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## **EDITORS' FOREWORD**

Like Hector and Achilles, Grant and Lee, even Nicklaus and Palmer, Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy were strikingly similar figures who are remembered for their differences. As W. J. Rorabaugh observes, both Kennedy and Nixon were Washington politicians who never served in state or local government; they were young (Kennedy was 43, Nixon only four years older), ideological moderates, Navy veterans, and family men whose main interests were in foreign rather than domestic affairs. They ran against each other in 1960 in a contest that was closely fought throughout the campaign and ended with Kennedy winning by a margin of about one-half vote per precinct.

Despite the similarities between the two candidates, their contest came to be defined by the differences between them. After eight years as vice president to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Nixon made "experience" the theme of his campaign. "Kennedy," writes Rorabaugh, "countered with the theme of getting the country 'moving again.'" More significant, perhaps, was the difference between the two in upbringing and temperament. Nixon came up hard, the son of a struggling, quick-tempered, small businessman father and a mother who was often absent, busy taking care of Richard's two sickly brothers. From youth until the end of his political career, Nixon was transparently insecure and driven to succeed. Kennedy was born to wealth and raised to serene self-assurance.

To an unprecedented degree, the temperamental differences between the two candidates were on naked display during the election because of the spread of television. In 1950 only about one in ten American homes had a television set; by 1960 only about one in ten homes did not have one. Four live televised debates, the first in history, took place between the candidates. It is hard to recall a single important issue on which Kennedy and Nixon disagreed in these debates, but everyone remembers the contrast between Kennedy's coolly assured manner and Nixon nervous insecurity.

Politically, Nixon and Kennedy faced different challenges in 1960. The Republican Nixon was competing to win in a country that remained strongly Democratic. The Roman Catholic Kennedy strove to be elected

by a country that was overwhelmingly Protestant. Nixon came as close as he did by making inroads among conservative Democrats in the previously solid South. Kennedy lost votes because he was a Catholic, but he also gained some, and the latter tended to be concentrated in the large industrial states that ultimately provided his margin of victory.

Rorabaugh describes the presidential candidates with evenhanded depth and insight. Unlike Theodore White, the author of *The Making of the President 1960*, he does not succumb to Kennedy romanticism. He also pays particular regard to the critical role played by Kennedy's running mate, Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, who managed to keep most of the South in the Democratic column. Kennedy faced two threats in the region: not just Nixon, but also a movement among some anti-civil rights southern Democratic leaders, which Johnson largely suppressed, to withhold electoral votes from both major-party nominees and throw the election into the House of Representatives. Never before or since has a vice presidential candidate had as great an effect on the outcome of a presidential election as Johnson did in 1960.



## **AUTHOR'S PREFACE**

This book began when Fred Woodward of the University Press of Kansas told me about the press's new series on presidential elections. I became interested in writing about the 1960 election after I published *Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties* (2002), a book that only briefly discussed John Kennedy's election. Many of the social and cultural changes that the United States underwent during the first years of that fascinating, tumultuous decade could be traced to the 1960 election campaign.

In the present volume, I have reexamined terrain that the journalist Theodore White covered many years ago in *The Making of the President, 1960* (1961). A young reader will find it difficult to understand that very dated work, and many sources closed at that time are now available. In addition, White had his own prejudices and too often took campaign "spin" at face value. The present book, a corrective to White, is a reevaluation of the 1960 election and its place in American history.

This book owes much to the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, where I held the Theodore Sorensen Fellowship in 1992. On that visit, as well as on a later one, I became well acquainted with many materials, including oral histories, about the 1960 election. However, the Kennedy side of the story is often told best in secondary publications.

The losers' papers are more interesting because they have not been the basis for as much scholarship: Adlai Stevenson's at Princeton, Hubert Humphrey's at the Minnesota Historical Society, Lyndon Johnson's at the Johnson Library, and Richard Nixon's at Laguna Niguel, California, recently transferred to the Nixon Library in Yorba Linda. Photographs appear courtesy of the Johnson Library, Harry S. Truman Library, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Minnesota Historical Society, Wisconsin Historical Society, George Mason University, and Corbis.

