

Richard N. Goodwin

# Remembering America



A VOICE FROM THE SIXTIES

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# REMEMBERING AMERICA

A Voice from the Sixties

RICHARD N. GOODWIN



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# REMEMBERING AMERICA

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To My Wife, Doris

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I acknowledge, first of all, my three sons — Richard, Michael, and Joey — who provided me with not unmixed, but life-sustaining joy during the preparation of this and other works. I am grateful to my close friend Michael Rothschild, who, from his artist's eyrie atop Tory Hill, bestowed hours of labor and his final blessings on this manuscript. And I owe much to the meticulously thoughtful suggestions of Pat Flynn, who took time from his own playwriting to help a needy friend. Linda Vandegrift's insightful and untiring research made it possible for me to revive and verify memories of events from the now-distant past. I have been enormously strengthened by the steady encouragement and constant flattery of Lindy Hess, while her husband, Bill Appleton, provided me with the energy needed to finish. Sterling Lord, my agent and friend for over twenty years, presided with his customary magisterial skill over the creation of this project, and continues to guide its progress through the labyrinth which leads the hopeful writer toward an ambivalent public. My editor Fredrica Friedman's belief in this book, before even a page had been written, gave me the necessary stimulus to initiate this story of my peripatetic years, and her sagacious editorial judgment at every single stage helped me to bring it to term. Mike Mattil, the acknowledged king of copyeditors, gracefully turned my textual obscurities into lucidly accurate prose. Nor would timely completion have been possible without the assiduous labors of Cynthia Stocking in translating my chaotic scribblings into a readable manuscript. And I owe most of all to my wife, Doris Kearns Goodwin, a most distinguished writer, whose love and critical intelligence have left their imprint on every page of this book.

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## Contents

Prelude	3
Part I Preparation	
1 Beginnings	13
2 The Justice	24
3 Investigating the Quiz Shows	43
Part II The Kennedy Years	
4 The Nomination	69
5 Seed Ground of the Sixties	91
6 The Election	100
7 To the White House	133
8 Alianza para el Progreso	146
9 The Bay of Pigs	169
10 Meeting with Che Guevara	190
11 From the Inside Out	209
12 Coda	233
Part III Johnson	
13 An Unexpected Return	243
14 The Master at Work	256
15 The Great Society	267
16 Lyndon's Landslide	293
17 We Shall Overcome	310
18 Beyond Civil Rights	342
19 Digging the Ditch	349

20	The Impossible War	368
21	Descent	392
22	Leaving the White House	417
Part IV The Insurgents		
23	Bobby	431
24	Joining the Resistance	452
25	"Bobby's Dilemma"	468
26	The McCarthy Campaign	483
27	The Last Crusade	516
	Postscript	541
	Index	545



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# REMEMBERING AMERICA



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## Prelude

Hello darkness, my old friend  
I've come to talk with you again.

— Paul Simon, “The Sound of Silence”

AT NOON, January 20, 1961 — two and a half years after my graduation from law school — I became assistant special counsel to the president of the United States. My elevation took place simultaneously with that far more historic moment when John Kennedy took the inaugural oath before the aging hero of liberalism, Chief Justice Earl Warren. As I stood in that bitter-cold, iridescent day — sun glistening from the marble, the snow scattered from the unobstructed heaven — it seemed as if the country and I were poised for a journey of limitless possibility.

After the ceremony, I watched the inaugural parade from the presidential reviewing stand in front of the White House. It was emblematic of New Frontier heroics to come that I sat — along with the president, his family, and other officers of his administration — through the freezing hours of an interminable procession. Will it never end, I thought, shivering, or will the whole country pass in review?

When the parade was over I wandered into the West Wing of the White House to look at my new office. After inspecting my cramped but hugely portentous space, I walked along the first-floor corridor toward the Oval Office. Approaching me — having yielded to a similar impulse to inspect his chambers — I saw the figure with whom I had shared sixty days in the cramped cabin of a twin-engine Convair named *Caroline*, as we crossed and re-crossed the country during frantic months of campaigning.

