

## **Historians and a New RFK: How Historical Narratives View RFK from 1961-1968**

Theodore White's *Making of the President 1968* is thorough and candidate centered. It remains a reference for those who seek to understand that paramount election year. White's meticulous assessment of the 1968 presidential election constructed a concentrated narrative about every candidate and their campaign. Robert F. Kennedy and his brief campaign was no exception – in some examples even exaggerated – in White's analysis. White's fascination of the Kennedys echoes to this day, notably in recent work such as Thurston Clarke's *The Last Campaign* and Peter Edelman's *Searching for America's Heart* for instance.

The essential outlines of the “New RFK” trope in White's account holds up. Kennedy – referred to as Robin Hood by the working class and the “Liberator” by Black Americans – would create the “Kennedy movement” in opposition of Johnson.<sup>1</sup> While many feared of the creation of a “Kennedy dynasty,” this power drive concentrated on concern for underprivileged populations, and Johnson's exploitation of government power.<sup>2</sup>

Clarke and Edelman, as did White, have a profound interest in putative change in RFK and leading to his 1968 presidential campaign. We can think of this as a “New RFK” trope. Historians have argued how this “New RFK” was molded by LBJ's liberalism, JFK's assassination, and issues seen in his Senate years. This historiographic paper will investigate how historians have described the “New RFK” trope. This analysis will also assess how many historians contend – and some disagree – that RFK's decisions in his 1968 campaign fit these changes in personality.

Before the illustration of the “New RFK” trope, a brief biography of Robert Kennedy is in order. Born in Brookline, Massachusetts on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1925, Robert F. Kennedy one of nine

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 175-77.

<sup>2</sup> White, *Making of the President 1968*, 176-77.

children, reared by Joseph Patrick Kennedy and Rose Fitzgerald.<sup>3</sup> Kennedy's grandparents fostered qualities of toughness from prejudices they had faced as Irish Catholic immigrants.

Kennedy intimate and historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. writes:

His great-grandparents had come from Ireland some three quarters of a century before. The legacy brought to Boston was but mildly diluted in the next two generations. The nineteenth-century Irish saw themselves as the victims of the history. Memories of dispossession and defeat filled their souls. They had lost their national independence, their personal dignity, their land, even their language, to intruders from across the sea. Joyce defined the Irish view: "History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake..." They had kept trying to awake. Pessimism mangled with pride and romantic defiance. They countered fate by talk, incessant and extravagant; by irony and self-mockery; by fantasy and by drink. They evaded fate, as oppressed people do, by donning masks to deceive the oppressors.<sup>4</sup>

Schlesinger emphasizes that Robert's father, Joseph, gained a resilient personality like Robert's grandparents. This, unfortunately, led to his absence in Robert's childhood as written by Schlesinger.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Joseph's two eldest sons, Joseph Jr. and John, Robert yearned for his father's attention.<sup>6</sup>

Robert also took on attributes of John during his brother's presidential campaigns. Mimicking his brother, Robert assumed, would help Joh.<sup>7</sup> Underneath this front, Schlesinger argues, was an inward sensitivity. Native Americans, Latinos, Black people, and impoverished families – among other populations – would encounter tremendous sensitivity from Robert

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Schlesinger Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph P. Kennedy's involvement in the Securities and Exchanges Commission (SEC) from 1934-35 during Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, directing the Maritime Commission, and serving as U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1938-1940 led to his absence from his family. This affected the development of Robert Kennedy's personality.

<sup>6</sup> Schlesinger Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, xix.

<sup>7</sup> Schlesinger Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, xix.

Kennedy.<sup>8</sup> This would become a means of discovering his identity and conveying his empathy for those sequestered, like himself in his childhood, an argument contributing to the “New RFK”.<sup>9</sup>

Schlesinger’s interpretation of Robert Kennedy’s beginnings and development of his personality coincided with White’s analysis. Vehement praise and dissent characterize the contentions made towards the argument of the “New RFK” trope, or if Kennedy’s changes even took form in the first place. While Schlesinger argues RFK’s childhood molded the “New RFK,” Peter Edelman takes a different approach in focusing on his Senate years prior to his 1968 presidential campaign.

Edelman argues that RFK was an outsider. RFK remained a work in progress through his “persistent insistence that we, as Americans, could do better.”<sup>10</sup> However, Clarke argues that there was and was not a new RFK, prior to JFK’s assassination and during his (Robert’s) 1968 campaign. Clarke maintains Robert Kennedy’s personality as a “transformation,” as a method of recounting his personality prior to Jack’s assassination.<sup>11</sup> Kennedy – in Clarke’s words – was no martyr as prominent figure in the Red Scare contributing to the view of the “Old RFK.”<sup>12</sup>

John Bohrer’s *Revolution of Robert Kennedy* maintains this case of the “New RFK” trope. Bohrer describes the “New RFK” trope as a revolution.<sup>13</sup> Kennedy would – argued similarly by Schlesinger – have a different identity during JFK’s presidency. After mourning his brother and coming to the Senate, RFK became what these historians argue: “new.”<sup>14</sup> Bohrer, unlike the

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Kennedy’s “shell” hardened as he adapted his personality to that of his father and his brother. Since Kennedy valued their attention so much, it fueled his ambitions in following their paths and, later, their legacies.