In many ways, this book began in 2004, when, largely through the generosity of Professor Hugh West, I was the Visiting NEH Professor at the University of Richmond. While in Virginia, I dug deep into Senator Harry F. Byrd's remarkable papers at the University of Virginia. The largely untold story about the South's role in the 1960 election that appeared in Byrd's papers led to the decision to write a book about the election. Senator Richard Russell's papers also proved to be a rich source.

The South, to a great extent, was the key to Kennedy's victory, and this book's chapter on the South is the book's most original contribution.

I would like to thank my colleagues Robert Stacey and John Findlay for helping to arrange a University of Washington paid leave for 2006–2007. Several chapters benefited from the Department of History's History Research Group, and especially from Dick Kirkendall's insights. I would also like to express appreciation to Don Critchlow at Saint Louis University for reading an early draft. Finally, at the University Press of Kansas, I wish to thank Fred Woodward, the series editors, Susan McRory, Susan Schott, and Jennifer Dropkin.

I would like to dedicate this book to Hugh and Rosalie West and to Richard Johnson and Carol Thomas, all fellow toilers in the vineyard of scholarship.



## **INTRODUCTION**

Reexamination of the 1960 election is in order. Today, the popular image is that the election was about John Fitzgerald Kennedy as a dashing liberal knight, playing Luke Skywalker to Richard Nixon's Darth Vader. The 1960 campaign certainly helped produce this distorted image, but careful study of the facts reveals that Kennedy and Nixon had much in common. With no ideological differences, these two moderate contenders in this close contest shared a generational outlook. World War II shaped both Kennedy and Nixon. Shortly after the two former junior naval officers won election to the House of Representatives in 1946, observers concluded that both would gain higher office. In 1950 Nixon moved up to the Senate, and Kennedy followed two years later, when Nixon became vice president. In the 1950s the two rising stars had offices across the hall from each other and frequently visited together. Both were cold warriors, both advocated moderate domestic policies, and both tepidly endorsed civil rights.

It is time to go behind the image to examine the evidence about the 1960 election. However, writing honestly about Kennedy is difficult. His popularity while president hinders discovery of the truth. Then, too, Kennedy was enigmatic, even for a political figure. Throughout his life, he routinely dodged questions either with wit or by asking questions to avoid giving answers. This evasiveness created an aura of mystery, which was part of Kennedy's charm, but it also left listeners with misimpressions. Fortunately, Kennedy's popularity means that sources documenting his career are abundant. The larger problem, however, is that even after sifting through the evidence, the sum of the historical parts fails to rise to the level of the heroic myth that surrounds this beloved American martyr. What are mere "facts" when one is trying to come to terms with a man who has become a legend so powerful that he has achieved mythic proportions?

Much of what we "know" about John Kennedy, it turns out on close scrutiny, is less about the real man, his principles, or his politics, including the presidential election of 1960, than it is about our collective socially constructed memory of Kennedy. In this sense, what we "know" is not necessarily that which is true. This memory, in turn, is rooted less

in fact than in emotionally based images, often derived from television, where Kennedy first entered into the national consciousness. In our collective memory, he is an earnest student, rugged athlete, brilliant intellectual, heroic warrior, dutiful husband, proud father, urbane liberal, honest public servant, ardent defender of freedom at home and abroad, and crusader for social justice. Even though he has been dead for more than forty years, he is still all of these, more often than not in the present tense. Like Marilyn Monroe, another iconic public figure from the same period, he remains forever young. In reality, if Kennedy were alive today, he would be past ninety.

Nor can we escape the memory of Kennedy's sudden, grotesque departure from the public stage in the moment of horror that is his assassination. That scarring event continues to give contour and meaning to our memory of the glamorous young president. The tragedy both contradicted and reinforced the collective positive memories so vividly established during Kennedy's presidential election campaign and brief presidency. The murder contrasted starkly with preassassination images of a noble chevalier blessed with brains, money, courage, wit, creativity, and political skill, not to mention a beautiful wife, who was so loved by the public at home and around the world that many felt that he could do no wrong and that no wrong could be done to him. Sacrificed in blood in a public setting, Kennedy ascended to martyrdom, and his senseless death, when counterpoised against his life, caused his image-driven virtues to be seen as manifestations of perfection.

