

Robert F. Kennedy and the 1968 Indiana Primary

By Ray E. Boomhower

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At the outset of the 1968 campaign, Robert Kennedy remarked that he was the only serious candidate ever to run for President opposed by business, organized labor, and his own party's leadership. That was certainly the case during the Indiana primary, the first contest on the calendar for Kennedy after his late entry into that tumultuous year's fateful presidential race. In Indiana, Kennedy took on the state's Democratic establishment in the name of Governor Roger Branigin, who had put himself on the ballot as a stand-in for the soon-to-be lame duck President Lyndon Johnson. He also confronted *The Indianapolis Star*, which attacked Kennedy on its front and editorial pages almost daily. Add the fact that Senator Eugene McCarthy had already won over many of America's young activists for his willingness to challenge LBJ in the New Hampshire and Wisconsin primaries, and Kennedy was, in a sense, on his own in Indiana, forced to write a new play-book.

Ray Boomhower's excellent *Robert Kennedy and the 1968 Indiana Primary* details how Kennedy navigated his campaign to victory through this singularly inhospitable terrain. Indiana was an even more unlikely state in which to lay down his presidential marker than West Virginia had been for his brother in 1960. Indiana was known as a conservative Repub-

lican state. "Hoosiers are phlegmatic, skeptical, hard to move, with a 'show-me' attitude," wrote native Hoosier reporter and campaign advisor John Bartlow Martin in a memo to Kennedy. George Wallace had carried almost one-third of the Indiana Democratic primary vote just four years earlier. To win, Kennedy needed to mold together a new coalition of voters comprising what syndicated columnist Joseph Kraft called "Black Power and Backlash."

Kennedy's highly visible work on civil rights issues as Attorney General and U.S. Senator had already earned him strong loyalty among the state's African American population. But it was Kennedy's "mysterious chemistry with lower classes," as reporter and former Kennedy adviser Jack Newfield called it, that allowed him to make critical inroads among the state's white blue-collar workers and family farmers. These voters—Slavs, Poles, Italians, and Irish as well as "rednecks" up from Kentucky and Tennessee—were among the neglected and sometimes resentful voters whom Richard Nixon came to call "America's Silent Majority." Kennedy also worked to capture a share of the youth vote by courting voters in college communities. So it was that Kennedy came to be the first political leader in the late 1960s to try to bring together an America torn

apart by racial divisions and an unpopular war.

Most fascinating is Boomhower's description of how the Kennedy campaign adjusted itself to the Hoosier state's conservative style and pace. Kennedy began to limit the more frenetic campaign events, although his celebrity made such an effort difficult as spectators would literally grab for a piece of him during campaign appearances, coming away with strands of clothing and locks of hair. Martin had encouraged Kennedy to make campaign visits to the state's historic sites to demonstrate his understanding of "Hoosier pride." He also pressed Kennedy to visit the backlash factory towns in central Indiana, followed by a whistle-stop railroad trip on the famous Wabash Cannonball.

Kennedy also toned down his message, emphasizing his tough law-and-order background and his support of policies to move people from welfare to work. Kennedy strongly believed his message of "self reliance" and "community action" to fight poverty as an alternative to big government programs, and he delivered it to black and white audiences alike, although many liberals cringed. By turns, he charmed and challenged his audiences, calling on voters to take personal responsibility for making America better. Hoosiers came to Kennedy skeptically, but they found unique honesty and authenticity.

The best remembered moment from Kennedy's 1968 Indiana primary campaign is, of course, is his visit to an

Indianapolis inner-city park, where he informed a mostly African American crowd of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination just minutes before. Boomhower begins his book with a recounting of that day—April 4, 1968—and a reiteration of the spontaneous words by Kennedy that not only quelled a riot but still stand as one of the most moving campaign speeches in American political history.

Robert Kennedy's 1968 campaign has been called the "last good campaign," a moniker with which the supporters of Barack Obama might now quarrel. Like Obama, Kennedy launched his campaign with the promise to bring together an America divided by an unpopular war. And, like Obama, Kennedy sought to practice a new kind of politics in which ordinary citizens could shape their own and their country's destiny and to push Americans to pursue a higher purpose than mere accumulation of wealth. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in presidential politics.

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