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## **FOREWORD**

What didn't happen in 1968? The Tet offensive occurred in January, turning Walter Cronkite and ultimately the American people against the war in Vietnam. In April, Martin Luther King was felled by an assassin's bullet in Memphis, robbing the civil rights movement of its most effective leader. Two months later, Robert F. Kennedy was murdered after having won the California primary, eliminating the best chance that either party would nominate an antiwar presidential candidate. In September, the Democratic National Convention went off the rails in Chicago, ensuring the party's eventual nominee, Hubert H. Humphrey, an uphill climb in his quest for the presidency. Throughout the year, urban race riots in several cities rocked the country, causing scores of deaths and millions of dollars in damage. Among the few bright spots, I was born in June, making 1968 a subject of particular interest to me.

What makes understanding the election of 1968 so important is the political aftershocks that continued to rock the nation for decades. Most notably, the Republicans, often the losing party since 1932, became regular winners in presidential elections. Of the six elections starting in 1968, the Democrats won only one, and that was mostly the result of the fallout from Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal. Moreover, three of these victories were landslides, two of historic proportions. In 1972 and 1984, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, respectively, won 49 of 50 states. And, in 1980, Reagan won 45 of 50 states from an incumbent, Jimmy Carter, an unprecedented feat. These victories owe, in part, to the new issue agenda set in motion by the politics of 1968.

Throughout the 1960s, and climaxing in 1968, race became the central issue dividing both the parties and ordinary Americans. When the "race issue" meant integrating public facilities, especially in the South, it benefited Democrats. Witness Lyndon B. Johnson's landslide victory in 1964 over Barry M. Goldwater. The events of the mid- to late 1960s, combined with the skill of Richard Nixon's political operatives, transformed race into a Republican issue that would last decades. No longer was the "race issue" about odious things such as turning fire hoses on peaceful protesters and standing in the schoolhouse door to bar African American students from attending all-white schools. As Edward Carmines and James Stimson skill-

fully argue in their 1989 book *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton University Press), it came to be about the degree to which the federal government should be involved in the struggle for civil rights. Later the issue evolved again to be about violence in inner cities. Racial conservatism, then, no longer required one to be a racist as was the case in preintegration days. The evolution of the race issue turned out to be bad news for liberals.

The politics spawned by 1968 reordered party coalitions. Conservative southern whites, once the Democratic Party's most stalwart supporters, have only cast a majority of their presidential votes for a Democrat once since 1968, and that was for native son Jimmy Carter of Georgia in 1976. Working-class whites, another bulwark of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal coalition and a socially and racially conservative group, began to vote for Republicans on a regular basis as well. Less dramatically, but no less importantly, racially liberal northern and western cities began to pull these regions toward the Democratic Party over time.

This reordering of groups and regions is the basis for the partisan polarization that grips the country in the 2000s. Ideological diversity within the parties became a thing of the past. Before 1968, the Republican Party did well in some liberal parts of the country, such as the Northeast and Pacific West, and the Democratic Party did well in conservative parts of the country, such as the South. As a result, both parties had to balance liberal and conservative wings within them. The 1968 election set in motion a process in which that would no longer be the case. The GOP, the conservative party, came to dominate the conservative parts of the country where Democrats once thrived while its liberal wing shriveled. Democrats, the liberal party, came to dominate liberal parts of the country where the GOP once thrived while its conservative wing all but disappeared. The absence of intraparty differences allowed the parties to pursue much more ideological politics, creating the situation that weighs on the nation today. The election of 1968 is the root of all this change.

For all the divisiveness that ultimately followed and the lasting imprint it has left, 1968 goes down in history as a watershed election. Michael Nelson's book is extraordinary in capturing the relevant twists and turns. More than that, it also provides a fresh perspective on this tumultuous time. Given all that happened that year and in the decades that followed, most scholars tend to frame their focus on the period's coming apart. But, as Nelson demonstrates, that story is too simple and ultimately incorrect. The country did not, in fact, come apart as it might have given all the political stress that

foreign and domestic events produced. In fact, leaders through this fraught time produced unity as well. The executive and legislative branches worked together to solve problems, despite the presence of divided government. Whereas divided government has caused a governing crisis in the present era, political leaders regularly came together to overcome it in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nelson's concluding argument is compelling and well made, which is not surprising given his status as one of the political science profession's most esteemed scholars of the American presidency.