Although positive images about Kennedy as athlete, intellectual, war hero, family man, and passionate liberal have some basis in reality, the truth, we have learned increasingly in recent decades, was sometimes more complicated than the image that simple memory would provide. And, in some respects, the image has been just plain wrong. Today we know that Kennedy's lifelong poor health prevented him from ever being a rugged athlete, and he was not a dutiful husband. On the other hand, he was a war hero, he was proud of his children, and he did earnestly seek to defend freedom. Although he had a fine wit, much of what passed for intellect came from his ability to utilize excellent speeches crafted by others, his liberalism was more cautious than robust, and his commitment to social justice was ambiguous. Part Harvard-educated patrician and part tough Boston Irish politician, Kennedy often felt more at home with the latter role, but he knew that the image of an Irish machine politician would never lead to the White House. Ambition dictated that Kennedy

construct an image that paid homage to, but was somewhat distanced from, Irish roots.

Much of what became the Kennedy myth began with the 1960 presidential election, when, according to legend, the beloved knight in shining armor conquered the body politic with charm and panache. The truth was more complicated. Not well known at the beginning of the year, Senator John Kennedy of Massachusetts used the Democratic primaries to gain both votes and public notice. To win, he used hordes of money, an efficient organization, and television image making, but he also manipulated politicians and the media and ruthlessly attacked opponents, including the use of dirty tricks. Despite Kennedy's charm, he was no virtuous white knight, even if he tried to present that image. After Kennedy won the nomination in July, he ran all out against his much better-known Republican opponent, Vice President Richard Nixon.

The psychology of Nixon's campaign is fascinating. Nixon's quiet, self-contained brooding darkened his effort just as it did his later presidency. A poor political strategist but a brilliant tactician, Nixon may have concluded that he could not win the election at an early date. He certainly knew that he faced an uphill battle against a telegenic opponent who represented the majority Democratic Party and had unlimited family money, an excellent personal staff, and a superb nationwide organization. After the election, Nixon coldly concluded that the main reason for his loss was Kennedy's four-year head start. There is much truth in that analysis, although it ignores Nixon's own shortcomings. Despite Kennedy's advantages, he would never have won in 1960, given peace and prosperity, if there had not been widespread discomfort with Nixon.

Nixon campaigned on the theme of his "experience" in high office, which Kennedy countered with the theme of getting the country "moving again." In contrast with Nixon's static defense of the status quo, Kennedy's rhetorical device captured a mood of restlessness that gripped many Americans in the late 1950s. Intellectuals, in particular, were dissatisfied with the era's crass materialism and with the sense of complacency that Eisenhower's administration seemed to project. Even though Kennedy's Senate record was only moderately liberal, he offered a dynamic politics in which liberal programs might flourish. Although Kennedy's decision to use the "moving again" theme enabled him to excite the Democratic Party base, Eisenhower's popularity might have given Kennedy pause, had he reflected upon it. If Eisenhower had been eligible to run for a third term, polls showed that he would have won in

a landslide. Americans liked Eisenhower's middle-of-the-road approach to governance.

Without television, Kennedy would have been neither nominated nor elected. A natural performer in the new medium, he also worked hard to develop an effective on-air persona. Both talent and effort were necessary to achieve success in television. Kennedy used television to win votes, but in doing so he established a majestic public presence that transcended mere political needs. Kennedy invented the concept of the handsome, glamorous, exciting political celebrity. The senator built this image upon a substantive foundation as a war hero, as a well-informed world traveler, as a labor law reformer, and as a Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Little interested in expressing a political philosophy or championing a set of programs, he offered charismatic personal leadership that could appeal to persons of diverse views. This image making was crucial to the formation of the Kennedy myth.

Like all successful American politicians, Kennedy was self-made, both in the sense that he had proved himself in the democratic political arena by winning elections and in the sense that he had, throughout his political life, artfully constructed for public consumption a set of images about himself. Kennedy had abundant help in this ambitious project. First, the senator's wealthy father, Joseph Kennedy, had been a Hollywood filmmaker who understood the mechanics of manufacturing a star. Second, Kennedy's talented staff, led by the brilliant speechwriter Ted Sorensen, cultivated public recognition of Kennedy's name over several years both by crafting excellent speeches and by placing thoughtful articles carrying Kennedy's byline in leading periodicals. Third, Kennedy, as a former reporter, understood the needs of the press, and he personally gave reporters juicy tidbits. Today, these items would be called "spin." His successful manipulation of the press would be one of the hallmarks of the 1960 campaign.