<sup>9</sup> Schlesinger Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, xix-xxi.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Edelman, *Searching for America’s Heart: RFK and the Renewal of Hope* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Publishing, 2001), 39-49.

<sup>11</sup> John Kennedy’s nickname, Jack, will be utilized throughout the paper as deemed fit based on the research of historians and other writers.

<sup>12</sup> Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> John R. Bohrer, *Revolution of Robert Kennedy: From Power to Protest After JFK*, (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 1-4.

<sup>14</sup> Bohrer, *Revolution of Robert Kennedy: From Power to Protest After JFK*, 1-4.

previous three authors, directed attention to Kennedy's Senatorial position as evidence of the "New RFK" trope. It created room for identity recreation on his own.<sup>15</sup>

*Bobby Kennedy: A Raging Spirit* by Chris Matthews diverges from the argument of the "New RFK" trope. Rather, Matthews – like Schlesinger – disagrees that Robert's identity only appeared after his brother's assassination and would bring unquantifiable importance to his collaborations with Jack and others like Cesar Chavez: morality, enthusiasm, and courage.<sup>16</sup> Matthews emphasizes the diverse identity of Robert in an excerpt of the prologue.

He was there at his brother's side, yet was always his own person, contributing and supporting but also taking charge and leading. No one who knew him was indifferent to him. No one who encountered him even forgot him. In that, he was like his brother. His own path, however, led him elsewhere, into new places and new concerns that, most strikingly, became his heartfelt priority. It was, after all, Bobby Kennedy of the two, who'd recognized the historic urgency of making civil rights a national priority, who saw how vital it was to elevate the struggle to a main goal of his brother's presidency. It was he who'd argued that ending segregation was a matter of American conscience. Over the following years, up until his own death, one can clearly see how – after that signal beginning, when serving as his brother's vigilant attorney general – he progressed further and further into the role of activist champion of the country's disinherited.<sup>17</sup>

This contributed to his individuality, including characteristics of empathy and security. JFK's persona shaped differently due to this rivalry, included qualities of wittiness, initiative and camaraderie.

Kennedy ran against Lyndon B. Johnson as a candidate due to moral concerns. Kennedy demanded the United States take accountability for domestic and foreign actions for consistent and influential healing of moral wounds, as contended by Edelman. The fundamental disagreement of a "New RFK" lies on three components: if there is one, what caused it, and when it approximately took place in RFK's life.<sup>18</sup> The "New RFK" trope especially focuses on Kennedy's distance from

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<sup>15</sup> Bohrer, *Revolution of Robert Kennedy: From Power to Protest After JFK*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Matthews, *Bobby Kennedy: A Raging Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 1-5.

<sup>17</sup> Matthews, *Bobby Kennedy: A Raging Spirit*, 11-13.

<sup>18</sup> Edelman, *Searching for America's Heart: RFK and the Renewal of Hope*, 39-41.

the liberalism of Lyndon Johnson. The argument of Kennedy's separation from Johnson's "Great Society" locates itself across historical research and writings.

Edelman defined Kennedy as an idealistic critic, distinct from his brother's realism.<sup>19</sup> While the Great Society provided minimal educational possibilities, Kennedy knew education and professional opportunities would not suffice. For instance, after appearing on a CBS television panel about communism in Manhattan, RFK walked to Harlem and met with gang members discussing their thoughts on the matters of poverty and education. Bobby also traveled to neighborhoods in Los Angeles and Appalachia to gather insight and contribute that to plans during his Senate years and in his contributions to the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act (or the War on Poverty).

Clarke's argument of connections between transformation in Kennedy's personality and his distance from LBJ through Johnson's abandonment in government coincided with other historians but was characterized by mention of a "moral crisis." His mismanagement of political influence – according to Clarke – led to expansion in the moral crisis America confronted.<sup>20</sup> This moral crisis in RFK's 1968 campaign is described by Clarke in the following passage:

During his campaign for the Democratic nomination, Kennedy told Americans that they were individually responsible for what their government had done in the name of Vietnam and for what it failed to do at home for minorities and the poor. He said they could not acquit themselves of this responsibility simply by voting for a new president and new policies. Instead, they would have to participate in the healing process. Because Kennedy had managed his late brother's 1960 presidential campaign and served as in his cabinet as attorney general, he understood that following a crude and divisive campaign with a high-minded presidency would be difficult and healing a morally wounded nation after running an immoral campaign would be impossible. Because he understood this, his campaign is a template for how a candidate should run for the White House in a time of moral crisis.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Edelman, *Searching for America's Heart: RFK and the Renewal of Hope*, 40-41.

<sup>20</sup> Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, 18.