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## PREFACE

America coming apart has been the theme, both at the time and in the half century since, of most commentary on politics in 1968. Three of the leading books about the period in which that year's election occurred convey this theme in their titles: *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, by Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin; *The Unraveling of America*, by Allen J. Matusow; and Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, with "hope" morphing into "rage" as the decade unfolded. A blizzard of new commentaries on 1968, timed for its fiftieth anniversary, echoes this theme. Hence the need for an expanded edition of *Resilient America*, the first edition of which received the American Political Science Association's Richard E. Neustadt Award for best book on the presidency published in 2014. I have thoroughly revised that edition to take account of both the literature and, in the concluding chapter, the events of the past few years.

Certainly there was no shortage of unusual, even alarming events in 1968: in January, the Tet offensive in Vietnam, which severely undermined public confidence in President Lyndon B. Johnson's conduct of the war; in March, the challenges to Johnson's renomination by antiwar senators Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota and Robert F. Kennedy of New York, which triggered the president's withdrawal from the election; in April, the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King and the scores of race riots that erupted in its wake; in June, the assassination of Senator Kennedy on the night of his victory in the California primary; in August, the violence surrounding the Democratic National Convention in Chicago; and, all year long, the simmering anger that attended the third-party candidacy of former Alabama governor George C. Wallace. Nineteen sixty-eight was, by any reckoning, a turbulent year.

Yet the year culminated in a peaceful election between the candidate most favored by Republican voters, former vice president Richard Nixon, and the candidate most favored by Democratic voters, incumbent vice president Hubert H. Humphrey. Both nominees worked hard to placate the loudest dissident elements of their parties. Humphrey moved far enough left to win back many antiwar Democrats. Nixon moved far enough right to keep on board conservatives whose loyalties lay with the GOP's 1964 nominee, Senator Barry M. Goldwater of Arizona, and the recently elected

governor of California, Ronald Reagan. The largest dissident element in the electorate was even further to the right, at least on racial and cultural issues, and neither Nixon nor Humphrey was willing during the campaign to move sufficiently in that direction to capture the 14 percent who constituted the core of Wallace's support.

Just as significant as the events of 1968 was the aftermath of the election. President Nixon, the Democratic Congress, and both major parties worked actively and, for the most part, successfully to woo still-alienated sectors of the electorate into the normal channels of constitutional politics and government. Nixon was rightly driven from office partway through his second term for the crimes and other abuses of power he committed as president. But during his first years in the White House he surprised the left with his diplomatic openings to the country's leading enemies, China and the Soviet Union, as well as with his acquiescence to a wide range of environmental, feminist, civil rights, and other domestic reforms. By reducing draft calls and then eliminating the draft, he took much of the wind out of the sails of the campus-based antiwar movement. At the same time Nixon courted Wallace's supporters by alternately honoring and pandering to their cultural fears and concerns.

On Capitol Hill, congressional Democrats pushed Nixon leftward on domestic policy and became a vehicle through which opponents of the war in Vietnam could advance their cause. The Democratic and later the Republican parties opened up the presidential nominating process so that most of those who felt shut out in 1968 were emboldened to pursue their goals through the two-party system.

America holding together, not America coming apart, is my theme in this book—the resilience of a political system that, after enduring great strains, largely recovered from them. Conventional political processes—peaceful demonstrations, congressional legislation, executive initiatives, Supreme Court decisions, party reforms, and presidential politics—were flexible enough to absorb most of the dissent that tore America deeply in 1968 and may otherwise have torn it asunder. The system also proved able to endure—and at least in the short term benefit from—a lasting problem of governance to which the 1968 election gave birth: a federal government chronically divided between a president of one party and a Congress wholly or partially controlled by the other party—with serious long-term consequences for, among other things, the third branch of government, the judiciary.

Although the resilience of the political system is my theme, the 1968



election was too rich in event and character to be shoehorned into a single argument. Among the other claims I make in this book are these:

- Like Nixon in 1952 and 1956, Johnson was in serious danger of being dropped from the Democratic ticket in 1964 if President John F. Kennedy had lived.
- As president, Johnson faithfully pursued his predecessor's policy in Vietnam and had reason to worry that he would be attacked as a weak leader by Robert Kennedy if South Vietnam fell to the communists.
- Among the dissident candidates in 1968, Wallace and McCarthy regarded getting their widely diverging points of view taken seriously as reason enough to enter the race. Kennedy had no interest in running unless he thought he could win.
- McCarthy's surprise showing in the New Hampshire Democratic primary was facilitated by Republican contender George Romney's withdrawal from the GOP contest, which freed up considerable media time and attention for the McCarthy campaign.
- Although Reagan posed the greatest risk to Nixon's nomination, Nixon worried more about Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York. In many ways, Nixon's insecurities and resentments toward Rockefeller resembled Johnson's toward Robert Kennedy.
- Nixon, a risk-taker throughout his political career, ran a superb campaign for the 1968 Republican nomination. His main appeals to the voters—foreign policy statesmanship and cultural populism—reflected authentic aspects of who he was. But Nixon nearly lost the general election by running a cautious campaign for which he was temperamentally unsuited.
- In choosing a running mate, Nixon sought someone in his own vice presidential image: loyal, hardworking, and willing to attack the opposition relentlessly so that he could take the high road. He decidedly did not want someone like the languid, independent-minded running mate he chose in 1960, the Massachusetts patrician Henry Cabot Lodge.
- Of all the candidates who ran in 1968, only Nixon had a campaign organization that was talented and integrated from top to bottom. In the fall campaign, his was the only organization that had been battle-tested in the primaries.