As it turned out, no one played a more important role in creating the Kennedy myth than the journalist Teddy White, author of *The Making of the President, 1960* (1961). This widely read best seller became a major source, both then and now, about Kennedy's campaign and about the new president's emerging public image. During the fall, White spent about twice as much time with the Kennedy campaign as he did with the Nixon effort. In part, White did so because Kennedy and his staff fed White, as well as other journalists, fascinating details; Nixon and his staff provided little help. Kennedy's staff passed on anecdotes that

promoted Kennedy while withholding material that showed the candidate in a bad light. Somewhat naively, White did not seem to realize that he was being used to further Kennedy's image.

On election night, White gambled that Kennedy would win by spending the night at the Kennedy compound in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. Richard Nixon was in California, so there was no way that White could be at both headquarters. The author wanted to capture the flavor of the moment in which the voters willed a president into existence. White's riveting election night account, by far the most interesting part of his book, was used as a prologue. Even on election night the Kennedy campaign continued to manipulate White. The Kennedy pollster, Louis Harris, reported excitedly to White about counties that seemed to be going surprisingly for Kennedy. There were many other counties where Kennedy underperformed, and although Harris reported this sobering news to the campaign manager, Robert Kennedy, White was kept in the dark.

White's best seller, heavily influenced by his closeness to the Kennedy campaign, has shaped our conception of the 1960 election since its publication in 1961. The author presented the story of the election as a joust, as the white knight besting the black knight, as the triumph of the virtuous Kennedy over the morally ambiguous Nixon, as the resumption of America's inevitable progressive course, and as the success of a resurgent liberalism against the exhausted conservatism of Eisenhower's presidency. To heighten the sense of drama, White chose to write about the campaign mostly as a horse race, which became a common journalistic practice in covering later presidential elections. If the election was seen mostly as an exciting contest, then Kennedy's victory was in and of itself the significant story. Winning, according to this line of thought, is mostly about winning. White told the story as a liberal triumph, a view that was difficult to challenge at that time. In the 1960s, it was also hard to dispute White's interpretation because the author had enjoyed unique (if partial) access to many materials that were unavailable to other scholars, in some cases for decades.

The most important clue that White's interpretation of the 1960 election is flawed comes from the election returns themselves. Only 112,803 votes separated John Kennedy's 34,221,349 from Richard Nixon's 34,108,546—49.7 percent to 49.6 percent. Diehard segregationists in the South cast most of the remaining 503,348 votes (for details, see Appendix D). In a nation where the number of Democrats exceeded the number of Republicans by a margin of roughly three to two, how could

Vice President Richard Nixon, a man who was widely detested, gain almost as many votes as the intelligent, charming, courageous Senator John Kennedy of Massachusetts? Was not Kennedy the more compelling candidate? Was he not also the better campaigner? Had he not won the crucial first-ever televised presidential debate?

The close result raises other questions. Had peace, prosperity, and affection for the popular Eisenhower generated a lot of votes for Nixon? Did Kennedy's inexperience trouble many voters? Did Kennedy's Catholicism lose votes? Why did Kennedy, by historical norms, perform poorly in the traditionally Democratic South? Was the country, in fact, perhaps not eager to embark upon a new liberal era? Rather than being troubled by these questions, White and other originators of the Kennedy myth largely ignored the election returns. Although Kennedy narrowly edged Nixon in the popular vote, the winner did not gain a majority of the overall popular vote, he carried fewer states than his rival, and he won fewer congressional districts. The Democrats lost twenty-one seats in the House of Representatives and two seats in the Senate, which could hardly be construed as the sign of a new liberal age.

