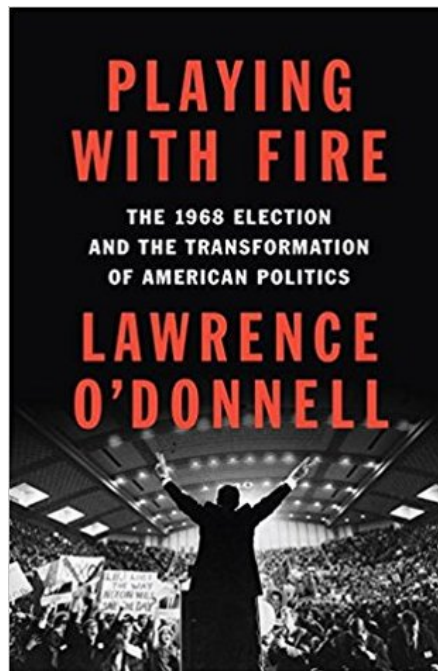




Playing with Fire: The 1968 Election and the Transformation of American Politics

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Playing with Fire: The 1968 Election and the Transformation of American Politics Lawrence O'Donnell
From the celebrated host of MSNBC's *The Last Word* with Lawrence O'Donnell, an important and enthralling new account of the presidential election that changed everything, and created American politics as we know it today.

Long before Lawrence O'Donnell was the anchor of his own political talk show, he was the Harvard Law-trained political aide to Senator Patrick Moynihan, one of postwar America's wisest political minds. The 1968 election was O'Donnell's own political coming of age, and *Playing With Fire* represents his master class in American electioneering, as well as an extraordinary human drama that captures a system, and a country, coming apart at the seams in real time.

Nothing went to script. LBJ was confident he'd dispatch with Nixon, the GOP frontrunner; Johnson's greatest fear and real nemesis was RFK. But Kennedy and his team, despite their loathing of the president, weren't prepared to challenge their own party's incumbent. Then, out of nowhere, Eugene McCarthy shocked everyone with his disloyalty and threw his hat in the ring. A revolution seemed to be taking place, and LBJ, humiliated and bitter, began to look mortal. Then RFK leapt in, and all hell broke loose. Two assassinations and a week of bloody riots in Chicago around the Democratic Convention later, and the old Democratic Party was a smoldering ruin, and, in the last triumph of old machine politics, Hubert Humphrey stood alone in the wreckage.

Suddenly Nixon was the frontrunner, having masterfully maintained a smooth facade behind which he feverishly held his party's right and left wings in the fold through a succession of ruthless maneuvers to see off George Romney, Nelson Rockefeller, Ronald Reagan, and the great outside threat to his new Southern Strategy, the arch-segregationist George Wallace. But then, amazingly, Humphrey began to close, and so, in late October, Nixon pulled off one of the greatest dirty tricks in American political history, an act that may well meet the statutory definition of treason. The tone was set for Watergate and all else that was to follow, all the way through to today.

Playing with Fire: The 1968 Election and the Transformation of American Politics Details

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Kaileigh says

Eerily relevant.

Steven Z. says

The publication of MSNBC host Lawrence O'Donnell's new book, *PLAYING WITH FIRE: THE 1968 ELECTION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN POLITICS* comes at a propitious moment in American political history. According to O'Donnell 1968 is the watershed year that set our current politics in motion – a partisan conflict were by ideology and party affiliation has become more important than the needs of the American people. O'Donnell argues that before 1968 the terms conservative democrat and liberal republican existed, today they are pretty much extinct. By examining 1968 we can discern the origin of this political schism and conjecture on how it affects the United States domestically and in the realm of foreign policy. The comparison between our current politics and 1968 is fascinating as Donald Trump seems to have adopted the populist message of Alabama governor George C. Wallace, be it state's rights or white nationalism, and Bernie Sanders can be compared with Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy and his liberal socialist agenda. We must also mention the emergence of Roger Ailes and the role of Fox news in molding a certain part of the electorate, because in 1968 Ailes joined the Nixon campaign, which over decades led to the creation of his successful news outlet and helped formulate the term "fake news."

The election of 1968 was about life and death as the war in Vietnam controlled people's lives. A person's draft status dominated their waking hours be it soon to be high school graduates, college students, and recent college graduates. The United States found itself in this situation due to the machinations of the Johnson administration in late July and early August, 1964 that resulted in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which provided Lyndon Johnson with almost imperial powers to conduct a war. According to Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach appearing before Senator J. William Fulbright's Senate Foreign Relations Committee the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorized the president to use "the armed forces of the United States in any way that was necessary," and argued further that the constitution did not require the Senate to play a role in foreign policy. Johnson would take the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as almost carte blanche in getting the United States into a quagmire in Vietnam. Keeping with the theme of comparing the past to the present, the Patriot Act passed by Congress and signed into law on October 26, 2001 in response to 9/11 has been used in a similar fashion by three presidents; Bush, Obama, and Trump to conduct war on their own terms in the Middle East, and currently it appears, in Africa.