Kennedy had changed from his formal wear to a dark business suit; moved with the same purposeful stride. He looks just like he

always did, I thought, as if I had expected his ceremonial ascension to metamorphose his outward appearance — ennoble his features, enlarge his physical stature, ready him for immediate transport to Mount Rushmore.

“Dick,” he called, beckoning me toward him. His voice hadn’t changed either. As I approached him, I could see excitement in his eyes. And why not? I had been exhilarated at the sight of my own small office. He ran the whole place.

“Mr. President,” I replied.

“Mr. President.” What grandeur in the phrase, how lovingly it passed my lips. If there was such swollen warmth in saying it, what must it be like to hear?

“Did you see the Coast Guard detachment?” he asked.

Frantically I canvassed my memory of the parade.

Impatiently Kennedy interrupted my efforts at recollection. “There wasn’t a black face in the entire group. That’s not acceptable. Something ought to be done about it.”

The observation was an order. It was a manner of command I had learned well over the brief period of my employment. I turned immediately. Struggling to maintain the dignity of office, I walked down the corridor until, turning the corner, I began to run up the stairs toward my office. The Coast Guard? I thought. Who ran the Coast Guard? The Pentagon, Bob McNamara. No, the Treasury Department. Doug Dillon.

Then it struck me: swift, accelerating elation. I was not to draft a statement or make a promise. Now we could do more than talk. We could change it! This was what it had all been about: the struggle, the fatigue, the fear, the uncertainty, the slim, fragile victory. It was the meaning, the essence of that abstraction — power. For a moment, it seemed as if the entire country, the whole spinning globe, rested, malleable and receptive, in our beneficent hands. “Here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.” I did not pause to reflect upon what I knew with philosophic certainty — that we were neither gods, not special intimates to His will. And why should I? We would do what men could do. And men — determined, idealistic, tough-minded, powerful — could perform great works, high deeds in Albion past all men’s believing.

I picked up the White House phone. “Get me Secretary Dillon, please,” I asked the White House operator. Dillon listened to my report of the president’s comments. “Tell him I’ll get right on it,” he replied.

That summer the first black professor was hired at the Coast Guard Academy and the following year four black cadets entered the academy. The first irreversible steps toward desegregation had been taken.

We had made a difference. I had helped make a difference. It was, admittedly, a small problem, one resolvable by presidential authority alone. But it was successfully resolved. And the exhilaration of that achievement reinforced my belief that far larger dangers and difficulties could also be mastered; that it was a great country, but it would be greater.

Seven and one half years later I paced the fifth-floor corridor of the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles, California. Robert Kennedy was dying. The assassin's first bullet fired at Kennedy on the eve of his victory in the June California primary entered the head just behind the right ear and hit the spongy mastoid bone, scattering fragments of bone and metal through the brain. Six surgeons operated on the wound for three hours and forty minutes.

For twenty-five hours, a small group of family and friends kept vigil in the hospital. We ate sandwiches, went for occasional walks, looked at the crowd outside, and drank coffee while the accumulated weariness slowly dulled feeling.

For a long time the doctors told us to hope. So we did. Then they said it was hopeless. So we waited. I cried, and then, when it seemed I was too tired to feel anything, I cried again. And at the very end, Kennedy's boyhood friend, Dave Hackett, touched my arm and said, "You'd better go in now if you want to see him. It's almost over."

I entered Kennedy's hospital room, where a few minutes later, the doctors finally turned off the machines that pumped the lungs and blood of Robert Kennedy's corpse. My best and last friend in politics was dead.

