

HISTORY UNWRITTEN

History Unwritten

Free preview: chapter one of ten

VOLUME ONE · TEN LIVES

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Every chapter begins with what the record shows and says plainly where the record ends. The documented parts are documented. The alternative histories are reasoned, not claimed. Nobody, including this book, knows what would really have happened. This free preview contains the first of ten chapters. The complete ebook is available at historyunwritten.pages.dev

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Robert F. Kennedy, 1968: The Half-Second in the Pantry

Shortly after midnight on 5 June 1968, Robert Francis Kennedy finished speaking to supporters in the Embassy Room of the Ambassador Hotel, on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. He had just won the California Democratic primary. The ballroom was full of television lights, campaign staff, volunteers and reporters, and the noise had not yet died down when Kennedy told the crowd, "So my thanks to all of you, and now it's on to Chicago, and let's win there." Those words are on the record, filmed by the networks covering the primary count. He stepped down from the stage and, on the advice of his aides, was routed through the hotel's kitchen and pantry area, a shortcut meant to get him to a press room without pushing back through the crowd.

The pantry was a narrow service corridor lined with ice machines and a steam table. Kennedy shook hands as he walked through it, working the kitchen staff the way he had worked the ballroom. A twenty four year old Palestinian immigrant named Sirhan Bishara Sirhan was standing near a low tray stacker, close enough to reach him. Sirhan fired a .22 revolver at close range. Kennedy was hit three times, once fatally in the head, just behind his right ear. Five other people in the pantry were wounded by the same gunfire: William Weisel, Paul Schrade, Ira Goldstein, Elizabeth Evans and Irwin Stroll. All of them survived.

Kennedy fell to the floor. A busboy named Juan Romero, who had shaken his hand moments before, knelt beside him and placed a rosary in his hand; a photograph of that moment, taken by Boris Yaro, became one of the defining images of 1968. Ethel Kennedy, eight months pregnant with the couple's eleventh child, pushed through the crowd to reach her husband. Kennedy was conscious for a short time. Witnesses recall him asking if the others who had been shot were all right. He was taken first to Central Receiving Hospital, then transferred by ambulance to Good Samaritan Hospital, where neurosurgeons operated through the night to relieve pressure on his brain. The bullet had fragmented and driven bone into the brain tissue. He never regained consciousness. He was pronounced dead at 1:44 a.m. on 6 June, nearly twenty six hours after the shooting.

He was forty two years old. Sirhan Sirhan was arrested at the scene, tried in 1969, convicted of first degree murder, and sentenced to death, later commuted to life imprisonment after California briefly abolished capital punishment. He remains in prison in California; parole boards have periodically recommended his release, and governors have periodically blocked it. That is what happened. Everything that follows in this chapter is what did not.

THE LIFE THAT LED THERE

Robert Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1925, the seventh of nine children of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy. He grew up in the shadow of an ambitious father and two older brothers, Joseph Jr. and John, both of whom their father had marked for public life before Robert was old

enough to compete for the role. Joseph Jr. was killed in 1944 when the naval aircraft he was piloting on a volunteer bombing mission exploded over England. That death reordered the family's plans, and reordered Robert's life along with them, though it would be years before he stood at the center of them himself.

He was, by most accounts including his own family's, a quieter and less obviously gifted child than his siblings. He served briefly in the Navy at the end of the Second World War, went to Harvard, then to the University of Virginia School of Law. He worked as a lawyer for congressional committees in the 1950s, including a stint on Senator Joseph McCarthy's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, a period he rarely discussed with pride in later years. He then made his name as chief counsel to the Senate committee investigating labor racketeering, where he pursued Teamsters president Jimmy Hoffa with a personal intensity that outlasted the hearings themselves and continued into his years as attorney general.

He managed his brother John's 1952 Senate campaign and his 1960 presidential campaign, and the closeness of that partnership, part fraternal and part professional, shaped how he was seen for the rest of his life: as the enforcer, the younger brother who did the hard and often ruthless work so that John Kennedy could remain above it. As attorney general from 1961 to 1964, he was his brother's closest adviser, involved in decisions far beyond the Justice Department, including the Cuban Missile Crisis. He also became, gradually and not always consistently, an advocate for civil rights enforcement, sending federal marshals to protect the Freedom Riders in 1961 and

overseeing the Justice Department's role in the desegregation crises at the Universities of Mississippi and Alabama.

John Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on 22 November 1963. Robert Kennedy was at Hickory Hill, his home in Virginia, when he received the call. Those who worked with him afterward describe a man who changed, who went through a period of grief that friends and colleagues found difficult to watch, and who returned to public life more reflective and more willing to talk about poverty, injustice and mortality than the hard-edged operator he had been before. He stayed on briefly as attorney general under Lyndon Johnson, a relationship strained from the start, then in 1964 won election as senator from New York, a state he had not lived in for most of his adult life, a fact his opponents made much of.

As senator, he visited the Mississippi Delta and the coalfields of Appalachia and came away, by the account of aides and journalists who traveled with him, visibly shaken by the poverty he saw at close range. He visited South Africa in 1966, at the height of apartheid, and delivered a speech at the University of Cape Town on the theme that has come to be known by its central image, the ripple of hope, arguing that each person who acts to improve the lot of others sends forth a small wave that can build into a current strong enough to break down walls of oppression. He championed the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation in Brooklyn, an early experiment in community-based urban renewal. He held hearings on hunger in America that produced some of the starkest testimony given to Congress on the subject.

He was, throughout, an uneven and sometimes contradictory figure: capable of ruthlessness and capable of a kind of raw empathy that colleagues found startling in a man with his reputation. On the night of 4 April 1968, campaigning in Indianapolis, he learned that Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot in Memphis. Speaking from the back of a flatbed truck to a mostly Black crowd that had not yet heard the news, he told them King had died, and asked for restraint in a moment of open grief and anger, invoking the death of his own brother by violence. Indianapolis did not see the rioting that broke out in dozens of other American cities that night. That speech, unscripted and delivered from notes he made on the drive over, is among the most closely studied of his career, and it is documented on tape.

He declared his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination on 16 March 1968, later than many of his supporters wanted, after Eugene McCarthy's strong showing against President Johnson in the New Hampshire primary had already exposed how vulnerable Johnson was over the war in Vietnam. Johnson withdrew from the race on 31 March. Kennedy's campaign became a contest against McCarthy for the anti-war and reform vote and against Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who entered too late to compete in most primaries but held the support of the party establishment and its delegate machinery. Kennedy's platform combined an argument for ending the war in Vietnam with a domestic argument that poverty and racial injustice had to be addressed together, and that the coalition capable of doing so had to include both Black voters and working-class white voters who were increasingly drawn to George Wallace's third-party candidacy. Whether that coalition

could actually have held, given how starkly it would be tested over urban unrest, crime and busing in the years just ahead, is a question his campaign never lived long enough to answer. He won primaries in Indiana, Nebraska and South Dakota, lost Oregon to McCarthy, and needed California to reassert his position ahead of the nominating convention in Chicago that August. He won it, narrowly, with just under forty six percent of the vote to McCarthy's forty two, and was shot within the hour.

THE HINGE

The single most examined physical detail of that night is the decision about which way Kennedy would leave the ballroom. His original plan, and the route his advance staff had prepared, took him back through the crowded Embassy Room to a press conference in a different part of the hotel. Hotel maitre d' Karl Uecker and Kennedy's aides changed the plan at the last minute, reportedly because the crowd had grown too dense and unpredictable, and rerouted him through the kitchen pantry as a shortcut. That single decision put him on a direct, narrow, poorly lit path past a support pillar and a low ice machine where Sirhan Sirhan was waiting, rather than through an open ballroom under bright lights, surrounded on all sides by cameras, security volunteers and thousands of witnesses, where a lone gunman with a small revolver would have had a far harder time getting close enough to fire at point-blank range.

This is not invented. The rerouting, the presence of Uecker, and the confined geometry of the pantry are all part of the documented record and were central to the 1969 trial. The hinge this chapter

turns on is exactly that decision, made or unmade by seconds and by which staff member reached Kennedy first. If his security detail, thin as it was, had insisted on the original route back through the ballroom; if the crowd had thinned just enough for the planned path to remain open; if Uecker had steered him a few feet to the left along the tray stacker rather than past it, Sirhan's position and angle would not have given him a clear shot. Kennedy had no Secret Service protection that night. Presidential candidates were not entitled to it by law until Congress changed the statute after his death; his security consisted of a retired FBI agent, a former football player named Rosey Grier, and a handful of campaign volunteers, an arrangement that in hindsight reads as recklessly thin for a man who had already lost a brother to an assassin's bullet and who was, by June 1968, the most prominent political target in the country. Any one of those small adjustments, none of them implausible, keeps him out of that corridor, or keeps Sirhan too far from him to fire with the accuracy he in fact achieved. It is on that narrow, physical, well documented hinge, not on some deeper alteration of the campaign or the man, that this alternate history rests.

