul O'Dwyer, one of the iconic leaders of the reform wing of the Democratic Party and a leader in the Senator's New York campaign, often asked me to be McCarthy's liaison when he came to New York. During my time escorting McCarthy one conversation stands out.

One morning I went to pick him up at the St. Moritz hotel where the Senator always stayed. I met Jerry, his chief of staff, in the living room and told him I was having a problem with campaign workers who were upset that McCarthy always reserved an expensive suite in this very swanky hotel. I told him bluntly that this was creating an image of the Senator as an out-of-touch elitist and needed to stop. "I'm not about to tell him that", Jerry replied and suggested I go into the next room and tell him myself. I did just that and the Senator replied brusquely, "I like staying here and that's it", and refused to change his choice of hotel.

Several weeks after his New Hampshire “victory”, a few of us pointed out that urban issues were important not only to New Yorkers, but to voters in every major city in America. Yet the campaign and McCarthy himself had never ever mentioned the words “urban” or “cities” and campaign staff in New York couldn’t understand this failure to address urban issues. We suggested a major speech outlining his views on revitalizing the cities. His response was to appoint two of us co-chairmen of a group to write a White Paper on the problems of America’s cities. After two months of work involving a large committee of experts and activists, we came up with a pretty decent set of proposals and gave them to the candidate. He accepted the proposals and thanked the committee members, but nothing ever happened.

I heard from Bill once again during Senator Kennedy’s campaign. He called me after he’d been tapped as Bob’s campaign manager in Oregon and asked if I’d come out to organize the field operation. I had to refuse because of my duties in New York. The Senator lost in Oregon, but he went on to California where he won overwhelmingly and immediately met his tragic end.

Senator McCarthy’s balloon deflated before the convention even took place. President Johnson had announced he would not run for reelection and Senator Kennedy had been assassinated. In a tumultuous Democratic Convention with delegates and protestors being beaten in the streets of Chicago, Vice President Humphrey became the Democratic nominee.

At that point I was very depressed and tired of campaigns and politics. I spent much of my time hanging out in Central Park with friends. Unexpectedly, I received an urgent call from Jack Olivero, a senior member of Vice President Humphrey’s staff and a friend from my Washington days. The Vice President, he said, was behind, but could win the election if he had a better and larger staff on the ground in key States. Humphrey needed only four or five people and they hoped I would be one.

Although I consider Hubert Humphrey one of the most decent human beings I’ve had the privilege to know and will never forget he’d shown extraordinary kindness to me after I had a serious automobile accident, I told Jack I was too depressed to be of use to anyone and turned him down. That was the end of a year that began in hope and feverish action, ended in tragedy and disappointment and became the source of several regrets.