



The Presidential Election of 1968 – and Implications for 2024

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Overview

Some have said that history repeats itself. Some have said history *rhymes*. I am not sure it does either, but it can illuminate possible future paths – especially when there are recognizable patterns. I suppose that is the reason why in antiquity, an additional duty of some historians was also to serve as a fortune teller. I struggle enough trying to make sense of the past. I can't imagine being responsible for making sense of the future, too, especially with the added pressure that not only is your reputation at stake if you get it wrong but also possibly your mortality. For most of us, we view politics from the cheap seats – like a kind of kabuki theater. But that does not tell us much about how it really works behind the scenes. Preconceived ideas and political commitments exaggerate our blind spots. The more white-hot the political moment, the worse our judgment gets. Even the records assembled decades later by a historian often do not do a very good job of telling us much about subjects such as personal relationships. Regardless of one's political affiliation and policy convictions, we must remember that an awful lot of what happens in Washington happens for selfish, personal reasons.

I find politics to be a bit like a magic show. The magic continues as long as no one figures out how the trick works. That's what I'm interested in trying to figure out. If you are interested more in hearing political predictions or partisan analysis, there are better places to look. I avoid making political statements, especially in a country so narrowly divided – where almost anything you say is bound to offend half your audience, and if you do not say it sincerely enough will offend much more than half. Instead, I try to do politics without being political and reach as many people as possible.

It helps to have a guide. The dystopian year 1968 has been an unusually good guide to our dystopian year 2024, at least in terms of American politics and the presidential campaign. I have been speaking and writing about this topic for a little over a year, since my last book on the 1968 presidential election was published in August of 2023. As 2024 has progressed, it has been interesting to track the two years in parallel as the number of similarities has grown. I have also been asked many times whether I planned to write a book that has allowed me to do this. I wish I could take credit, but I started seriously working on the book in 2017. I remember thinking then that it seemed we had entered a more visceral political era, but I could not have anticipated the eerie similarities with 2024. There are no contemporary references in the book, although those looking for opportunities to draw comparisons do not have to look very hard: simply substitute names like Lyndon Johnson for Joe Biden, Hubert Humphrey for Kamala Harris, and Donald Trump for Richard Nixon or George Wallace.

Over the course of the past year, I've tried to draw attention to the similarities as well as the differences between the years, and what 1968 suggests we might look for. There are patterns, which I'll discuss some of today, that allow us to go that far, although we won't know anything approaching the truth, or whether the key political figures this year were aware of these similarities until decades from now when their official and personal papers are made available to researchers in archives. And 1968 is not always a perfect guide, even if it's the best one we have.

Stepping back for a moment to take a look at the big picture, what are the similarities between the 1968 and 2024 presidential elections? There are more than we have time to get into in any detail today, but I would draw to your attention the following:

- A surprise presidential withdrawal
- Vice presidential succession

- A Republican candidate desperate for redemption after a previous loss
- Stronger than usual third-party candidates (including one named Robert Kennedy)
- Political violence
- A more chaotic than usual Democratic National Convention in Chicago
- An unpopular war that has mobilized young people and the left
- A loss of trust in American institutions, and
- A desire to return to a more “normal” political era

The result of these is that we have consistently had things to look for this year, questions to ask, and precedents to test.

Of the similarities between 1968 and 2024 just mentioned, there are three that I believe have been critical thus far in the race, and those are three I would like to focus on in this public lecture, although even now there is time for a last-minute surprise. In addition, there is one key difference that remains that I would like to discuss, which also has the potential to be decisive when Americans go to the polls on Election Day this coming Tuesday – although with so many forms of early voting many voters have already made up their minds. Until we have the ability to vote early and change our mind later, which is something that I think is coming as soon as we figure out how to do so safely, we might see the return of the “October Surprise” as it was more common in the 1960s.

