

The change in robert  
f. kennedy from 1963  
to 1968: how and why  
it occurred essay ...



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Robert F. Kennedy was already a man of significant political power in 1963. In 1961, Kennedy had been elected Attorney General of the United States, serving during the presidency of his brother, John F. Kennedy. As a powerful man in his own right, Robert Kennedy asserted his political influence in such important events as the Bay of Pigs invasion, prosecution of organized crime and corruption in the Teamsters' Union. Kennedy was also a deeply religious man who believed strongly in human and civil rights for all people. As such, he was also active in many areas of the civil rights struggle that was at the political forefront during the 1960s. Following the assassination of his brother, however, Kennedy underwent both political and personal changes that lasted until his own death at the hands of his assassin, Sirhan Sirhan. In part, these changes were due to the natural evolution of opinion that many other Americans experienced at the time; however, in part these changes were due to the difficult times that he was undergoing at home (Palermo, 2005). Finally, his changes in his political positioning also had an effect on his ability and on opportunities he had to serve his nation.

At home, the Kennedy family experienced a great deal of turmoil following the assassination of John F. Kennedy. As can be expected, JFK's death had a great deal of impact on his close knit family. Robert Kennedy became what Arthur Schlesinger characterized as being "melancholy" (618). Already a religious man, attempted to find meaning behind his personal suffering in reading Greek philosophers and the related works of Edith Hamilton.

Schlesinger states that:

The fact that he found primary solace in Greek impressions of character and fate did not make him less faithful a Catholic. Still, at the time of truth,

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Catholic writers did not give him precisely what he needed. And his tragic sense was, to use Auden's distinction, Greek rather than Christian [. . .] “What a pity it had to be this way,” rather than “What a pity it was this way when it might have been otherwise.” (619).

It is entirely possible that this focus inward created a change in Kennedy's political focus as well. Largely known as a ruthless and driven prosecutor as Attorney General, many of his humanitarian political efforts came after the death of his brother. While other factors also gave Kennedy cause to adjust his personal point of view, as well as his political focus, it would be naïve to think that the assassination of his brother and his personal faith played anything other than a major role in the changes that overcame his life.

The assassination also forced Robert Kennedy to make a change in the direction of his career. Although he continued to serve as Attorney General under the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, the two men had differences of opinion and political vision that prevented them from working effectively together (Schlesinger; Palermo). As a result, Kennedy left the Attorney General's office to run for the United States Senate, representing the state of New York. As a Senator for New York, he continued his civil rights efforts, advocating for equal voting rights and for desegregation for bused students. In addition to these efforts, Kennedy was active in efforts to end the Vietnam War and in efforts to bring human rights to the center of United States public affairs.

In 1968, Robert Kennedy announced that he would run for president, opposing the incumbent Republican president, President Johnson, despite

having previously announced that he would not run. His campaign continued his emphasis on human and civil rights. Palermo notes that “ the tone and style of Kennedy’s campaign was tuned to the passions that years of war and civil rights struggles had inflamed” creating a “ frightening spectacle” of crushing throngs of people in his support. The energy of this campaign perhaps signaled the new energy that he would bring to his future presidency; not the aggressive energy of a driven prosecutor, but the positive energy of a man seeking to represent humanity and ease its suffering.

It is difficult to know how things would be different if Kennedy had been elected president. Certainly, presidents have promised much and delivered less than promised in the past. However, it is possible to see that Kennedy’s personal outlook and his political direction did change in the few brief years following his brother’s assassination.

#### Works Cited

Palermo, Joseph A. *In His Own Right: The Political Odyssey of Senator Robert F. Kennedy* . New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Robert Kennedy and his Times* . New York: Houghton Mifflin-Mariner, 2005.