

Memories of 1968

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5 June 1968: I'd been in the army for less than a year. Beginning with the summer of 67--just before I entered—I had seen American cities go up in flames, been alerted for riot duty in Washington, watched the news cover the furious battles for Saigon and Hue during Tet, placed on alert again in March following the assassination of Martin Luther King; this time for riot duty in Seattle, sat open mouthed in front of a USO lounge TV as Lyndon Johnson announced he wouldn't run again.

Oh, the things I'd learned in such a short space of time: That soldiers are not trained for riot duty. That racism was not confined to the South. That poor, undereducated men were drafted so that college students didn't have to be. That some of the men under my command couldn't add and subtract. That some of the men in Lieutenant Jim Farwell's company had to be taught how to run. That bigamy was real and not just something I'd heard about in teen age rumor sharing. You grew up fast in the army, and in the late sixties.

I began to hear and read about Senator Eugene McCarthy. He was the only man in Congress willing to stand up and ask questions about the Vietnam War and to challenge President Johnson. Stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington and anticipating orders for Vietnam, I decided to "get clean for Gene." I knocked on doors, stuffed envelopes, stapled placards, delivered yard signs, and wore my McCarthy button when in "civies."

When McCarthy made a race out of it in the New Hampshire primary, I began to dream of the possibilities. When the senator's poll numbers continued to rise I waited for the moment when he would pass the President among Democrats.

And then Johnson resigned and Bobby Kennedy entered the race. I liked Bobby. Charming, well-spoken, youthful outlook, but also an opportunist; he'd had plenty of time to break with the party and the President. Instead he waited and let McCarthy do the groundwork so he could reap the benefit.

The California and Oregon primaries would settle the issue. I was heartbroken as the California results came in. Why couldn't the voters see that McCarthy was the one with the message? The news flashed on the screen, there was Bobby on the kitchen floor of a Los Angeles hotel.

McCarthy's campaign faded from my thoughts. I was in three places at once: back in front of the Varsity Club on Lane Avenue, in Columbus, Ohio, climbing into the back seat of a 57 Plymouth coup, "Didja hear," the driver asked, "someone took a shot at President Kennedy" back in a ready room at Fort Lewis waiting to find out if I would be needed for riot duty in Seattle, and watching the news coming out of Memphis, in the living room of a house I shared with Lieutenant Farwell, too shocked to accept what I was seeing on the TV screen.