Similarity #1: Presidential Withdrawal and Succession

It might be decades until we understand President Biden’s decision to withdraw from the race. We might not ever know exactly what happened, or what went through his mind. What role did actor George Clooney’s letter play? Or other politicians such as Nancy Pelosi or Barack Obama? Or doubts he might have had, or his health? But we do know there have been two surprise withdrawals after the primaries began since World War II: Harry Truman in 1952, and Lyndon Johnson in 1968. Both of whom are among Biden’s political heroes and were episodes he is likely to remember. Of the two, LBJ’s decision is particularly relevant and provides clues that future historians might consider when researching Biden’s decision.

In the run-up to the 1968 presidential election, Lyndon Johnson was under pressure from the left wing of his party, primary challenges, and the media to not run for re-election amid the war in Vietnam. Johnson had been the hardest-working Senate majority leader in modern American history and brought that same work ethic to the White House where he worked to complete not only John F. Kennedy’s unfinished legacy but also that of his mentor, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Yet LBJ was never fully embraced as president by his own party and America’s war in Vietnam distracted from his domestic successes with the Great Society. The questions Johnson faced were strikingly similar to the ones Biden faced. How does a president withdraw from an election? What precedent is there? What process is used to make such a decision? What considerations are there for the nation – political, economic, national security – and, for the president, in terms of personal or legacy concerns?

“Well, what do you think? What shall I do?” LBJ asked Lady Bird Johnson the day of his State of the Union address. It was January 17, 1968. That evening he would deliver the least hopefully and most defensive of his annual messages to Congress. The question going over and over in his mind was whether he should use the occasion to announce that he would not run again. Up until the moment he delivered the speech, those closest to him were not sure what he was going to do. Even as he gave his State of the Union address, Johnson had a secret. In his jacket pocket, he carried a piece of paper that contained an alternate ending: “Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your President.” Having these words on a separate piece of paper would allow him to maintain the element of surprise since the ending was not part of the prepared text given to the press in advance. Johnson was free to pull out the piece of paper and use the statement whenever the moment felt right.

Leading up to the State of the Union, Johnson shared his intentions with only a close inner circle, including his wife Lady Bird and outgoing governor of Texas, John Connally, who had come to Washington in 1937 as one of LBJ’s first staffers after Johnson won a special election to Congress. The first lady, Johnson’s underappreciated strategist, was perhaps the only person in Washington who really knew what he was

thinking. She judged the withdrawal statement beautifully written. “Lyndon handed me a piece of paper, a letter from John Connally with his recommendation that he go with the statement tonight,” she wrote in her diary, “because he would never have a bigger audience...the occasion of the State of the Union was a noble time to make an announcement. Lyndon had to weigh this against the fact that the whole 1968 program of action would thereby be diluted, if not completely ignored.”

However, Johnson could not go through with it. He delivered his State of the Union address without the alternate ending. Some aides were surprised since it had been discussed with his speechwriters in advance, but the timing did not feel right to LBJ. What goes through a president’s mind at a time like that? How do you know when it’s the right time to step down? How do you do so in a way that does not seem like a response to the media, your critics, and those who would prefer you let someone run who is younger or more in tune with the future of the party? How do you do it on your terms, with your head held high? It is a difficult needle to thread; otherwise, stepping down in response to critics signals they must have been correct.

In contemplating withdrawal, Joe Biden was not defending a single debate performance or even a four-year term. The stakes were much higher for him than we might realize. He is defending a half century in political life that goes back to his first election to the Senate in 1972. He will not allow this final chapter to define his entire career. No matter how many critics Biden has, the American people elected him for a full term of office. No president wants to be a lame duck a moment earlier than necessary. Biden feels a duty to defend the presidency and carry out the agenda he was given the mandate to fulfill. Short of impeachment and removal from office, no one can take that away from a president unless they voluntarily withdrawal. LBJ ultimately withdrew at the end of a nationally televised address on the Vietnam War on March 31, 1968. Johnson said he would not “devote an hour or a day of my time” to anything other than his duties as president and he would not accept the Democratic Party’s nomination again. He publicly supported his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, as his successor.