Robert's campaign – depicted by Clarke – was the template of how a candidate should run during a moral crisis.<sup>22</sup>

Matthews mentions RFK's life struggle with seeking approval from his father. The harsh perspective held by Joseph P. Kennedy showed RFK that he lacked qualities his father found of any value, those being empathy and generosity. His competition with Jack translated to many as ruthlessness. However, childhood friend Chuck Spalding stated, "What you don't see is softness, because it's been disciplined not to show."<sup>23</sup> Bouncing off recollections in Matthews's account, Bohrer's writing contains description of the "New RFK" trope in simple terms. Yale law professor Alexander Bickel clarifies the "New RFK" concept through his participation in civil rights.

Robert was perceived as a tough guy, insensitive, cruel, vindictive, clannish, summed up in a word which he never shook off... ruthless. He was so polarizing that civil rights managed to cut him both ways: demonstrators picketed him for lacking urgency and segregationists accused him of cramming court orders down their throats.<sup>24</sup>

Another author holds different ideas about the "New RFK" trope, however. *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon* by Larry Tye shows RFK's changes gradually rather than all at once, as described in the accounts above. The idea that the "New RFK" came gradually is argued through his time in the Senate. This is evident in his tour of the Mississippi Delta and his changes in views on the Vietnam War. Tye draws on RFK's ruthlessness in the McCarthy era and the appearance of his authenticity and empathy as a Senator, as others above have applied. However, Tye points out that while he held morality in poverty, racism, and other issues, he always held flaws, further proving a more progressive nature in the "New RFK" trope. Tye further elaborates:

Kennedy scholars often write off those Senate years as a prosaic interlude between Bobby's action-packed attorney generalship and his exhilarating run for the White House. He wasn't

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<sup>22</sup> Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Matthews, *Bobby Kennedy: A Raging Spirit*, 19-22.

<sup>24</sup> Bohrer, *Revolution of Robert Kennedy: From Power to Protest After JFK*, 8.

nearly as eloquent a senator as his brother Jack, they say, or as effective an insider as Ted. True enough, but that was not nearly the complete story. Jack got to the Senate because he and Bobby ran a brilliant campaign paid for by Joe, while Teddy made it there on Jack and Bobby's coattails. The Kennedy name and money helped Bobby, but unlike his brothers, he had done his homework. He learned the Senate's arcane ways a decade before when he played decisive roles in the Army-McCarthy hearings and the rackets probe. He helped steer America's domestic and foreign policies for nearly three years as attorney general and de facto deputy president. He discovered how to connect with voters at the same time as he ran his own campaign. Bobby was readier for his new role not just than Jack and Ted, but then all but a handful of senators in the institution's 178 years.<sup>25</sup>

Why other authors perceive RFK's legacy in a rose-colored lens is not discussed by Tye, but only enhanced by his writing and evidence. He maintains that there was no "Saint Bobby," as he boasted autonomy and pragmatism in the Senate. However, three sibling deaths, the loss of his father's guidance, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and campus race riots brought upon empathy and morality in subtle, increasing mental stages rather than one transformative moment.<sup>26</sup>

This steady change is also evident in Tye's explanation of RFK's evolution on the issue of Vietnam. According to Tye, this took place in three stages: hawkish, neither-hawk-nor-dove, and dove. His hawkish stage – first appearing on a trip with Jack to Vietnam in 1951 – grew out of bedrock beliefs from Jack and his presidency, recognizing a profound importance in winning not just battles but the minds and hearts the people were fighting to save. Communism must be trounced by progressive political programs attacking poverty, discontent, and misery it thrives on, according to RFK.<sup>27</sup>

He entered his in-between phase in Spring 1965 as he urged LBJ to suspend bombing on Vietnam, arguing "honorable negotiation" as a middle course and share of responsibility. He found himself in a trap: being the guy who committed our troops to a deadly and impossible mission, as the French had done in 1951. Moral issues began to eat at him, leading to his dove stance between

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<sup>25</sup> Larry Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon* (New York: Random House, 2017), 350-52.

<sup>26</sup> Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon*, 352.

<sup>27</sup> Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon*

1965 and 1967. At a meeting with LBJ, word filtered through the press about a “peace feeler,” leading to LBJ’s outrage towards RFK, telling Bobby “I’ll destroy you and every one of your dove friends in six months. You’ll be dead politically in six months.” This, among other disagreements, led to RFK’s distance from LBJ’s liberalism.<sup>28</sup>

The “New RFK” trope defines a change in Robert Kennedy’s personality and actions from his beginnings in politics to his 1968 presidential campaign. The outlines of the “New RFK” trope in White’s account of the 1968 election continue to hold up. Many historians, however, describe this in different ways and through different experiences in his political journey, including Clarke, Edelman, Matthews, Bohrer, Lemann, Schlesinger Jr., and Tye. All agree that there was a “New RFK,” but what caused this change and when the change occurred continues to clash among each account. Why they agree with if there is one includes discussion and analysis of his personality in the Senate and in his 1968 campaign. What caused these changes exactly is still heavily debated, but these historians agree that what caused this change included portions of RFK’s childhood, specifically his relationship with his father and his competition with his brothers, along with his beginnings in politics. When this change occurred is also contested, with many saying during his time in the Senate, earlier in his career, or even during his 1968 campaign.

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<sup>28</sup> Tye, *Bobby Kennedy: The Making of a Liberal Icon*, 368-69.