

These paintings explore how the world might be different today had two of the 1960's most influential political figures, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, not been assassinated in 1968. At the time, the Civil Rights movement was the strongest it had ever been, and RFK was in a prime position for challenging Nixon in the 1968 election.

I created two large scale digital paintings; one a presidential portrait of RFK, and the other a gubernatorial portrait of MLK being sworn into President Reagan's cabinet. I chose to paint digitally because I wanted to make sure they were as professional and clean looking as possible, as if they could be hung in a government office. Working digitally allows me to make perfectly cut edges, and play with the brush strokes as many times as it takes to get the stroke perfect. The two paintings illustrate possible scenarios that could have played out had these powerful leaders' lives not been abruptly taken.

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# If Triggers Weren't Pulled In 1968

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## **Introduction**

1968. A year filled with political events that the United States had yet to experience in its history as an independent country. The year started with a bang, as the North Vietnamese communists launched the Tet Offensive in January. The assault contradicted President Lyndon Johnson's administration's claims that the communist forces were weak and that the US-backed South Vietnam was winning the war. In February, in Orangeburg, South Carolina, police opened fire on students protesting segregation at the city's bowling alley. Three protesters were killed and 27 more were wounded. In early March, some 15,000 Latino high school students walked out of their schools to press their demand for a better education in the Los Angeles school system.

These events occurred over a three month period, January through March, and there was already conflict brewing over the US involvement in Vietnam, along with multiple racial inequality protests. 1968 was already off to an extremely hectic start, but it was about to get far worse.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. King was leading a sanitation workers' strike when he was shot by gunman and white supremacist, James Earl Ray. Over the next week, riots in more than 100 cities nationwide left 39 people dead, over 2,600 injured, and 21,000 arrested.

Exactly two months after King's devastating and untimely death, Presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy won the California primary. While celebrating the victory in Los Angeles with his supporters in the Ambassador Hotel, he too was assassinated. The gunman was a Jordanian citizen of Palestinian descent named Sirhan Sirhan who was immediately captured at the scene.

The twin assassinations of Martin Luther King Junior and Robert Kennedy were the most prominent and impactful events of 1968, and altered the course of history. Both MLK Jr. and RFK were respected and charismatic leaders, known to be heavily influential men. With passionate support from the new up-and-coming generation, the assassinations were all the more devastating for the country to endure. An entire generation was left both lost and confused as their most influential voices were taken from them so quickly.

Had Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy not been assassinated, the world would be a vastly different place. These two passionate, idealistic leaders who had vast followings in support of views that were way ahead of their time, were taken from the country when they were most needed. Their deaths were national tragedies.

## **Background**

Martin Luther King Jr. was originally born Michael King Jr. on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia to parents Michael King Sr. and Alberta Williams King. His father, Michael King Sr., filled the shoes of his father-in-law, working as the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Michael King Sr. went on to have a successful career as a minister and adopted the name Martin Luther King Sr. in honor of the German Protestant religious leader Martin Luther. In due time, Michael Jr. also changed his name, following in the footsteps of his father, to Martin Luther King Jr. Known as the pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement, MLK acted as a voice for the unheard, the discriminated against. On August 28, 1963, the historic March on Washington drew more than 200,000 people in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial. It was here that King made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, emphasizing his dream that someday the integrity of a man would be judged not the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Robert F. Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts on November 20, 1925, to the infamous Kennedy family. After helping his brother John F. Kennedy campaign for his presidential position, RFK was appointed US Attorney General and served in that position from January 1961 until September 1964. He was also a key supporter of the Civil Rights Movement. After JFK's assassination, Robert was elected to the U.S. Senate representing the state of New York. RFK was himself assassinated on June 5, 1968, during the California Democratic presidential primary. He died the next day. The unfortunate irony of the situation was that RFK was opposed to people with criminal records having guns, and was an early pro-gun control supporter, and ultimately, gun violence was the reason for his untimely death.

### **The Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War (May 11, 1961 - April 30, 1975) was a brutally fatal and violent war, which was only intensified by the ongoing Cold War between the Soviet Union and the US. Over 3 million people died; 58,000 of whom were Americans, and over half of whom were Vietnamese civilians. Opposition to the war in the US bitterly divided the country. While some people strongly believed in the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, others felt strongly the other way.

Many who deemed it necessary to stay at war with Vietnam were believers in the Domino Theory. This theory held that if one Southeast Asian Country falls to communism, they will all eventually follow. John F. Kennedy was an avid believer in the Domino Theory, causing him to increase U.S. aid, though he stopped short of committing to a large-scale military intervention (which LBJ was soon to carry-out following JFK's assassination). By 1962, the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam had reached some 9,000 troops, compared with fewer than 800 during the 1950s.

The devastating Vietnam War would have turned out far differently had RFK and MLK Jr. never been assassinated. At the time of their assassinations, RFK was in the middle of his campaign for the 1968 Presidential Election, and MLK Jr. was continuing his leadership of the Civil Rights Movement. Both were strong opponents of the Vietnam War – in fact one of RFK's key platforms was removing the US from Vietnam. King and RFK would have both continued to aggressively speak out against the US involvement in the war. This was a fringe view in America when they embraced it: in 1967 only about 30% of Americans agreed with their stance that America should not send troops to Saigon. King was so opposed to the war that he was planning to do all he could to prevent Lyndon Johnson from running for president again in 1968, despite everything Johnson had done to pass the Civil Rights Act. This means that King would have backed RFK publically, supporting Kennedy's anti-Vietnam policy, an ideal that would slowly gain support as the number of young American troop casualties increased.

