

# L.B.J. WITHDRAWS AND OTHERS ENGAGE

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Under the main tent of American politics are all the activities of nominating, campaigning for and electing many important officials and of appointing yet others; of gathering money through taxes and expending it through programs; of formulating policies, domestic and foreign, and carrying them out; of maintaining a measure of law and order and of ensuring a measure of freedom and justice. It is, in brief, under the main tent that principal sources of national power are ordered and distributed.

Around the main tent are all those sideshows of lesser activities and of performers who sometimes aspire to the main tent. It is understandable and even reasonable that politicians and political commentators should focus their attention on the principal performers, merely casting an occasional eye on the sideshows in case they turn up a promising act or a particularly amusing spectacle. But however understandable it may be, it is not reasonable for politicians, commentators and assorted pundits to overlook those rare occasions when the sideshows markedly influence the act in the big tent—as they recently have.

Before Lyndon Johnson withdrew from the 1968 presidential contest, those American citizens who were opposed to the war in Vietnam had no real candidate. It seemed as if the nation was to be faced with the choice between Johnson and Nixon, and in terms of his attitudes toward the Vietnam war Nixon could not, to the critics, be judged an improvement. But Eugene McCarthy entered the presidential race to debate the issues—and won in New Hampshire; Robert Kennedy almost immediately jumped into the race; and subsequently, to the surprise of most people, President Johnson withdrew. The President's decision to withdraw was undoubtedly based on a complex of factors, including the course of the war in Vietnam, the growing uneasiness in the business community, and the mounting acerbity of our national debate. Consensus had given way to conflict and the President acknowledged, by his withdrawal, that the national conflicts might better be resolved or diminished by another executive. But much credit for revealing—and frequently heightening—the sharp divisions in our country must go to the young activists who wrote critically and marched indefatigably, who carried banners, picketed and otherwise expressed their opposition to government policy.

To deny that these critical activists, splintered with internal differences though they are, had a potent effect at a crucial stage in our national politics is to deny reality. President Johnson might have withdrawn even without the challenge of McCarthy and Kennedy, but we do not yet have the evidence; Senator Kennedy might have entered the race even

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