Johnson had asked aides to study how Harry Truman withdrew from a run for re-election on March 29, 1952, when Truman was hesitant to face a strong opponent, General Dwight Eisenhower. Biden, born in 1942, is old enough to remember when those two moderate Democrats were pushed aside. It might even have been a reason why the date of his 2024 State of the Union was so late in the calendar in March. From a historical standpoint, March was the month to watch – and it came and went without fanfare. We now know that Johnson’s health played a more prominent role in his decision to disengage in 1968. He was 59 at the time and would reach the age of 60 – the same as his father, who died prematurely following an earlier stroke – on August 27, the day the Democrats planned to nominate their presidential candidate. It was no coincidence that the date was the same as LBJ’s birthday. Four years before, in 1964, he had been nominated on his birthday at the convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Lady Bird might have been the only one who knew his true thinking. Her diary reveals LBJ’s preoccupation with his health, but there was also another reason he thought it might be time to step down. “I think what was uppermost – what was going over and over in Lyndon’s mind,” she wrote in her diary, “was what I’ve heard him say increasingly these last months: “I do not believe I can unite this country.” She saw the strain he was under from “the growing virus of the riots, the rising list of Vietnam casualties, criticism from your own friends, or former friends, in Congress” and noted that “most of the complaining is coming from Democrats.”

First Lady Jill Biden might be the only one who really knows her husband’s thinking. Like LBJ, when Biden withdrew, he was briefly a hero to his party and the nation. In 1968, LBJ’s act of self-sacrifice was seen as virtuous and about putting the country ahead of his political future. As with Johnson, a withdrawal by Biden has not necessarily been a withdrawal from politics. LBJ simply shifted his political energies from the ballot to focus on the war in Vietnam and influencing the choice of his successor, thus his legacy. Following a president’s withdrawal, the excitement shifts to the challengers. Alternative candidates – governors and senators – emerge. Like LBJ, Biden endured defections from staffers who flocked to others out of a desire to work in the next administration. In 1968, the Democrats were divided over the Vietnam War, and prominent candidates like senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy challenged the establishment. This year, divisions over Israel threatened to splinter the party, although Biden had no serious primary challenger. Millions watched the chaos of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on television from their sitting rooms in 1968. The violence in the streets outside the International Amphitheater, which Mayor Richard Daley’s police joined in, spelt doom for the Democrats. Richard Nixon campaigned on the platform of “law and order” in contrast to the chaos facing his opponents. In 2024 the Democrats returned

to Chicago although for a largely scripted convention. When I was there, I saw a heavy police presence and close monitoring of demonstrators to ensure their influence was limited. The dysfunction on those streets in 1968 played a major part in electing Richard Nixon as president, but similar disorder did not assist Donald Trump's campaign this year. I watched delegates and VIPs arrive in Chicago demonstrating a palpable level of energy not seen in American politics for years. Kamala Harris is no Obama, and Democrats should not look to replicate the excitement of 2008. What I saw from her was much closer to the spirit of the 1968 "Happy Warrior," Hubert Humphrey, a spirit which, if sustained, may yet carry her to the presidency.

Similarity #2: A Vice President Running on Change and Continuity

In 1968, Vice President Hubert Humphrey had been labelled "the happy warrior of our generation," for his passionate advocacy of social justice as a senator from Minnesota and he had built a legacy as a tireless champion of the Great Society programs and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As vice president, however, Humphrey had become inseparable from the Johnson administration's war in Vietnam. Appearing on *Meet the Press* on the eve of the convention, Humphrey sounded more like a man who had conceded defeat than one at the pinnacle of his political career. He knew the chaos and anger that awaited him. The protesters in Chicago were not the poor or the downtrodden, but white radicals, many from middle and upper-middle-class backgrounds. "I supported the Vietcong and selective violence here at home," antiwar protest leader Jerry Rubin wrote in his memoirs. "Though I am a white middle-class American, who enjoys a good meal and the luxury of comfort, I nevertheless share the feelings of extremist revolutionaries." Images of police beatings became the thing that most people would remember or learn about the convention. There is no question that they used excessive force, that it violated the civil rights of innocent protesters, and it was likely sanctioned by Daley himself. There was considerable sympathy for the police, too, however. "The bating of the police was incredible," Humphrey's physician, Edgar Berman, wrote later. "There was no doubt police brutality in Chicago, plenty of it, but I saw provocation that few men could tolerate." A Gallup poll showed that a majority of Americans supported the police, 56 to 31 percent.

