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There has never been another political year quite like 1968: urban riots, campus unrest, the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the seizure of an American naval vessel off the coast of North Korea, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. “Not since the Civil War and Great Depression has the American political system been subject to greater stress than in 1968,” writes Michael Nelson in his superb new book, Resilient America. “To a remarkable degree, the system survived.”

Amid all the turmoil, Nelson points out, the election and inauguration proceeded on a normal schedule. Though few loved Richard M. Nixon, and many hated him, there was no serious challenge to his legitimacy. On January 20, 1969, he took the oath of office from his longtime enemy, Chief Justice Earl Warren. When it was over, they shook hands.

Why was the political system so resilient? Nelson, a former editor of the Washington Monthly and the Fulmer Professor of Political Science at Rhodes College, astutely notes that, although various forms of anger and violence were besieging the country, they were largely detached from one another. The urban rioters and campus demonstrators had little connection from any organized insurgency, as well as from the larger wave of violent crime. “Because the system-straining forces of discord were unaligned,” Nelson argues, “they had no coherent political effect.”

Moreover, as political scientist William F. Connelly, Jr., has put it, James Madison rules America. Our complex political structure provided dissenters with ways of expressing themselves through the various channels of conventional government and politics. For instance, supporters of antwar Democratic presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy broke new ground in grassroots political organizing. The “get clean for Gene” kids worked within the system, and many of them grew up to be elected officials.

George Wallace, a segregationist who ran strong in the South, won more electoral votes than any third-party candidate since Theodore Roosevelt. Had he carried a few more states, as early polls suggested that he might, the election would have gone to the House, where pro-Wallace delegations could have created deadlock. Nelson lays out several scenarios by which political leaders could have resolved the situation, but acknowledges that a “postelection election” might have been bumpy.

Critics of the Electoral College would seize on that point. One could argue, however, that a direct popular vote system would have been even riskier. Writing for the minority on the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1970, staffer Michael Uhlmann observed:

In the case of a close popular election, such as in 1960 and in 1968, the determination of the presidential candidates and their ardent supporters to win will place great temptations before every election official in the country. Those who control the polling places, whether they are State or Federal officials, may succumb to the pressure to obtain the largest popular vote margin for their favorite candidate.

The lure of ballot-box stuffing would have spread throughout the country, and so would post-election legal challenges.

Resilient America is valuable not only as an analysis of the system’s strengths but as an overview of a key moment in political history. It does not purport to supply any grand new factual revelations; rather, it clears up myths and misunderstandings that have distorted discussions of 1968. It also offers perspective. Forty-six years later, we can see more clearly where the events of that year ultimately led.

Take the issue of “law and order.” Nixon had barely talked about it in his 1960 run for the White House, but it was a centerpiece of his campaign eight years later. According to the standard liberal account, the phrase was nothing but a cynical appeal to racism. Without denying the reality of prejudice, Nelson points out that crime really was rising at an alarming rate. According to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports, the rate of violent crime increased 85% between 1960 and 1968. Crime would stay on the national agenda at least until the early 1990s, when it started dropping as a result of more effective police methods and favorable demographic trends. (Baby Boomers had gotten too old to run from the cops.)

In recent years, the GOP has purportedly relied on the “next in line” when nomi-
nating its presidential candidates. According to this trope, Republicans somehow have an instinct for hierarchy and succession, so they automatically turn to contenders who have either sought the nomination before or been on the national ticket. On the surface, the 1968 nomination race seems to confirm the theory. After his narrow 1960 loss to JFK and Barry Goldwater’s departure from presidential politics, Nixon was apparently the next in line.

But Nelson’s thorough and detailed account of the 1968 nomination contest shows that there was nothing automatic about it. Nixon’s ill-advised and unsuccessful 1962 race for governor of California had tagged him as a loser. To overcome the taint, he built a sophisticated campaign organization and set about winning a series of primaries. (In those days, when party leaders still chose most of the delegates in both parties, primaries were as much about election psychology as convention arithmetic.) Despite Nixon’s exertions, the late-starting candidacies of Ronald Reagan on the right and Nelson Rockefeller on the left put his nomination in some doubt. In the end, Nixon won with 692 delegates, just 25 more than he needed. Though he had some votes in reserve, a second ballot would have seen him lose Southern support to Reagan, creating the potential for a free-for-all.