A few months later I attended the Democratic convention in Chicago as a delegate from Massachusetts, pledged to Senator Eugene McCarthy. After Bobby's death, I had rejoined McCarthy's campaign, knowing that he had no chance of nomination, yet moved by some indefinable inward obligation to finish the year as I had begun it — in the ranks of those committed to an end of the Vietnam war. At McCarthy's request I drafted a "peace plank" for the party platform — the text approved by

McCarthy, George McGovern, and Edward Kennedy, and tentatively accepted by agents of Hubert Humphrey until a call from the White House commanded the Humphrey forces to reject any statement that hinted at the slightest doubt of Lyndon Johnson's policies.

Johnson himself had planned to attend the convention until his friends and lieutenants had advised him that a personal appearance would throw the convention into turmoil. "I can't guarantee what'll happen, Mr. President," explained Congressman Hale Boggs, a Johnson loyalist named to lead the platform committee. "You have a lot of friends here, but no one can control these delegates. Your enemies will stir things up." Coming from Boggs, these politic euphemisms could only mean that Johnson would be verbally abused, greeted with jeers, slandered from the floor; exposing the angry ferocity of a divided party to a watching nation.

So Lyndon Baines Johnson, president of the United States, titular head of the Democratic party, recalled the Secret Service agents who had gone to Chicago in preparation for his visit and stayed home. Sitting in a White House that was no longer the vitalizing center of the nation, but an exile's prison, he mourned: "I've never felt lower in my life. How do you think it feels to be completely rejected by the party you've spent your life with, knowing that your name cannot be mentioned without choruses of boos and obscenities? How would you feel? It makes me feel that nothing's been worth it. And I've tried. Things may not have turned out as you wanted or even as I wanted. But God knows I've tried. And I've given it my best all these years. I woke up at six and worked until one or two in the morning every day, Saturdays and Sundays. And it comes to this. It just doesn't seem fair."

It is impossible not to be moved by the poignancy of Lyndon Johnson's remarks — wholly sincere, totally honest — nor to realize that his personal tragedy of rejection was also a metaphor, a symbolic reenactment of what an entire nation — equally ambitious and hopeful — was also losing as Johnson's war destroyed Johnson's Great Society.

As the convention, subordinate to Johnson's will, proceeded to its ritualistic endorsements of the past, thousands of young people arrived in Chicago to protest the war, the nomination of Humphrey, the Democratic party's symbolic repudiation of what they had mistakenly thought to be the inevitably triumphant spirit of the sixties. As I stood outside the Hilton Hotel across from Grant

Park, I saw the student encampment transformed into a battleground, as members of the Chicago police, unleashed by Mayor Daley without opposition from the White House, mounted attack after attack, clubbing unarmed youths to the ground, dragging them brutally across the trodden grass, shoving them into police wagons.

For a brief moment images out of the past raced through my mind — Birmingham, the bridge at Selma, the flames of Watts. But this was different. It wasn't racial conflict; nor established privilege defending itself against some illusory fear of revolution. It was working Americans attacking young Americans simply because they were young, or of different upbringing, or thought to be condescending, or, maybe, just because they were there. I recalled the words of a folk song: "Where have all the flowers gone?" Trampled, I thought, into the earth of Grant Park.

That November, Richard Nixon was elected president of the United States.

The sixties were over. A failure. Their ambiguous promise soon yielding to the drab withdrawal of the decades to follow. The twenty years since those final days in Los Angeles and at the Chicago convention have taken me along the paths of thought and literary creation toward which I was attracted, perhaps destined, from childhood. I have not missed public life. Nor have I written about my brief period of engagement. Not until now; moved to speak by an apprehension that the defeats of the sixties might be more than a temporary setback — that we are threatened with a loss of far vaster dimensions than the collapse of the New Frontier or the Great Society; of larger portent than the destruction and self-destruction of great leaders. The chronicles of great nations are not solely composed of alternating periods of stagnation and progress. They also reveal the possibility of irrecoverable decline.

