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MARTIN LUTHER KING IS SLAIN IN MEMPHIS;
A WHITE IS SUSPECTED; JOHNSON URGES CALM

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KENNEDY SHOT AND GRAVELY WOUNDED
AFTER WINNING CALIFORNIA PRIMARY;
SUSPECT SEIZED IN LOS ANGELES HOTEL

1968 AMERICA'S TRAGIC YEAR

WATCHING the funeral train of Robert F. Kennedy as it traveled from New York to Washington, D.C., June 1968

The 1960s was already shaping up as one of America's most turbulent decades. But in 1968, it seemed like the nation was beginning to spin out of control. **By Monica Davey in Chicago**

Long before Martin Luther King Jr., stepped onto a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tenn., on a spring evening in 1968, tensions in America were running high, especially among young people.

Opposition to the war in Vietnam—and the draft that sent hundreds of thousands of 18- and 19-year-old men into battle—was growing. The civil rights movement had fractured, with more radical leaders sharing the spotlight with King and other proponents of nonviolence.

American culture itself seemed to be reeling. If crew cuts, hula hoops, and TV shows like *Leave It to Beaver* defined the quiet, conformist 1950s, then long hair, tie-dyed clothes, “hard rock,” and hippies proclaiming “don’t trust anyone over 30” and “do your own thing” seemed to typify the restless, louder 1960s.

But when King, still the most prominent and respected civil rights leader of his time, was fatally shot as he stood on the Lorraine Motel’s second-floor balcony on April 4, 1968, it unleashed a wave of anger, sadness, and, in some places, violence.

Then, only two months later, Senator Robert F. Kennedy (President John F. Kennedy’s brother), who was running for President on an anti-war, civil-rights platform, was assassinated in Los Angeles as he celebrated his June 5 victory in the California Democratic primary.

Their deaths 40 years ago, along with other events in 1968, made it seem as if America was coming apart at the seams.

“The country was already a tinderbox with things so fragile and so flammable that people were ready to erupt,” says David Farber, a history professor at Temple University in Philadelphia.

In his long fight for civil rights, King had followed in the footsteps of Mohandas K. Gandhi, the Indian leader (himself assassinated in 1948) who believed that peaceful nonviolent protest was the only way to effect change. King attracted scores of young, middle-class Americans, who had traveled to the South to register black voters, participated in sit-ins at segregated restaurants, or marched on college campuses to call for action against segregation and poverty. But as the 1960s progressed, King was challenged by more radical figures who thought his

approach wasn’t bringing change fast enough.

“King, the last apostle of nonviolent change was brought down violently,” says Farber. “That [led] to a sense for some that nonviolence was not going to work anyway.”

RIOTS

In the days after King’s death, riots broke out in cities across the nation, including Washington,

Chicago, Baltimore, Newark, and Detroit. Buildings burned. Dozens of people died. Millions of dollars in damage was left behind, and 40 years later, some neighborhoods still haven’t recovered.

Robert Kennedy had been among those calling for calm in the hours after King’s killing.

“What we need in the United States is not division,” he sadly told a crowd in Indianapolis as he informed them of King’s death. “What we need in the United States is not hatred. What we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness, but love and wisdom and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or black.”

With both King and Kennedy gone, young people who had longed for a quick end to the war or a more color-blind



AT THE TIME OF THEIR DEATHS, both Kennedy and King were calling for an end to the war in Vietnam and steps to fight poverty and racism in the U.S.

Monica Davey is the Chicago bureau chief of The New York Times.

TIMELINE: A DECADE OF UPHEAVAL

1960



SIT-INS

At a Woolworth's in Greensboro, N.C., four black college students stage a sit-in at a whites-only lunch counter. Sit-ins follow in dozens of cities, raising national awareness of the civil rights movement.

AUGUST 1963



MARCH ON WASHINGTON

A quarter million people hear Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech at a march for civil rights and to urge passage of the Civil Rights Act, introduced by President John F. Kennedy that summer.

NOVEMBER 1963



JFK ASSASSINATION

President Kennedy is assassinated as his motorcade travels through downtown Dallas. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson is sworn in as President.

1964

CIVIL RIGHTS ACT

At Johnson's urging, Congress passes the Civil Rights Act, outlawing segregation in public places. The next year, Congress passes the Voting Rights Act, barring literacy tests and other discriminatory voting practices.

FEBRUARY 1965



VIETNAM WAR

Johnson sends the first U.S. combat troops as the war between communist North Vietnam and U.S. ally South Vietnam escalates. By decade's end, American troop levels would reach 540,000.

AUGUST 1965



WATTS RIOTS

Deadly riots break out in Watts, a poor, predominantly black section of Los Angeles, after police clash with residents over the arrest of a black motorist accused of erratic driving. Six days of rioting leaves 34 people dead, 1,000 injured, and hundreds of businesses destroyed.

society felt a sense of loss, even betrayal.