- Humphrey would have been nominated for president by his party even if Robert Kennedy had lived, and the contest came down to him, Kennedy, and McCarthy.
- RFK's death, the stalled peace talks with North Vietnam, and the president's belief that he had a better chance to defeat Nixon in November than Humphrey did led Johnson to seriously reconsider reentering the race on the eve of the Democratic convention.
- Humphrey severely underestimated how much the power balance between him and Johnson shifted away from the lame-duck president when Humphrey became the nominee of the Democratic Party. As a result, he refused to make even a modest break with Johnson until just five weeks before the election.
- The Wallace campaign was crippled by his offhand selection of former air force general Curtis LeMay as his vice presidential running mate. Wallace was too easily dissuaded by influential right-wing backers of his campaign from picking his first choice, former Kentucky governor A. B. "Happy" Chandler, an experienced campaigner.
- Wallace's supporters, so different in most ways from those attracted to the extreme left wing of the antiwar movement, resembled them in their certainty that the political system was controlled by a small elite that scorned their values and neglected their concerns.
- The judiciary's recent transformation into a political football kicked back and forth by the political parties was foreshadowed by the Senate's reaction to Johnson's nomination of Justice Abraham Fortas to be chief justice in June 1968.
- As a way of channeling dissent into mainstream politics, the much-criticized reforms of the presidential nominating process that followed the 1968 election were of tremendous value.
- McGovern's landslide defeat in 1972, like Goldwater's in 1964, helped lay the foundation for the future success of their parties.

These arguments emerge from rather than organize *Resilient America*. The book is built on a triad of character, narrative, and analysis from which my arguments emerge. I take my cue from Robert A. Caro, who once wrote that because Johnson's narrow election to the Senate in 1948 "was thrilling," then "if your account of that campaign isn't thrilling, it's false, even if it's factually accurate." At the risk of inviting invidious comparison with a superb practitioner of the art of political journalism, I can only say that

1968 also was a thrilling election, and I have tried to write about it in a way that at least doesn't drain it of its dramatic power.

In terms of how the book is organized, to appreciate the stresses that the American political system endured in 1968 and how it bounced back from them means seeing events as they unfolded in time. It also means understanding the individuals who dealt with those events as candidates for the presidency. The 1968 election was not *sui generis*; it arose from circumstances previously in the making and played out through the nominating process, the general election campaign, the voting, and the events that followed. Narrative and character therefore govern the organization of this book.

Chapter 1 takes the view from 1964, an election that seemed to place the continued existence of the Republican Party in jeopardy; it also introduces the nine political leaders who later played the leading roles in 1968: Johnson, Humphrey, McCarthy, Kennedy, Wallace, Nixon, Rockefeller, Reagan, and Romney. Chapter 2 describes the events of 1965 and 1966: Johnson's simultaneous pursuit of the Great Society and a satisfactory outcome in Vietnam, as well as the GOP's steady recovery from recent defeat, culminating in a major rebound for the party in the 1966 midterm elections.

Chapters 3 (the Democrats) and 4 (the Republicans and Wallace) chronicle the parties' parallel presidential nomination campaigns from 1967 until the end of the primaries in early June 1968. Chapter 5 is about the lead-up to the conventions and the conventions themselves.

The general election campaign between Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace is the subject of chapters 6 (September) and 7 (October and early November, including an analysis of the congressional, gubernatorial, and, especially, presidential results). Chapter 8 returns to the theme of resilience by describing the efforts of both the parties and the government to bring back dissenting elements of the electorate on both the left and right into the institutions and processes of the American political system.

In the course of researching and writing this book, I incurred debts too great to pay with words of thanks—but here goes anyway. Bruce Miroff read the manuscript carefully and provided exactly the sort of pointed but helpful criticism that an author needs. Bruce's entire motivation was to help me construct the best version of my argument that I could. Marc J. Hetherington's comments on draft chapters were very helpful, as were those of Andrew E. Busch, Richard J. Ellis, and my fellow series editor, John M. McCardell. In addition, Marc wrote a foreword that is not only gracious but also deeply insightful in its own right.

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