In his late-night speech accepting the nomination, Humphrey did his best to calm the chaos both outside and within the hall where there had been a drawn-out battle over the platform between the moderate and liberal wings of the party. While it has been inevitable that Humphrey would become the nominee, Johnson refused to relinquish control of the process and never allowed his vice president to define his own independent positions. Humphrey tried to patch up their differences during his acceptance speech. It was not the radical, gauntlet-hurling speech that many wanted him to make. It was, however, an elegant address, a classic Humphrey speech that had something for everyone and drew upon the history of the Democratic Party. He paid tribute to his political heroes, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Adlai Stevenson, and John F. Kennedy. He thanked Johnson, called for party unity, praised Eugene McCarthy, and reminded Democrats that "we need a state of law and order."

As with LBJ, Biden's replacement was defined at the outset by her distance from the incumbent, but Kamala Harris has never quite been able to escape that shadow. As the Democratic nominee, Hubert Humphrey learned in 1968, it is very difficult to quickly organize a campaign around a meaningful theme, balancing between presenting both continuity and change, under such conditions. The candidate must excite the party's base without alienating their political patron. When the media honeymoon ends, they need fresh policy proposals to maintain the excitement level – and that's where potential conflict creeps in that can be capitalized on by the other side. In fact, only one sitting vice president has won the presidency in the past century – George H.W. Bush in 1988, when he arguably ran more on continuity than change.

Like Harris, Humphrey was not the strongest candidate but rather the one who could most easily be inserted into what was left of Johnson's campaign infrastructure. Another option in 1968, such as Eugene McCarthy on the left, or a John Connally on the right, each representing one half of the New Deal coalition of northern liberals and southern conservatives, might have caused lasting division in the party – a serious danger, especially in a year that favored the Republican candidate. Hubert Humphrey and the Democratic Party came out of the 1968 convention divided and scarred. In 2024, however, Harris left Chicago with a broadly united party, supported by a series of rousing speeches from the grandees of the Democratic establishment. The ghosts of 1968 had been exorcised: the protests over Israel's war in Gaza were small and drowned out by the excitement generated by the Obamas, Tim Walz, Oprah Winfrey, and all the

champions of Harris and the Democratic Party's vision for America. With a precedent of such unedifying chaos and misery, the Democratic Party was able to excel beyond the stark warnings of history.

At least that was the public spectacle, which does not tell us much about what goes on beyond the scenes. If Biden's primary concern is his own legacy, there is another role that he could play in the election, however. The more that LBJ was pressured to not run, the more he found common ground with his long-time political nemesis, Richard Nixon. Despite his notional party loyalties, Johnson quietly supported Nixon's election over his vice president, Hubert Humphrey. They were each the best of their generation on their side of the aisle, but, when not facing each other on the ballot, Johnson and Nixon came to realize they needed each other. It was not so much what they had in common that led LBJ to support his successor's election, but that they had so many of the same critics. To Johnson, Humphrey wasn't a surrogate but the anti-Johnson. Humphrey was a constant reminder to LBJ that he had been forced out.

