



The Unfinished Odyssey of Robert Kennedy

David Halberstam

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The Pulitzer prize-winning newsman's analysis of Kennedy's ideological journey toward increasing radicalism and a personal account of his subsequent successes (and single major defeat) along the campaign trail. Halberstam shows how Kennedy in his role as leader of the honorable opposition in the Democratic party became the caustic critic of the administration's ghetto policies as well as a more cautious critic of its Vietnam policy, placing himself at the exact median point of American idealism and American power. It is a fascinating story of realpolitik (the Kennedy staff wanted Mayor Daley's backing in Chicago) played for radical aims, but Halberstam demonstrates his thesis that Kennedy was the rare politician who surpassed his image. The Kennedy backers were a coalition of old eggheads, youngish radicals (Allard Lowenstein was a major booster and a radicalizer of the candidate), veterans like Larry O'Brien, and--possibly--because he was the first, candidate to visit them and make demands for them--the ghetto residents. Kennedy was a crucial bridge to the New Politics which was, like the country, in transition politically. Halberstam mourns him.

The Unfinished Odyssey of Robert Kennedy Details

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From Reader Review The Unfinished Odyssey of Robert Kennedy for online ebook

Lynn Smith says

This was a good book. It was well written and easy to read. I've never read much about Robert Kennedy except a few things about his assassination. I definitely learned things about him I did not know and it brought new insights to the JFK administration and his role, and what led him to run for President in 1968 (he was really planning to run in 1972 but event propelled him to run in 1968). The book ends rather abruptly, right as RFK has just won the California primary and is about to head down to make his victory speech. This rather disappointed me. I thought there was going to be more and I was wondering why my Kindle was getting so close to 100% of the book read. But it's still a good read and I would definitely recommend it to learn more about RFK, although it really focuses the most on after JFK's death until RFK's death.

Nick says

Ends up abruptly which is fitting considering Bobby's untimely demise. But still a great account of what Bobby was really like from someone who covered him up close in that 1968 campaign.

Jane Buchbauer says

Halberstam relays his experience of traveling with the Kennedy campaign in the 1968 primary season that ended in Kennedy's assassination. A bit of a tedious read, it tells the story from the perspective of Halberstam as a member of the press corp. It gives some but little of the background that brought Bobby Kennedy to run for president with interesting insights into the problems faced by Lyndon B. Johnson that led to his announcement not to run for reelection. It ends at the California primary campaign but does not hit upon the assassination itself.

Mary Kay says

Interesting content, but I found difficult it to follow at times.

Hasan says

Really good book about the unfinished campaign of Robert Kennedy. With his loss, America lost the person who could unite the country on racial issues, lost the most sincere advocate for the poor, and lost the sense of idealism that started with John Kennedy in the 1960.

The Democratic Party lost two enormous political giants - both brothers - in the 1960s, a loss that they still

haven't overcome even in the age of Obama some 40 years later.

Judy Stewart says

A masterful work!

As usual, Halberstam has done a masterful job of capturing many of the disparate elements of a time of great change, placing them in a context of understandability. He was one of the greatest non-fiction writers of our time.

Dylan says

This is a much abridged version of my first review. Goodreads could not handle the volume of characters I dedicated to this book so I made it a book chapter in Political Essays (also on goodreads). Here is the shortened version, it does neither Halberstam nor Kennedy justice, but there it is:

I always knew there was something special about Bobby Kennedy—my mom told me so. But until I read this book I wasn't quite able to put my finger on what it was. His celebrity is there, though admittedly less than his brothers, but what is tangible to the legacy of Robert Kennedy that makes him, in my mind, one of the great Americans of our time. Somehow, in a book that is as great in scope as it is narrow in time, David Halberstam answers the key questions, whose answers make up the story of Robert Kennedy's greatness.