WHAT FOLLOWS, HAD THE SHOTS MISSED

The rest of 1968. A Kennedy who survives California arrives in Chicago in August for the Democratic National Convention as the most successful vote-getter of the primary season, though not necessarily as the certain nominee. The nominating process in 1968 ran mostly through party bosses and state conventions rather than primaries, and Hubert Humphrey had spent the spring securing exactly those delegates while Kennedy and McCarthy split the

primary vote against each other. Historians disagree, and disagree sharply, on whether Kennedy could have converted his California win and his standing with party leaders like Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley into a floor victory over Humphrey. Some point to private signals that Daley was reconsidering his commitment to Humphrey once he saw Kennedy's numbers; others note that Humphrey's delegate lead was already close to insurmountable by convention rules of the time. What can be said plainly is that Kennedy's presence alive in Chicago changes the convention itself: the violent clashes between Chicago police and anti-war demonstrators in Grant Park, watched on live television by the country, played out against a backdrop of grief for Kennedy and disgust with a nominating process seen as illegitimate. A living Kennedy, contesting the nomination on the floor, gives the anti-war wing of the party a standard-bearer inside the hall rather than a slain martyr outside it, and very plausibly changes the tenor, if not necessarily the outcome, of that convention.

If he wins the nomination. Assume, as this chapter's premise requires, that Kennedy takes the nomination, whether by a contested floor fight or a Humphrey withdrawal in his favor, a event nowhere near guaranteed but within the range of what serious historians have argued was possible. He would have faced Richard Nixon in the general election that November, in a three-way race complicated by George Wallace's American Independent Party campaign, which drew heavily on working-class white voters in the South and parts of the North. Kennedy's central strategic bet, tested only in fragments during the primaries, was that he personally could hold a coalition Humphrey could not: Black voters, Catholic ethnic voters,

and working-class whites who might otherwise drift to Wallace. Whether that bet would have paid off against Nixon's law-and-order message, in a year scarred by riots, assassination and open warfare in the streets of Chicago, is genuinely contested among historians. Some point to his primary results in Indiana, where he ran well among white voters in blue-collar wards, as evidence the coalition was real. Others point to the fragility of that same coalition once Kennedy was no longer physically present to hold it together with his particular mix of moral appeal and ethnic political instinct, and argue Nixon's message would likely have prevailed regardless of the Democratic nominee, given the exhaustion with Johnson's party after 1968. No outcome can be stated as fact. What can be stated as fact is that Nixon in our history won with 43.4 percent of the popular vote in a three-way race, a margin thin enough that historians on both sides of this argument agree a different Democratic nominee, running a different campaign, could plausibly have closed it.

The 1970s, if Kennedy had won. A Kennedy presidency beginning in January 1969 inherits a war in Vietnam that Johnson had already begun to wind down through the Paris peace talks opened in May 1968. Kennedy's public position was that the war was a mistake and that a negotiated withdrawal should proceed faster than the Johnson administration was prepared to move. What is not knowable is the precise shape or speed of that withdrawal, or its cost in Vietnamese and American lives, since Kennedy left no detailed operational plan and presidents of both parties before and after him found the gap between campaign rhetoric on Vietnam and the reality of extracting from it to be far wider than expected. It is reasoned, not

documented, that a Kennedy administration ends direct American combat involvement earlier than Nixon in fact did, since Nixon did not complete withdrawal and the Paris Peace Accords until 1973. It is not reasoned, only guessed, to say by how many years, or whether South Vietnam's collapse in 1975 would have come sooner, later, or not changed in kind at all.

Domestically, a Kennedy administration would have pursued the antipoverty and urban investment themes of his Senate years, building on programs like the Bedford-Stuyvesant model, at a moment when the Great Society's legislative energy in Congress was already fading and a conservative countercurrent, visible in the 1966 midterm elections, was building. Whether Kennedy, an unpredictable and sometimes confrontational figure even within his own party, could have pushed comprehensive antipoverty legislation through a Congress that was about to hand Nixon the same obstruction it had begun giving Johnson, is not something the historical record can settle. What can be said is that Nixon's actual first term, whatever its adversarial reputation, produced the Environmental Protection Agency, the expansion of Social Security indexing, and an opening to China; a Kennedy term forecloses all three specifically as Nixon achieved them, though it does not tell us what a Kennedy administration would have produced instead.