The 1960 presidential election was not a "critical election" marking the beginning of a new election cycle. Its voting patterns fitted quite well with the close elections of 1948 and 1968. Although the 1960 election was not about resurgent liberalism, it was about the continuing dominance of the Democratic Party. Kennedy's narrow victory reaffirmed that Americans preferred the Democrats, who had governed the country more or less continuously since 1932. Inside this party coalition, both northern liberals and southern conservatives were important. In some ways, it was an odd coalition, but intense party loyalty in the South meant that national Democratic rule was the only way that southerners could participate in governance, and northern liberals were too weak to govern by themselves. This unnatural alliance, which would fall apart over racial issues at the end of the 1960s, enabled Democrats to win all of the presidential elections except Eisenhower's two victories from 1932 through 1964. For all but four years, the Democrats controlled Congress. In 1968 the Democratic Party's two wings split, and northern liberals gained control of the party. In presidential elections, the South turned to the Republicans and started a new political cycle. Republicans would win seven of ten presidential elections from 1968 through 2004.

Why, then, is the 1960 election significant? First, Kennedy has remained a person of unusual historical interest. He wears well on videotape

and is vividly remembered by millions born after his death. Second, it is time to go beyond the myth that White and others established as early as 1961 in order to understand better the realities about this important election contest. To find the truth, it is crucial to explore the nuts-and-bolts nature of politics in 1960. Third, Kennedy's election as the first Catholic president did represent a breakthrough that inspired millions of Americans to believe that the country was ready to move beyond prejudice. Some of Teddy White's excitement about Kennedy's election came from the fact that White was Jewish, and even more than Catholics, Jews long had been excluded from important American institutions. By the time that the Kennedy-Johnson years were over, the power of the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment had been broken. John Kennedy's election in 1960 began to open doors to many people previously shut out, and the novelty of Catholics and Jews in high places quickly gave way to the possibility of African Americans and other persons of color, as well as women, entering into positions previously unimagined.

As chapter 1 shows, understanding a bit about Eisenhower, his popularity, Nixon's baggage from the 1952 campaign, Kennedy's near miss running for vice president in 1956, and the Democratic midterm election victories in 1958 are all necessary background to the 1960 campaign. Older Democratic Party leaders greeted Kennedy's candidacy with scorn. Considered a lightweight in Congress, the senator seemed too green for the highest post. These leaders did not grasp that Kennedy astutely had figured out how to circumvent their opposition. Kennedy planned nothing less than to reinvent the nomination system. It was the only way he could be nominated. He cultivated the persons who would be delegates to the 1960 Democratic National Convention and quietly wooed the still-important party bosses. He knew that he needed to win primaries in 1960 to convince the bosses that, in addition to money, organization, and television appeal, he had real popularity and could handle the campaign trail.

Chapter 2 tells how Kennedy used a large personal organization, polls, and television advertising to win the primaries. Money, much of it supplied by Kennedy's supremely wealthy father, was necessary for all of these purposes. Kennedy's victories over Hubert Humphrey in Wisconsin and, especially, in West Virginia made his nomination all but inevitable. Tricks played on Humphrey in West Virginia have been underemphasized in most previous accounts. The knight rode deep in campaign mud, which the starry-eyed press ignored. Charming and manipulating

the media were Kennedy specialties. After Kennedy swept the primaries, the Democratic Party could hardly deny him the presidential nomination without appearing to be anti-Catholic. In effect, Kennedy changed how presidential politics worked. After 1960, it was difficult to run for president without huge financial resources. Whether this money-driven politics has given us better presidents is an open question.

At the Democratic National Convention, covered in chapter 3, Kennedy narrowly prevailed on the first ballot. The election of 1960 would mark the last time in the twentieth century that a ballot for president would make news at a national convention. After 1960, primaries and caucuses that committed delegates before the convention would settle nominations ahead of the meeting. The most important event at the convention, other than Kennedy's nomination, was the adoption of an exceptionally strong civil rights plank in the platform. Kennedy signaled that the Democratic Party would seek black votes in the North, even if it had to risk losing white votes in the South. To counteract the civil rights plank, Kennedy put Lyndon Johnson on the ticket to try to hold part of the South. Politics is often about implausible political coalitions, and the Kennedy-Johnson ticket running on a strong civil rights plank was just such an example.