Another popular myth is the notion that had Robert F. Kennedy lived, he certainly would have won the Democratic nomination and the presidency. No one can be sure, of course, but Nelson shows that Hubert H. Humphrey had a massive delegate lead on the eve of Kennedy’s assassination. It seems unlikely that RKF could have overtaken HHH. Says Nelson: “The convention’s three main power bases—labor, the South, and the state party organizations—were all strongly for Humphrey and strongly against Kennedy.” And Kennedy was hardly a sure winner in the general election: in a trial-heat survey in May, Nixon led him by ten points.

After incumbent Lyndon Johnson’s withdrawal, Humphrey skated to the nomination without entering a single primary. Liberals groused, but it’s not true that a grubby bunch of backroom bosses forced Humphrey on an unwilling party. Nelson points out that the polls showed him ahead of Kennedy and McCarthy among Democratic voters—for many in the rank and file, an association with the Vietnam protesters was a liability, not an asset. After the Chicago police beat up demonstrators at the Democratic convention, one survey found that 71% of respondents sided with Mayor Richard J. Daley and his cops. If there was one thing that was more unpopular than the war, it was the antiwar movement.

Regardless of what the polls said, liberal Democrats thought that the system had cheated them. Their discontent led to changes in the party rules that would shift delegate selection to primaries and voter caucuses. In part because a number of states amended their election laws to accommodate the rules changes, a similar shift occurred on the Republican side. Reagan, who had never been a favorite of the GOP establishment, could now become a contender by rallying grassroots conservatives. He nearly beat Gerald Ford for the 1976 nomination, and he won in 1980. So a reform that started on the Democratic Left ended up in triumph for the Republican Right.

The 1968 election ended in divided government, with a Republican president and a Democratic Congress. That situation seemed more unusual at the time than it would today. Nelson points out unified party government has prevailed 79% of the time during the first two-thirds of the 20th century but only 30% of the time since. There are multiple reasons for this shift, one of which is a precedent from 1968. During the general election campaign, Nixon held his party’s contenders for congressional seats at arm’s length, and a number of nominees have followed his example.

One must be careful in drawing historical parallels between the late 1960s and today. The GOP no longer has a Rockefeller wing, and white Southerners have largely abandoned the Democrats. In 1968, many people thought Robert Kennedy was pushing the envelope when he said, “There’s no question that in the next thirty or forty years a Negro can achieve the same position my brother has.” He was exactly right, and now youngsters are growing up taking it for granted that an African American can become president.

Nevertheless, the 1968 election does hold at least one big lesson for contemporary politics: don’t raise expectations that you cannot fulfill or make promises that you do not intend to keep. Nelson quotes what Lyndon Johnson told a cheering crowd in October 1964: “We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.” Months later, he did just that, leading conservatives to tell a bitter joke: “They told me that if I voted for Goldwater, we’d have a terrible war in Vietnam. They were right. I voted for Goldwater, and we have a terrible war in Vietnam.”

On the domestic front, LBJ talked about a “Great Society” that would end poverty and elevate the human spirit. As Nelson explains, “The liberal assumption, which the president shared, was that every social problem has a solution, social scientists know what it is, and the solution involves creating a new program administered by the federal government.” In 1986, President Reagan summed up what happened: “In 1964 the famous War on Poverty was declared and a funny thing happened. Poverty, as measured by dependency, stopped shrinking and then actually began to grow worse.” I guess you could say, poverty won the war.

The problems of the 1960s were bad enough, but they seemed even worse in light of the expectations that LBJ had raised. He paid a steep political price for the rhetoric of hope and change.

Michael Nelson’s Resilient America is lively and well-written, highly suitable for general readers. It would also be an excellent choice for college courses in American history and political science. Too many undergraduates know Nixon only through portrayals in popular culture, which are not exactly accurate. Contrary to the latest X-Men movie, he did not approve a secret program to have robots exterminate mutants. The real stories behind Nixon’s election and presidency are fascinating enough without embellishments. This book is a fine place to start.

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