

**SSUSH21 – Analyze U.S. international and domestic policies including their influences on technological advancements and social changes during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.**

e. Describe the social and political turmoil of 1968 including the reactions to assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, the Tet Offensive, and the presidential election.

The cultural and political landscape of the 1960s seemed to come to a head in **1968**. In addition to continued protests over the Vietnam War, there were assassinations that changed the political and social landscape, and a presidential election that was thrown into chaos.

The year 1968 began with the **Tet Offensive** in the Vietnam War. United States forces were unable to totally destroy communist forces in South Vietnam and communist forces lacked the ability to drive out the Americans. However, the United States commander, General William Westmoreland, was under the impression that the communist forces were on the verge of collapse as his publication of enemy body counts indicated. He urged Congress to authorize an additional 200,000 men to finish off the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong once and for all.

The communist forces were not on the verge of defeat. They had instead withdrawn to their sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos to rebuild and train. The North Vietnamese forces staged a massive offensive into the south in order to shatter the morale of the United States' and South Vietnamese units. The Tet Offensive, as it was called, occurred during the traditional lunar New Year festival. One hundred South Vietnamese cities were attacked simultaneously. Although initially caught off guard, the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) forces and U.S. forces rallied to counter-attack and inflict severe casualties on the Vietcong. Televised scenes of heavy street fighting in Saigon and Hue played out against Westmoreland's earlier report that the North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong were finished as a fighting force. The January Tet Offensive started 1968 in turmoil. The war, which the United States government said was nearing victory, was not close to ending as evidenced by the extreme force demonstrated by communist efforts in the Tet Offensive.

The presidential election of 1968 was thrown into chaos with President Johnson's surprise March 31st announcement that he would not seek nor accept the Democratic Party's nomination for a second term. **The election** was thus wide open less than nine months before the President was to be chosen on Election Day. The Democratic Party was divided over whom their candidate would be to challenge the Republican, Richard Nixon. Over the course of the spring of 1968, Robert Kennedy was picking up momentum within the Democratic Party. Two events further shook the nation.

Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated within a few months of one another.

**Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot** and killed on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. James Earl Ray was the shooter who held highly racist convictions. Dr. King's death was marked by riots in several cities despite the call for a non-violent response to his death by leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. His death further fragmented the Movement as the more aggressive Black Power effort began to take hold.

On June 5, 1968, **Robert Kennedy was assassinated** at a victory celebration in California on the night that he won that state's Democratic Party primary election. Sirhan Sirhan, a Palestinian immigrant who was angry over Kennedy's support of Israel, was responsible for shooting and killing the presidential candidate in the hotel immediately after he left the stage from giving his victory speech. It is thought that Kennedy's popularity and growing electoral strength may have resulted in his nomination for the Presidency had he not been killed.

Again, the 1968 Presidential Election was wrought with turmoil. The Democratic Party arrived in Chicago for their nominating convention without a clear frontrunner. The protest groups were in full force outside the convention hall and the city of Chicago struggled to maintain control. Various anti-war groups managed to become the main focus of media attention as the convention began. Chicago Mayor, Richard J. Daley, was a strong advocate of law and order. He used police and National Guard units to violently suppress groups who were attempting to disrupt the Democratic Convention. The confrontations between the police and demonstrators were broadcast live on national television. Demonstrators believed they would receive greater national support by inciting the police to action. However, the opposite reaction occurred. Most Americans, as they watched from home on television, were appalled by the protestors' challenges to policemen. The melee between police and protestors was portrayed differently based on who was recounting the event. The protestors blamed the police and the police blamed the protestors for the hostility. The frenzied violence of the Democratic Convention played into the Republican campaign message. Richard Nixon claimed that he represented the "silent majority" of socially conservative Americans who had grown tired of the liberal excesses and violence of the 1960s. He won the election in November, beating out the Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey. The complex social and political issues of 1968 resulted in a transition for the Civil Rights Movement and the conservative Republican Party claiming the White House.

**Define**

**Robert F. Kennedy**

**Tet Offensive**

1. What was the Tet Offensive?
2. What was the impact of the Tet Offensive?
3. What happened after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination?
4. What happened to Robert Kennedy?
5. What happened at the Democratic National Convention?
6. In what year did all these things take place?