

Aram Goudsouzian
Report on Professional Development Assignment
Fall 2016
Submitted February 17, 2017

I was awarded a Professional Development Assignment for Fall 2016 to make writing progress on my manuscript, *Men in the Moment: The Presidential Election of 1968 and the Transformation of American Politics*. My semester was a great success. I wrote the first half of the manuscript, and if I can continue to make progress, I will be able to submit a complete manuscript by the end of the summer of 2017. I have had substantial discussions with an editor at Oxford University Press about submitting the book for consideration in their series “Critical Historical Encounters,” which produces books that are particularly geared for classroom use.

Men in the Moment is a short narrative history of the presidential election. It is geared to undergraduate college students, but appeals to wider popular and academic audiences. It is notable because each chapter of the book centers upon on a particular candidate and paints a particular tableau around him, thus grounding the reader in a personality and a political milieu. At the same time, it advances the narrative of the election and explains its historical significance.

I had completed the bulk of the research for this project over the previous two years, so I could mostly concentrate on writing during the PDA. I wrote the first five chapters. Chapter One, “A Hound Bitch in Heat,” revolves around Lyndon Johnson in the winter of 1968, as he weathers criticism from both the Right and Left over the Great Society, and while the Tet Offensive stirs mainstream doubts about the Vietnam War. The chapter ends with his March announcement that he will not run for re-election.

Chapter Two, “The Chronic Campaigner,” charts the political odyssey of Richard Nixon through the primary season in the spring of 1968, tracing how he consciously tacks between the moderate wing of the Republican party and right-wing grass-roots politics. Like Johnson, he was a fascinating mix of ambition, insecurity, brilliance, and arrogance, and his personal style explains much about the political moment.

Chapter Three, “Act II Man,” explores the quixotic campaign of Eugene McCarthy, with a particular focus on the first primary in New Hampshire, when he surprised the nation with a good showing, helping to drive out Johnson. Student volunteers flocked to help his campaign, illustrating how portions of the Baby Boomer generation were altering the political landscape. Yet McCarthy – a former professor and poet – was an indifferent campaigner with little appeal to a broader Democratic coalition.

Chapter Four, “Billionaire for the People,” begins with Nelson Rockefeller’s March 1968 announcement that he will not run for president. The ultra-rich, larger-than-life governor of New York had supported George Romney until the Michigan governor’s disastrous remark that he had been “brainwashed” about the Vietnam War. Rockefeller read the political winds and stayed out of the campaign – until April, when he injected himself back into the fold. This chapter

paints the liberal Republican's struggles amidst the backlash issues that were driving centrist voters to the right, heightened by the urban rioting following the King assassination and the Columbia demonstrations led by student radicals.

Chapter Five, "That Grandstanding Little Runt," follows the halting, inspiring, and ultimately heartbreaking campaign of Robert F. Kennedy. Especially among poor minorities, he had a particular magnetism – at once shy, boyish, and tough. As part of his own evolution, he found himself most comfortable in black inner cities, on Indian reservations, or among striking Chicano workers. Yet the former Attorney General also preached "law-and-order," winning cheers from white working class audiences. Could he stir enough excitement to sway the minds of Democratic delegates in Chicago?

Could he actually unite a fractured party? His assassination in the immediate aftermath of his California primary victory meant that we will never know, though historians keep debating the answers.

I have since finished Chapter Six, on Ronald Reagan's challenge for the nomination at the Republican National Convention, and will soon start Chapter Seven, on the chaotic Democratic National Convention. If I can finish Chapter 8, on the third-party candidacy of George Wallace," by the end of May, I will be able to spend the summer writing the final chapter and epilogue on the general election and its aftermath. I will also draft a short introduction. If I complete the manuscript this summer, it opens the possibility of publishing the book in 2018, the fiftieth anniversary of the election.

I am also co-editing, with Charles McKinney of Rhodes College, a collection of historical essays entitled *An Unseen Light: Black Struggles for Freedom in Memphis, Tennessee*. While it has been long recognized as a major epicenter of black life, history, and culture, Memphis remains one of the more under-researched major cities in the entire nation. This unfortunate reality belies a rich history worthy of critical intellectual scrutiny. This book should fill a significant gap in the literature related to the history of African American life, culture, and struggle in Memphis. To both chart and critically interpret the effort to attain greater freedom, *An Unseen Light* will explore individuals, incidents, and organizations that span the twentieth century and encompass a host of topics, including politics, sports, music, civil rights activism, environmental disruption, and religion. The book is under contract with the University of Kentucky Press. This fall, we collected and edited the last of the chapters, and we submitted the manuscript to the press.

This fall I also wrote two book reviews. For the *Journal of American History*, the premier journal in the field, I reviewed *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, edited by Allyson Nadia Field, JanChristopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart. I also reviewed *Bad Call: Technology's Attack on Referees and Umpires and How to Fix It*, by Harry Collins, Robert Evans, and Christopher Higgins, in the December 4 issue of the *Washington Post*.

I presented a paper at the Southern Historical Association entitled, "Memphis is a Better City Now": The 1973 Memphis State Tigers and Myths of Race and Sport." I also did a joint film

review of *Fast Break: The John McLendon Story* and *The Profit for Kansas History: The Journal of the Central Plains*, and I conducted five interviews with authors (Matthew Desmond, Jack Hamilton, Sarah Bakewell, Johnny Smith, and Jason Morgan Ward) for *Chapter 16*, the online journal of Humanities Tennessee. Most of these authors were making appearances in Memphis, and most of the interviews are reprinted in local newspapers, so my work with *Chapter 16* helps promote the humanities to the broader community.

Finally, I served as the initial representative of the University of Memphis at the Graduate Feeder Conference at Florida A&M University, a historically black institution with many talented students who might attend graduate programs at our university. While there I gave a presentation as a member of the panel “Exploring the Mentoring Process,” and later, at the university’s historical archives, I gave a popular lecture about my book *Down to the Crossroads*.

Thank you for the Professional Development Assignment. As the narrative above indicates, I used my time productively and rewardingly.