The best guide for the Harris campaign is probably Humphrey's run in 1968. Like Harris, Humphrey was originally from the liberal wing of the Democratic party but his four years with Johnson forced him to shift closer to the center and into the difficult role of being the chief defender of an unpopular administration. The issues of the 1968 campaign were also not the preferred subjects for Democrats: an unpopular war, concern about the economy, inflation, and rising crime. Richard Nixon had no personal prestige invested or past positions to defend and he could present himself as a better alternative. Democrats, on the other hand, had controlled the House, the Senate, and the White House since 1961. Humphrey initially struggled under the weight of his association with LBJ as he sought the presidency. Every comment was measured against Johnson's statements by those looking for any perceptible difference between Humphrey and the sitting president – a figure who remained very much in charge during his final months. And if Humphrey suggested a new idea, a critic could easily ask why it had not been implemented over the previous four years. Humphrey could not escape, even as he tried; anti-war protesters hounded him throughout the campaign as a surrogate for LBJ, even though his positions on ending the Vietnam War were closer to the views of the protesters than those of Nixon – or Johnson, for that matter.

Harris has confronted similar issues of finding the right balance between continuity and change, especially in the shadow of an unpopular president. Humphrey ultimately realized that his position as vice president and his campaign strategy would doom him if he carried on. Late in the 1968 campaign, a few weeks before the election, he adopted a new approach. Democratic consultant Vic Fingerhut argued that Humphrey should stop talking about foreign policy, which had been a Republican strength since the Eisenhower years. He should not mention the war in Vietnam, because it would be a reminder to voters that, because it started under Democrats, Republicans would be better positioned to end it. He should stop appeals to perceived elites, who would come around eventually since they had nowhere else to go. Instead, Humphrey should exploit nostalgia by reminding voters what Democrats had done historically with the economy, jobs, education, and social security.

Humphrey shifted away from Johnson, while also not offending him, and returned to his roots, presenting himself as heir to a longer tradition of Democrats from the New Deal onwards. The gap in polls narrowed and, as the campaign drew to a close, it appeared that Humphrey could win. Though he ultimately lost, the conjecture of what could have been had he pivoted earlier spread. In retrospect, had Humphrey emphasized traditional Democratic domestic policy strengths when he was unexpectedly thrust into the campaign in April, his campaign could have coalesced around a clear and compelling theme much sooner. By focusing on domestic issues and allowing Johnson to manage the unpopular Vietnam War, Humphrey might have avoided a rift with the president, too. Like Nixon was able to, he could have minimized discussion of the war, spotlighted the achievements of Johnson's Great Society, and outlined how he would continue those initiatives, potentially strengthening his campaign and avoiding early missteps.

Similarity #3: A Liberal Running As A Liberal

Following the convention, Kamala Harris has continued to face the challenges of history – even if she escaped them in Chicago. Harris is a Californian, from San Francisco, who ran a liberal campaign for the presidency in 2020, and was called the most liberal member of the U.S. Senate. She has had to broaden her appeal across the country and political spectrum. She ultimately confronts a dilemma experienced by every presidential candidate of repositioning her views and politics for the whole country. Successful

presidential candidates win by targeting centrist voters – even Barack Obama ran largely as a moderate in 2008.

Harris might not have needed to calm angry protesters as the Democrats did in 1968, but American political history offers important warnings about the dangers of continuing a campaign for the presidency from the left. In 1972, for example, George McGovern of South Dakota ran on a campaign of opposition to the Vietnam War, amnesty for draft dodgers who fled the country, and reducing defense spending. That year, the columnist Robert Novak quoted an anonymous Democratic Senator: “The people don’t know McGovern is for amnesty, abortion, and legalization of pot. Once middle America – Catholic middle America, in particular – finds this out, he’s dead.” McGovern lost in a 49-state landslide to Richard Nixon, losing even his own home state. In 2007, Novak revealed that his source was in fact Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, McGovern’s own running mate.

A liberal campaign and candidate can be easy for as astute Republican opponent to decry as irresponsible. In 1984, former Vice President Walter Mondale of Minnesota ran on a campaign of raising taxes and improving the federal deficit by lowering defense spending. His charismatic opponent, Ronald Reagan, knew what to do. Quoting Mondale’s rival in the primaries, Reagan said the former vice president “had just promised everything to everybody with no thought of how it’s going to be paid for.” Presenting Mondale as reversing positions he held during the Carter years, Reagan quipped: “But just when you’re beginning to lose faith, you find there is some constancy. The old Mondale increased your taxes, and the new Mondale will increase them again.” Mondale also lost in a 49-state landslide, winning only his home state.