### **Equal Opportunity and Race Relations**

Another issue that that both MLK Jr. and RFK would've continued to stand for is equal opportunity and civil rights. Both men surely would have continued to strive for equality in the US in voting rights, education, housing, public transportation, etc.

MLK would have continued on his path of being a leader of the Civil Rights Movement. There were many things he felt he hadn't accomplished yet. Dr. King's speech "Beyond Vietnam", delivered in the Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967 spelled out exactly what he wanted: an end to the evils of racism, militarism, materialism, and poverty. Had he not been shot

exactly a year later, he would have worked tirelessly on getting these things done, or at least bringing as much attention to them as he possibly could. MLK was always a fighter for his beliefs - he wanted them to be heard. If he had an opinion, he was somehow going to make you listen whether it meant bringing 300,000 people to March on Washington, or him simply delivering a televised speech.

MLK had always been a strong civil rights activist, he stayed consistent with his views for his entire life. Bobby Kennedy, on the other hand, has a completely different story. Despite not showing it publicly while serving as a public figure, Bobby Kennedy privately struggled with the death of his brother, 35th President John F. Kennedy. Before his brother's death, many people had thought of Bobby as an arrogant bully who saw himself as holier than others, and who only became the Attorney General under JFK through nepotism. At times many people believed he was totally oblivious to the vicious racism in our country, even during his stint as the attorney general. He let civil rights protesters get beaten and hosed on his watch and he even went along with J. Edgar Hoover's plan of wiretapping Dr. King. This was the Bobby Kennedy that people did not like. Liberals and conservatives, white people and black people alike. Bobby's privilege, it seemed, had kept him from understanding any possible hardships. He was born a white man to a rich and successful family who was provided with everything he needed to succeed; Bobby had never experienced real struggle.

But his brother's death changed that forever, and it changed Bobby forever. A tragic event for a brother to endure, Bobby's best friend was shot in the head in broad daylight, and it was broadcasted everywhere: the television, the newspapers, the radio, and even just word of mouth. Every living adult at that time remembers where they were when they heard John F. Kennedy was shot and killed. Bobby couldn't escape his brother's death, and it sent him into a deep emotional darkness - a state in which, he realized, he had never felt before. Bobby realized that this is what hardship feels like, this is struggle, and this is what some people go through every day in America.

Bobby came out of the depression a changed man, a man of the people. He carried on his brother's key traits; charisma, empathy, and sincerity. Bobby devoted his life to being a voice for the unheard, the struggling, and the discriminated against. There is no doubt that Civil Rights would have advanced much further much faster had RFK been around to help. In fact, hours after MLK was assassinated, Bobby, who was by then a New York Senator and an initially reluctant presidential candidate, gave an incredible speech. It was in Indianapolis, honoring Dr. King's incredibly impactful life, and calling for the country not to riot out of hatred, but to continue on the path that King had set us on. Indianapolis was one of the only cities in which there were no riots incited, likely because of how well Bobby was able to connect with the crowd.

*“For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times...”*

-Robert F. Kennedy (after the death of Dr. King)

### **RFK would have Defeated Nixon and Become President**

Had RFK not been assassinated, Nixon would not have been the 37th President of the United States. Instead, RFK would have walked away victorious, and here's why:

JFK was a beloved figure in the political realm. The US as a whole took a heavy hit when he was killed. People were starting to associate RFK more and more with his brother rather than classifying him as the type of person he was before his brother's death.

A then sympathetic and reminiscent America would have come around to RFK. RFK's only real challenge would have been actually grabbing the Democratic Party Nomination. Back then, the 'old rules' for primaries were still in place. At the time, only 15 states chose their delegates by primary. Almost three-fifths of conventional delegates were selected by county committeemen, state party officers and elected officials, and those officials were pretty squarely behind Hubert Humphrey (the opposing democratic candidate). Now, that could have totally changed had RFK appealed in some way to the anti-war state officials that were originally voting for Humphrey. Because Humphrey was LBJ's Vice President, he found it difficult to distance himself from LBJ's war policies.

No Nixon means no Watergate scandal, which was an absolute stain on the presidency. When Nixon resigned, most people considered him the most dishonest president ever. Sadly, Nixon's presidency was one of the most unfortunate results from the loss of RFK and MLK Jr.

Today we have a president in Donald Trump that is arguably even more dishonest than Richard Nixon. It causes one to wonder, had RFK and MLK, Jr. lived, would the United States have ever even reached the point where a man in the White House would so openly be hostile to immigrants and people of color?

### **Would MLK have run for President?**

MLK didn't want to run for a position in which he would oversee a bureaucracy, such as the Presidency. He was a grass roots, hands-on political figure. If anything, King could have run for Governor of Alabama, and possibly scored a spot on either President Reagan, Clinton, or Carter's cabinets.

Most likely, however, King would have continued to voice his activism for Civil Rights and getting US troops out of Vietnam.

### **Conclusion**

When MLK Jr. was killed in April, and then just two months later RFK was killed in June, it sent a shockwave of disbelief. The country had lost its only youthful hope for true progress in a tumultuous time with civil rights and the nation-dividing Vietnam War quagmire.

The Vietnam War would have played out drastically differently. RFK surely would have pulled American troops out of Vietnam much earlier than March 1973 (when Nixon ended up pulling our last troops from Saigon, marking America's first defeat in combat).

The Civil Rights Movement would have kept gaining in support no doubt, and if MLK was still able to lead it, the world would be more progressive today and much less bigot-ridden. MLK was a fighter for his beliefs, and had amassed a massive following, with the potential to grow. There's no limit to 'what could have been' for the MLK-led Civil Rights Movement.

If Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy weren't both killed in 1968, we would be living in a different, more progressive and mature society; a society in which bigotry, racism, and inequality is unanimously shunned.

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