The people who keep their places. The clearest and most defensible consequences of Kennedy surviving are not about him but about everyone whose path ran alongside his. Sirhan Sirhan, in this alternate telling, either fails in the attempt and is arrested on the spot for attempted murder, or never fires at all if the routing hinge holds; either way California in the late 1960s does not add a second

Kennedy assassination to a decade that had already taken John Kennedy and, four years later in this alternate telling only if the historical calendar holds no other surprises, would still risk Martin Luther King's murder two months earlier in April, an event this chapter's hinge does not touch and which remains part of the record regardless. Hubert Humphrey, denied the nomination or defeated within it, does not become the Democratic candidate remembered for narrowly losing to Nixon while carrying the weight of Johnson's war; his long Senate career afterward, including his role shaping the Humphrey-Hawkins full employment legislation of the later 1970s, either does not happen in the same form or happens under a different president's shadow. Eugene McCarthy, whose 1968 candidacy first cracked Johnson's position, is remembered less as the man who nearly won and more as the runner-up to a Kennedy nomination, a different legacy for a man who in actual history drifted toward eccentric third-party runs in later decades.

Ethel Kennedy, who in our history raised eleven children as a widow and became a public advocate through the RFK Memorial Foundation named for her husband, instead becomes a First Lady, and the Kennedy family's third generation grows up around a presidency rather than around a foundation built to commemorate an absence. Edward Kennedy, the youngest brother, who in our history became the family's standard-bearer in the Senate for nearly five more decades and ran for president himself in 1980, would have remained the younger brother of a two-term or one-term president rather than becoming, as he did, the last surviving brother carrying the family's political weight alone from Chappaquiddick onward. Chappaquiddick itself, the July 1969 accident in which

Mary Jo Kopechne died in a car Edward Kennedy was driving, is a fact bound to Edward's own life and choices and this chapter's hinge does not erase or explain it; it is included here only to note that Edward's national political trajectory, whatever it became, would have unfolded next to a living older brother in the White House rather than in the vacuum left by his death.

The 1980s and beyond, more speculatively still. By the time Kennedy would have left office, whether after one term or two, the country's politics of race, labor and foreign policy would have absorbed a presidency built on different priorities than Nixon's, and different again from the Ford and Carter administrations that in fact followed Nixon's resignation in 1974. Whether Watergate happens at all in a timeline without a Nixon presidency is not knowable in any serious sense: Nixon's particular political culture, his enemies list, his distrust of the press, were personal to him and to the specific circumstances of his 1968 and 1972 campaigns, and a defeated or never-elected Nixon may simply recede from national politics after 1968 rather than returning in 1972 as he did against George McGovern. Historians who study counterfactuals of this kind generally treat this as the point past which confident reasoning breaks down: too many independent chains, from the Vietnam peace process to the shape of the conservative movement to the career of a young Ronald Reagan, depend on decisions and accidents that a changed 1968 does not directly touch. The most that can honestly be said is that the particular chain of events named Watergate, tied as it is to Nixon's own campaign committee and his own White House staff, most plausibly does not occur in the specific form it took in our history, because it depended on Nixon occupying the

office in 1972. What replaces it, or whether some different scandal of some different administration fills a similar place in the national memory, is not something the record, real or counterfactual, can supply.

WHERE THE RECORD ENDS

What is documented: the shooting in the Ambassador Hotel pantry after midnight on 5 June 1968, Kennedy's death at Good Samaritan Hospital on 6 June, Sirhan Sirhan's conviction, the absence of Secret Service protection for candidates before that year, and the near even split of the 1968 popular vote between Nixon, Humphrey and Wallace. What is reasoned, built on Kennedy's stated positions and the documented fragility of the 1968 Democratic coalition, is that his survival opens a genuinely contested path to the nomination and a competitive general election, without any certainty of the outcome. What nobody can know, and what this chapter does not pretend to know, is what a Kennedy presidency would actually have done with the war, with the country's cities, or with the coalition he spent the last months of his life trying to hold together, because he never reached the office in which those answers would have been written down.