McGovern and Mondale were doomed because they did not successfully pivot to the center. All other Democratic nominees in the modern era have run their autumn campaigns largely as moderates who could bridge both sides of the party while also making inroads with independents and some crossover Republicans.

A Difference: Donald Trump

Finally, setting aside any similarities between 1968 and 2024, what are the differences? This has also been an evolving tally. Up until this past summer, I would have said that two of the biggest differences in the years are the lack of political violence this year and the fact that President Joe Biden did not appear to be inclined to follow in Lyndon Johnson’s footsteps and withdraw from the race. Both of those were erased in the span of a fortnight in July. As it stands today, the biggest difference is that Vice President Harris is not running against Nixon in 1972, as George McGovern did, or against Reagan in 1984, as Walter Mondale did, or even against Nixon in his 1968 form, as Hubert Humphrey did, but against Donald Trump – a much more unpredictable and divisive opponent. It took decades before we had a more balanced frame of mind to consider 1968, so I assume it will take at least as long to make sense of our more recent era. While the media often describe Trump as far-right, for many conservatives he’s not really a Republican or a conservative – but to them a kind of interloper, carpet bagger, or a wolf in sheep’s clothing. At the recent AI Smith Dinner, Trump seemed right at home with Manhattanites such as Democrat Chuck Schumer. No one will be happier to move beyond the Trump years than many conservatives of the Reagan mold. If Trump wins, he will not be all powerful as his supporters claim. Power will begin to drain from him immediately since he will no longer face voters again and the momentum will shift towards 2028 when he cannot run again.

Once again, 1968 is the best guide we have. However, Donald Trump is not exactly Richard Nixon, despite the desire by each to redeem themselves after a previous losing race for the presidency, but a George Wallace figure – a conservative Democrat, and former (and future) governor of Alabama, who in 1968 was running as a third-party candidate. I will avoid a deep dive into the Wallace campaign, although in some ways his was the most relevant race of that year because, more so than Humphrey or Nixon, Wallace started a populist movement that is still with us today. These movements are typically based on a unique personality without clear heirs. Since one of the biggest questions about Donald Trump is whether he is unique, or leading a movement with heirs, it’s worth spending a few minutes on since history provides a few clues.

The American political system lacks strong third parties or coalition-based governments common in other

nations. Part of the reason is because the two major parties themselves operate as coalitions, containing a continuum of political thought that stretches across the spectrum – including ideological overlap among Democrats and Republicans. While these differences might seem less prevalent today than, say, during the Cold War, when the threat of an external enemy meant there were always significant numbers of anti-Communists in each party, both major political parties still operate similarly in terms of appealing to their partisan base during primary elections but then shifting towards the center to attract moderates and independents during the general election. The major parties tend to nominate moderates, while being wary of third-party challenges, who tend to attack from their outer flanks.

In this system, serious third-party challengers are exceptionally rare – perhaps once in a generation. First, there is the cost of running such a campaign. In 2024, both major party presidential nominees are likely to spend at least \$1 billion. There is also the challenge of getting on the ballot in enough states to make the effort meaningful. It is virtually impossible to simultaneously lead a revolution and secure a place on the ballot. Finally, there is the strategy of the campaign message to be employed – depending on whether the goal is to make a deal with one side or the other, spawn a movement, or simply be disruptive. Since the dawn of the 20th century there have been only a handful of serious third-party contenders and they all have been especially prone to being misunderstood in history.