As seen in chapter 4, Vice President Richard Nixon was the Eisenhower administration's designated heir, but he found the position inherently frustrating. An aggressive politician who had made his fame attacking Communism in the 1940s, Nixon instinctively preferred going on the offensive. Instead, he had to defend an administration whose policies he did not always like. To win the election, Nixon had to combine Republicans with about one-fifth of Democrats and about one-half of independents. To unite Republicans, Nixon had to make a deal with liberal governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York on the party platform on the eve of the Republican National Convention. Rockefeller forced Nixon to accept a liberal civil rights plank. This deal enraged Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona and the party's other conservatives. Nixon had to base his campaign solely on "experience." It was the only way Nixon could hold Republicans while trying to appeal to Democrats and independents.

As chapter 5 shows, the South played a key role in this election. In 1960, restless southerners threatened to bolt from the Democratic Party. Archsegregationists plotted to use unpledged electors running as Democrats to sabotage Kennedy's candidacy. Most historians have ignored this

movement because it took place in backwater locales, but Mississippi's ultimate rejection of Kennedy in favor of unpledged electors shows how serious the race issue was in some areas of the South. To win, Kennedy knew that he needed to carry part of the South. Accordingly, Lyndon Johnson was put on the ticket. Johnson's role has been understated in previous studies, which have focused mostly on Kennedy and Nixon. The Texan was Kennedy's secret weapon. Johnson used both high-level personal contacts with key southern Democrats and his considerable charm with fellow southerners on the campaign trail to win Texas and several other states. Without Johnson, Kennedy would have lost.

The fall campaign is covered in chapter 6. In September, the religious issue dominated. Using television to address a gathering of Protestant ministers in Houston, Kennedy powerfully defended separation of church and state to help defuse the religious issue. It was the most effective speech by either candidate during the fall, and the Kennedy campaign widely rebroadcast the tape on local stations. From late September through mid-October, Americans watched the first-ever television debates between two presidential candidates. These debates helped establish a precedent that would take root from 1976 on. Nixon's weak performance in the first debate was devastating. Kennedy executed brilliantly and went into the lead in the polls. In the final phase of the campaign, Nixon surged to all but tie the contest by massive television advertising and by campaigning with Eisenhower.

As the last chapter demonstrates, Kennedy's narrow victory suggested that Americans were fairly satisfied in 1960. It turned out that "moving again" held only a slight edge over "experience." Outside the Northeast, Kennedy ran poorly, and the improbable combination of the liberal Northeast and the conservative South was a poor basis for successful governance. Nixon ran well in the Midwest, which would be the battleground for the next forty years, and he won the West, his home region. Kennedy won with the only possible political combination that he could put together, but it was an unstable combination that would not hold long. In 1968 Hubert Humphrey and George Wallace split the Democratic Party vote along liberal-conservative, North-South lines. The South's growing alienation from the Democrats is one of the most important lessons of the 1960 election. Nixon's ability to contest the previously one-party South gave the Republicans hope for the future in that region.

Overall, the 1960 election is, as Teddy White suggested, an inspirational story about how a young challenger fearlessly battled against

stodgy, entrenched forces inside his own party, gradually persuaded them that he was a master politician and star vote-getter, gained the party nomination, and went on to slay the dragon, Richard Nixon. That version of the tale became the easily recognized myth about the election of 1960, but the truth was more complex. The election is also the nuts-and-bolts story, as told in this book, about how family wealth, political organization, television, good looks, charm, and a quick wit could go far in politics, especially when the money was used effectively. The darker side of the story is how money was used to prod, buy, or intimidate, how the media was charmed and shamelessly manipulated, how opponents were ruthlessly bulldozed, and how charisma, money, organization, and manipulation could be used to gain power.

For Kennedy and Nixon, ideas hardly mattered: Note the contrast with Woodrow Wilson or Ronald Reagan, two presidents for whom ideas mattered a great deal. Although Nixon's lack of an intellectual mooring has long been noticed, Kennedy's similar position has mostly gone unrecognized. In evading any commitment rooted in ideas, Kennedy was as smooth as Nixon was clumsy. Each of these opaque, nonideological politicians ran a campaign that largely avoided ideas. The absence of ideas did have an ironic side, since it enabled White to spin his myth about Kennedy as a liberal crusader. In reality, White concocted a story line that was poorly rooted in fact. The purpose of this book is to strip away the myth, examine the evidence, and explain the nuts-and-bolts operations of Kennedy, Nixon, and all of the other contenders in one of the closest and most exciting presidential elections in American history.