The book begins in the spring of 1967 with a meeting between the then Senator and Al Lowenstein, supporter of peace and organizer of student activist organizations throughout the country. Lowenstein was there to convince Bobby to run for president. Kennedy would surely run in 1972 but to challenge Johnson and in turn the Democratic political machine could be suicide. Ultimately, Kennedy listened to his closest political advisors and turned Lowenstein down. What his political advisors didn't foresee was that a legitimate anti-war candidate would be found and if it wasn't Bobby it would be someone else. Soon thereafter Lowenstein chose Senator Eugene McCarthy and for the first primary of 1968 hundreds of activists flocked to New Hampshire to work the "Get clean for Gene" anti-war, anti-Johnson campaign. Remarkably, this relatively unknown candidate from Minnesota took 42% of the NH vote to Johnson's 49% - this following Johnson's huge margin of victory over Barry Goldwater in 1964, in which Johnson carried 44 states and 61% of the national popular vote-- and 20 of the 24 NH delegates to the Democratic convention. Kennedy could wait no longer and announced his intention to run less than a week later on March 16th.

Recognizing the great division within the Democratic party President Johnson dropped out of the race on March 31st, leaving Kennedy and McCarthy to battle each other over peace while Vice President Hubert Humphrey sat on the sidelines, waiting for the Democratic convention in Chicago. Before Bobby Kennedy's political machinery was fully operational McCarthy won the next primary in Wisconsin. But Kennedy campaigned hard in Indiana and Nebraska, taking both fairly easily. The next state was Oregon, where as Kennedy's people put it, there were no Ghettos except the one block where professors from the University of Oregon took their kids to show them how poor people lived. Kennedy-- because of his civil rights record, his anti-poverty stance and his brother's legacy-- was the candidate for the working poor: black white or hispanic. But, in affluent and suburban Oregon that did not help him, McCarthy won. The book goes on to

detail Bobby Kennedy's last few weeks in life leading up to a strong primary victory on June 5th in California and his tragic death the next day.

As a reporter travelling with Kennedy's campaign what Halberstam offers, in a book that is now nearly 4 decades old, is an eye witness account of the story of a man driven by his principles. In recounting Kennedy's last 6 months, with flashbacks to his time as Attorney General and campaign manager for his brother, Halberstam offers the reader an in depth understanding of the personality that made Robert Kennedy so effective. Kennedy has often been misunderstood as too headstrong or reactive for his own good, but Halberstam paints a picture of a man who recognizes what is wrong in front of him and is determined to fix it. The book is beyond valuable because of the window it grants us into a world that is long gone yet remains critically relevant to issues today, of race poverty and war.

Claire Baxter says

I enjoyed the book, but I am a huge fan of Robert Kennedy so always enjoy reading about him! At times though I wasn't really sure where this book was headed or what its purpose was. If you are only going to read one book about the 1968 campaign, I'd probably suggest Thurston Clarke's 'The Last Campaign' instead.

Anne Hendricks says

Excellent read.

Bob says

Summary: This is a classic account of Robert Kennedy's last campaign tracing his decision to run, primary campaigns and evolving political vision that ended on the night of his primary victory in California.

We are entering primary season again. So I turned to this classic account by distinguished journalist David Halberstam, who traveled with Robert Kennedy during his 1968 campaign for the presidency, cut short on the night of his primary victory in California.

He begins with Kennedy's struggle with the decision to run, which initially meant challenging the incumbent President in his own party. Veteran politicians still urged him to wait until 1972. Yet ever since Kennedy had broken with the Johnson administration on Viet Nam, many younger political advisers and many among the young and disaffected looked to him as a new kind of politician. Yet Kennedy kept waiting, allowing Eugene McCarthy to run a strong second to Johnson in New Hampshire. Halberstam traces the tormented realization that 1972 would be too long to wait. His entry and the continually eroding support for the war led to Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run for another term.

Halberstam narrates the mad scramble to mount campaigns in Indiana and Nebraska, where Kennedy won victories. Then on to Oregon with neither the labor vote, nor large populations of disaffected. It was particularly chilling to read one narrative of Kennedy's encounter with gun rights advocates who he accused of deception on the issue of passing gun registration and background check laws. He said,

"If we're going to talk about this legislation, can't we do it honestly and not say it does something that it doesn't do? All this legislation does is keep guns from criminals and the mentally ill and those too young. With all the violence and murder and killings in the United States I think you will agree that we must keep firearms from those who have no business with guns or rifles."

Halberstam's comment is that the crowd "was not impressed." I could not miss the ironic and almost prophetic character of Kennedy's words, reading them a few days after the mass shooting in Roseburg, Oregon and the sadness that 47 years later and after a record number of mass shootings, we are still in the deadlock Kennedy faced in 1968.