The last time such a candidate seriously upset the traditional two-party dominance was arguably Ross Perot, who polled as high as 39 percent in 1992. Although he did not win any electoral college votes, his was the strongest third-party performance in terms of popular vote since Theodore Roosevelt in 1912. One day we might conclude with certainty that Perot was responsible for denying George H.W. Bush a second term in 1992. In the 1948 presidential election there were two formidable challengers, one from the left (former Vice President Henry Wallace), and one from the right (South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond). While neither was ultimately consequential, the simultaneous challenges showed the extent of dissatisfaction on both sides of the political spectrum with the major party nominees. Then there was also Eugene Debs, who ran as a socialist five times between 1900 and 1920, winning as many as a million votes in his best and final effort, despite being incarcerated in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

Perhaps the most relevant case from recent history to illuminate the current election season is that of former Alabama Governor George C. Wallace in 1968. What makes the example of Wallace resonate so strongly is that he managed to get on the ballot in all 50 states, everywhere but the District of Columbia. Wallace ran an anti-elite, anti-establishment, anti-media platform that has resonated with every populist major candidate in both political parties since. Wallace polled as high as 23 percent in 1968, just behind Vice President Hubert Humphrey for a period in the early autumn, and ultimately won ten million popular votes while carrying five states in the Deep South and 46 electoral college votes. More importantly for today, he sparked a movement.

Defeated in 1958 for the Alabama governorship, arguably because he was too moderate, he shifted right to appeal to hardline segregationists and won in 1962. Wallace made a limited run for the presidency in 1964, entering three carefully chosen Democratic primaries – Wisconsin, Indiana, and Maryland. He did better than expected, proving that he could win votes outside Alabama, and the South, and that the discontent with the establishment was a lasting national phenomenon. In 1968, Wallace made his first 50-state run for the presidency. His central issues were big government, public education, busing, and crime – effectively, opposition to civil rights and most of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. Race was a common thread, although by 1968 it was folded into a broader set of grievances with a class-based message. While he never recanted his earlier incendiary statements, Wallace talked less and less about race. The national press covering his campaign fell back on old stereotypes while missing the deeper connections he was making with the electorate. His target voter was the "little man," the "ordinary American," who more often than not was white, blue-collar, and rural. Yet since his support came from pockets all over the country, his followers were difficult to stereotype. They were mostly traditional Democrats who had voted for Lyndon Johnson in 1964. Many of the same millions who put Johnson over the top in a landslide, ultimately put Richard Nixon over the top in a landslide in 1972 and helped Ronald Reagan achieve a decisive victory in 1980.

The Wallace campaign was anti-establishment because, he argued, the establishment had let his people down. They felt harmed by institutions that were meant to protect them – all levels of government, political parties, national media, higher education, and religious leaders. Wallace knew how to excite his supporters

while keeping the subject of race in the background, focusing instead on local control of schools, protecting private property rights, and law and order. It could be said that the call for “law and order” was thinly veiled racism, but rising crime was real and measurable. Every index showed an increase, from property crime to crimes of violence. It was not Wallace who made law and order a political issue in 1968, it was the growth of seemingly random, brutal violence. He was a demagogue, but not a dictator. He took advantage of the fears that people had, but he did not create them. Wallace spoke for an America that felt its familiar world slipping out of its grasp. It is far easier to dismiss Wallace with labels like “racist” than to try to understand what he stood for, why he was popular, and why every populist who has run for the presidency since 1968 has borrowed from his style and even his policies.

That brings us to Donald Trump. It took a long time before we were in the right frame of mind to treat Richard Nixon as a serious subject of study. George Wallace is still controversial. It will be a long time until Donald Trump is treated as a serious subject of study. For example, how did his focus on blue collar and lower middle-class voters emerge in 2015? Did he calculate a rightward shift, like Nixon and Wallace? Are his supporters truly loyal, or only as long as he talks about their issues? Would their support of him diminish if other candidates did so? And ultimately, is Trump a movement, and can Trumpism exist without him? A second term in the White House would begin to shed light on some of these questions. But even if he wins, and the lesson of history is that he has the easier path to victory, unless he gets in his own way, a Vice President J.D. Vance could end up being his executioner rather than his chief supporter the closer we get to 2028, as the spotlight shifts beyond Trump to the challengers, and the Democrats will then be in position for a potentially magical year – at least according to history.

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