For the first time since we became a nation, America confronts that possibility. Yet decline, the progressive blight of self-seeking, protective fragmentation, is not inevitable, not necessary. Today, for the first time since our defeat in Vietnam, one senses large numbers of Americans emerging from an almost willed sleep to a repudiation of resignation and an awakening resentment of their loss of power over the direction of the nation and the conditions of their daily life. There is — or seems to be — an emerging desire to grapple with the country's ills. There is anger at political lead-

ership that has forfeited its claim to confidence and trust. The sixties have passed into history, but the animating spirit of that time is not dead.

Much of what has been written about the sixties recalls the riots of urban blacks and the apotheosis of mind-twisting drugs; hippies and love-ins and communes; the violent furies that loosed citizen against citizen at Grant Park and Kent State; divisions so fierce and profound that the newly elected Nixon could tell us that his mission was to "bring us together again." But these were not the sixties. They happened, of course. Had occurred, or begun to emerge, before the final pages were torn from the calendar of the decade. But they came late, after the mad, voracious war had consumed our most expansive sense of possibilities, caused us to doubt "the better angels of our nature"; impenetrably sheathed our governing institutions against the just claims of our own people. Chronologically part of the decade, they were, in reality, its failure.

Dimly aware that society had lost its capacity to respond, many of those most ardently dedicated to liberating change lashed out in self-defeating fury, or turned to a vain search for some form of fulfillment — of freedom, as they conceived it — outside the larger society. But there can be no country within the country. The "new consciousness," the "counterculture," had barely emerged before they began to be accommodated, absorbed by the ascendant structures of American life.

The word "sixties" itself is a convenient label for a multitude of events and people. Yet every decade has its own characteristics, and the sixties were so different from the decades that have followed that its years seem like some faint and distant resonance from a half-alien America — like the Great Depression or the Civil War, the westward settlement or the onset of industrialism. Yet it happened only yesterday. It is within the living memory of every citizen over thirty. The great issues that were then debated have not been resolved. They have deepened, accumulated new and more formidable dimensions. Indeed, "my" sixties never happened. The decade contained a promise, an augury of possibilities, an eruption of confident energy. It was smothered and betrayed by a needless tragedy of such immense consequences that, even now, the prospects for a restorative return remain in doubt.

At the outset of that decade, aspirations deeply embedded in the country's history had begun to dominate the public dialogue.



A confident nation entered the longest sustained economic boom in its history. The ancient phrases — “opportunity,” “justice,” “equality” — seemed not ritualistic invocations, stock phrases from old Independence Day orations, but guides to action. Their achievement was within our grasp.

We were gifted with leaders of large dimension and capacity — John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, the Lyndon Johnson of the Great Society, Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy. But their ascension was not a gift of fortune. Their qualities were also the creation of the people they led; their energy and direction a reflection of a people confident in their power to shape the future — their own and that of the country. If we believed in our leaders, it was because we believed in ourselves. If we felt a sense of high possibilities, it was because the possibilities were real. If our expectations of achievement were great, it was because we understood the fullness of our own powers and the greatness of our country.

This characterization of the sixties is not the product of long-delayed reflection. I believed it, felt it while I lived it, as did many, many others. In 1963, I gave a speech to a group of students from all parts of the world. I was speaking of the Peace Corps as an illustration of the conviction that “touches on the profoundest motives of young people throughout the world . . . tells them . . . that idealism, high aspirations, and ideological convictions are not inconsistent with the most practical, rigorous, and efficient of programs — that there is no basic inconsistency between ideals and realistic possibilities — no separation between the deepest desires of heart and mind and the rational application of human effort to human problems. . . . It will be easy,” I concluded, “to follow the familiar paths — to seek the satisfaction of personal action or financial success. . . . But every one of you will ultimately be judged — will ultimately judge himself — on the effort he has contributed to the building of a new world society, and the extent to which his ideals and goals have shaped that effort.”

Others might express it differently or better, but that passage contains, for me, the meaning of the sixties. If we have lost what it implies, then the sixties will have been more than an episode of failed ambitions. It will have been a watershed, a decisive turning point in the American story.

I cannot offer an objective history of the sixties. I lived them, with the arrogant, restless, romantic energy of youth. Nor has the