The concluding chapter chronicles the exhausting campaign across California, Kennedy's growing support among Blacks and Hispanics, his courageous engagement with radicals who tried to shout him down while they advocated anarchy, and the continued challenges of strategy as McCarthy turned more to media interviews rather than big but exhausting rallies. The book concludes with the Kennedy team plotting strategy to block Humphrey, who inherited Johnson's delegates, while Kennedy headed to the hotel ballroom to give his victory speech only to be cut down by an assassin.

The "unfinished odyssey" was not simply about the tragically interrupted campaign. It was also about the evolution of Bobby Kennedy's vision of and for America. As he distanced himself from the Johnson administration, he not only spoke out more against the quagmire of Viet Nam but also for the minorities struggling to find a place at America's table. His family's wealth freed him from the rich political patrons and enabled him to see the "other America". We see his evolution from an aide to Joe McCarthy in the 1950's and the oft-considered ruthless brother during John Kennedy's presidency to an outsider with a breadth of vision and compassion that captured the imagination of the young and the disaffected. We're left wondering what kind of president he might have been, where his odyssey would have ended, and how different America might be today.

The Open Road edition also includes a brief biography and photo spread chronicling the life of David Halberstam, who died tragically in an auto accident in 2007.

Reading this narrative is risky because one cannot help comparing Kennedy with today's field. I suspect our judgments may vary with our political commitments. For me it reminded me of that tragic spring of 1968 (I was in eighth grade at the time) when we lost King and Kennedy. Read this if nothing else to understand the "Kennedy mystique" narrated by one of the great journalists and writers of this period.

Kris - My Novelesque Life says

3 STARS

(I received an ARC from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review).

"Structured around the 1968 Democratic presidential campaign, *The Unfinished Odyssey of Robert Kennedy* offers an in-depth exploration of Robert Kennedy, both as a man and a politician.

Kennedy's mass appeal to minority groups, his antiwar stance, and his support from Catholics made him unlike any other politician of his stature in the late 1960s. Acclaimed journalist David Halberstam dives into Kennedy's career, covering his work as US attorney general and campaign manager for his brother John, his

run for a New York state senate seat, and his candidacy in the 1968 Democratic presidential primary. Through this crucial period, he charts Kennedy's evolution as one of the nation's most clear-headed progressives, ultimately revealing a man who—even now—personifies the shift toward a more equal America." (From Open Road website)

I loved how this book looked at Bobby without the shadow of Jack. The elder Kennedy is in the book as he was a big part of RFK's life but this book looks at him as a secondary character. A great short book written by a journalistic writer that writes what he sees than what he wants to see.

Amanda says

I like everything that David Halberstam ever wrote, and I would put this one in that list BUT it felt a bit disjointed for someone who has such a clear structure for the other things I've read. Maybe it was because he was writing it in the moment, a few months after his tragic assassination, and his writing almost felt like someone in shock who is going through the motions of reporting but grappling with the emotional shock of his death. Even though he made references that someone in 1968 would have gotten but I didn't in the present day, I did appreciate his view of RFK as a reluctant participant in the political process but someone who had a clear vision of the change he wanted to bring to a fractured nation. Reading this book, I was pulling for RFK to win, I wanted him to see him make real change in the country and come out from the shadow of his brother because he seemed like a decent, empathetic, ready man. And then he was gone.

Kathleen McLendon says

This book brings to mind how much we lost.

I campaigned for Robert Kennedy in 1968. He was truly committed to those who were left on the fringes. I gave this book 5 stars because it allowed one to see all sides of the man. It brought him back to life for a brief moment. A must read!

Andrew says

Something ironic and morbid about reading this real-time account of RFK's 1968 primary campaign when we know how the story must end. The final pages are exquisitely written.

David W Musal says

What might have been;

An inside look at what might have been. Other reviewers have quibbles about style and therefore miss the message.

This book is about the evolution of RFK into a candidate like no other in the 20th century. He was still a work in progress when he was ripped from us by an assassin.

Who that assassin really was and what RFK would have done as president is a subject for someone else to explore.
