

The assassination of Robert F. Kennedy and the end of American liberalism

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Fifty years ago, early in the morning of June 5, 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was mortally wounded in the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, only hours after winning the Democratic presidential primary in California by a narrow margin over Senator Eugene McCarthy. Kennedy was shot three times, in the head, neck and abdomen, and the head wound, which scattered bullet fragments throughout his brain, proved fatal. He died nearly 26 hours later, at 1:44 a.m. on the morning of June 6. He was only 42 years old.

The murder of Robert Kennedy was only one of a series of political upheavals that made the year 1968 the most explosive and event-filled since the end of the Second World War. The year began with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, which staggered the Johnson administration and fueled antiwar sentiment in the United States; first Eugene McCarthy and then Kennedy entered the presidential race, challenging Johnson for re-nomination and leading to his announcement on March 31 that he would not run for reelection. Just four days later, on April 4, Martin Luther King Jr., the most prominent leader of the civil rights movement, was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, sparking rioting in major cities throughout the United States. Throughout this period, college campuses were convulsed by protests over Vietnam, racism and police violence.

The year 1968 marked the most intense crisis of the American political system since the Great Depression, and it came as the culmination of major gains by the working class during the post-World War II period. Workers had fought through the great class battles of the 1930s, 1940s and into the 1950s to build industrial unions and increase their living standards. This was the driving force of a broader democratic development, particularly the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s and the demands for equal rights for women, an

end to the persecution of gays, the 18-year-old vote and other progressive reforms.

This period came to an end with the Vietnam War, in which millions of American youth, mainly from the working class, were drafted and sent to fight in the jungles of Southeast Asia against a popular national liberation movement. The American ruling class under Lyndon Johnson initially attempted to combine “guns and butter,” but when forced to choose, sought to defend its world position at the expense of the working class at home. The Democratic Party, which was the dominant of the two big business parties from the Depression through the heyday of the post-war boom, was ripped to pieces by the resulting conflicts.

One of the most striking manifestations of this period of crisis was the series of assassinations—President John F. Kennedy in 1963, civil rights militant Malcolm X in 1965, then Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy only two months apart in 1968. The cumulative effect of these murders was immense. Millions were embittered and alienated from the entire official political system, viewing these tragic events, whatever the immediate circumstances, as part of an effort to cut off potentially progressive social reforms and strengthen the domination of conservative and right-wing forces.

Robert Kennedy’s death in particular marked the end of the period, going back to Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, in which the Democratic Party presented itself as the party of quasi-social democratic reform, promoting economic measures that would improve the living standards of the working class as a whole, white, black and immigrant, while setting certain limits on the domination of big business. This period—between the inauguration of Roosevelt and the assassination of Robert Kennedy—was only 35 years, far shorter than the 50 years that have transpired since.

It is ironic that an individual who began his career as a Catholic anticommunist, the privileged son of a multi-millionaire sympathizer of the Nazis, should come to stand on the left wing of the Democratic Party and make an appeal to the working class. Robert Kennedy's career personified the contradictions of the Cold War liberalism of the Democratic Party, a fatal effort to marry a “progressive” liberal agenda with anti-communism and imperialist militarism.

His political activity encompassed the anticommunist witch-hunt, where he worked side-by-side with Senator Joseph McCarthy, to his work as US attorney general in the early 1960s, where he both aided the civil rights movement and authorized FBI wiretapping of Dr. King, to his role as a US senator from New York, supporting the social reforms of the Johnson administration while increasingly coming into opposition with its war policies in Vietnam.

There is little doubt that Kennedy was profoundly affected by his brother's killing and that he privately believed the assassination was carried out by elements in the national security apparatus that he himself had once served. But he was also a man of his class, acutely sensitive to the deep and potentially explosive social divisions in American society. His reformism, like that of Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, was aimed not at overcoming capitalism, but saving it, even if that meant imposing modest sacrifices on the ruling elite for its own good.

This reformist stage of American political development effectively ended with the second Kennedy assassination. That this was a significant turning point in history was reflected in the outpouring of mourning. While the killing of Robert Kennedy did not have as much of a shock effect as the assassination of his older brother—in the case of Robert Kennedy there was a greater element of despair and withdrawal—millions of people lined the route between New York City and Washington as a train brought his casket for burial at Arlington National Cemetery.

Never again would a Democratic presidential candidate be able to make such a wide appeal to working class voters of all races. Subsequent nominees, even those posing as “left” such as George McGovern in 1972, did so on foreign policy or cultural grounds, not economics, and had little to offer the working class.

When Edward Kennedy sought to reprise his

brother's role in his 1980 challenge to the incumbent, Jimmy Carter, the effort fell flat. American capitalism, in the grips of the second global oil crisis in a decade, no longer had the resources, let alone the appetite, for any significant social reform. The ruling class was turning sharply to the right, towards Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the United States, and the scrapping of what remained of the welfare state.

Those Democrats who became president after Robert Kennedy's death—Carter in 1976, Clinton in 1992 and Barack Obama in 2008—were all cut from the same cloth: fiscally conservative, distant from the working class, pro-corporate, intent above all on demonstrating their *bona fides* to the military-intelligence apparatus and Wall Street. Every Democratic president since RFK has either scrapped even a pretense of domestic social reform or else, like Obama, offered counter-reforms that would actually reduce living standards and social benefits while seeking to disguise them as progressive (Obamacare, school “reform,” etc.)

The perspective of liberal reform was viable only during the period in which American capitalism enjoyed a dominant and even unchallenged position in the world economy. That period has long ended. The defense of jobs, living standards and democratic rights, as well as what remains of the social conquests of the past such as Social Security and Medicare, requires the independent mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system, in complete opposition to all factions of capitalist politics, including the discredited remnants of Democratic Party liberalism.

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