Addressing her high school class at graduation ceremonies that June, Sandra M. Dixon, the valedictorian at Roslyn High School in Long Island, N.Y., spoke of the deaths of King and Robert and John Kennedy, who had been assassinated five years earlier.

"A special kind of grief is felt by the members of my generation, our generation, the people to whom their pleas were directed," Dixon said. "In an atmosphere polluted by prejudice, war, and corruption, they offered some hope for an idealistic generation looking sadly at a threatened society."

CHICAGO

Captured two months after King's death, James Earl Ray pleaded guilty to the murder but later recanted and proclaimed his innocence, saying he had been a fall guy in a broader conspiracy against King. By pleading guilty, he avoided the death penalty and received a 99-year sentence; he died in prison from liver disease in 1998.

Sirhan Sirhan, a 24-year-old born to Palestinian par-



KING ON MARCH 28, 1968, leading a sanitation workers' strike in Memphis. He was assassinated there a week later.

ents, was convicted of killing Robert Kennedy, and remains in a California prison. Sirhan once said in a TV interview that he felt betrayed by Kennedy's support for Israel.

The months that followed the deaths were equally turbulent. At the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, police officers with tear gas and clubs clashed with anti-war protesters on the streets all around the city, even as inside the convention opponents of the

Vietnam War tried, without success, to get the party to adopt an anti-war platform.

(It was one of the last times in recent history that one of the conventions actually determined a party's nominee. This year, of course, the Democrats might not choose Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama until their convention in Denver in August.)

Hubert H. Humphrey, Lyndon B. Johnson's vice president, won the nomination, but lost the election to Richard M. Nixon, a Republican who promised to restore order at home and a "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam.

The race was remarkably tight and neither man won a majority of the popular vote, thanks, in part, to a third-par-

APRIL
MLK assassinated
JUNE
RFK assassinated

1967

JANUARY 1968

MARCH 1968

NOVEMBER 1968

JULY 1969

AUGUST 1969



SUMMER OF LOVE

100,000 young people gather in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco to help themselves to free food and "free love." The hippie movement—and "love-ins"—spread to New York, Los Angeles, and other big cities.



WAR PROTESTS

Communists launch the Tet Offensive, a coordinated series of attacks on South Vietnam. Grisly TV images of U.S. troops in battle shake America's confidence and boost the anti-war movement.

RFK FOR PRESIDENT

Robert F. Kennedy enters the campaign for President on an anti-war, anti-poverty platform. Two weeks later, with his popularity plummeting, Johnson announces he won't run for re-election.



PRESIDENT NIXON

Republican Richard M. Nixon defeats Hubert H. Humphrey, Johnson's Vice President. The next year, Nixon begins a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam; it would not be completed until 1973.



MEN ON THE MOON

The world watches it all live on TV as U.S. astronauts land on the moon, fulfilling a 1961 pledge by President Kennedy and beating the Soviet Union in the "space race."



WOODSTOCK

Half a million people descend on tiny Bethel, N.Y., for a festival that is later seen as the peak of the hippie counterculture and youth movement.

ty candidate, George Wallace, the segregationist former governor of Alabama. But Nixon prevailed with 43.4 percent to Humphrey's 42.7 percent and Wallace's 13.5 percent. The country seemed as polarized as ever.

Still, the King and Kennedy assassinations did bring about changes, if not the sweeping ones their supporters had hoped for.

GUN CONTROL

Congress had for several years been debating a fair housing act, which barred discriminating against people trying to buy, rent, or get financing for a home. Just days after King's death, the act moved quickly through Congress, and President Johnson signed it into law on April 11.

The assassinations also set off a national debate on gun control, and by the fall, Congress passed legislation, which barred interstate traffic of firearms and denied the sale of weapons to felons, young people, and the mentally ill.

"It was very much a response to the assassinations," says Peter Hamm, a spokesman for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, a gun-control advocacy group.



KENNEDY CAMPAIGNING in California in May 1968. He won the primary, but was shot to death after his victory speech.

Kennedy's death also spurred additional protection for presidential candidates, with Congress deciding that presidential and vice presidential candidates would receive protection from the U.S. Secret Service. (Nevertheless, since that time both candidates and Presidents—George Wallace, who ran again for President in 1972, and Presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford—were the targets of assassination attempts.)

And the battles on the floor of the Democratic convention led

to changes in the party's nomination process, including a much more significant role for primaries.

For many, though, the assassinations of 1968 and the riots and tumult that followed were simply too much to digest.

"There was too much going on, one thing after another, and people were overwhelmed by it," says Howard Smead, a lecturer in history at the University of Maryland, College Park.

"We were a very optimistic people going through a period of enormous optimism and experimentation in the 1960s, and this changed [things] very fast. In a way, 1968 was the end of our optimism." ●