For O'Donnell the key figure in 1968 is Senator Robert Kennedy who appeared as a political "rock star." People believed that he would never send America's youth to fight in Vietnam a subject he rarely spoke about in his speeches. People related to Kennedy because they recognized the pain he was in and believed his empathy for the electorate was real. Many believed that it was only justice for Robert Kennedy to reclaim the presidency that was lost in Dallas when his brother was assassinated in November, 1963. The 1960s was an era of change, and no one's view of the world changed more than Robert Kennedy. By 1968 the Senate began questioning Johnson's "monarchical" approach to Vietnam and this would help foster the political upheaval we are still dealing with today.

O'Donnell does a wonderful job replaying the events leading up to 1968 and what took place that incredible year. My main problem with O'Donnell's approach is that it mostly based on his own experience and writing

and a slew of secondary sources and in some cases not even the best ones. A case in point is the Johnson-Kennedy rivalry and contempt for each other. The best study of rivalry is Jeff Shesol's *MUTUAL CONTEMPT: LYNDON JOHNSON, ROBERT KENNEDY, AND THE AND A FEUD THAT DEFINED A DECADE* an in depth nuanced look that O'Donnell might have consulted. There are many other examples including his over-reliance on Evan Thomas' biography of Kennedy, which reinforces my belief that O'Donnell needs to broaden his research, with the integration of more primary materials that would further his arguments as a significant part of the book reads like Theodore White's *THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1968*.

To O'Donnell's credit there are many fine chapters and insights interspersed throughout the narrative. By delving into the different factions on the left and the right the reader is exposed to the ideological struggle that existed in both the Democratic and Republican parties. The introduction of Allard Lowenstein, the role of Gene McCarthy's candidacy, in addition to the rise of the radical left, we can see the beginning of the splintering of the Democratic Party. The chapters dealing with the Kennedy-McCarthy competition for the Democratic nomination is well played out as is the candidacy of Hubert Humphrey after Robert Kennedy is assassinated. Republicans also experienced many fissures in their quest for the presidency. The discussion involving the reinvention of Richard Nixon, the liberal quest of Nelson Rockefeller, and the rise of Ronald Reagan on the right within the Republican Party are all artfully explained and we see the end result, and the type of campaign the "new Nixon" ran.

Among O'Donnell's most important points include the machinations within both major political parties, the role of the Tet Offensive in Johnson's withdrawal from the race, Kennedy's candidacy, and the politics of fear employed by George Wallace. Perhaps O'Donnell's most interesting comments encompass the rise of Ronald Reagan as a conservative spokesperson for General Electric allowing him to develop into a viable political candidate. O'Donnell's is right on when he argues that Reagan was GE's tool in educating workers, and indirectly the public in the evils of unions, government interference in the economy, and the benefits of giving freer rein to corporate America embodied in General Electric.

In addition, O'Donnell is correct in pointing out that the militarization of America's police forces that we experience today began in 1968 following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. King's death led to burning and rioting in 30 US cities that called for 18 Army Brigades, consisting of 50,000 troops to restore civilian control. The result was 20,000 arrests and 39 dead. Another example of how the past formed the present is the concept of "premeditated confrontation" that ABC introduced as a way to save money on their coverage of the Republican convention. By pitting the well-known conservative intellectual William F. Buckley against Gore Vidal, novelist and liberal commentator the expected explosions took place. When we watch PBS, the networks, and cable television today, we can easily discern where these types of panels originated.

O'Donnell forces the reader to relive or learn for the first time the impact of the assassination of Robert Kennedy and to contemplate a counterfactual approach to history by conjecturing what America might have experienced had he been elected to the presidency. Vietnam, civil rights, and numerous other issues would probably have played out much differently than it did under the Nixon administration, an administration that came to power based on the treason Nixon committed by interfering with the Paris Peace talks at the end of October, 1968 thereby contributing to the ongoing war in Vietnam and perhaps lost the opportunity for peace that led to the death of over 20,000 more Americans.

What is clear from O'Donnell's narrative is that Donald Trump copied the 1968 Richard Nixon playbook in his presidential run. First, the slogan "America First" began with Nixon as did the concept of the "silent majority" that Trump also followed. Second, Nixon's approach was one of anti-tax, anti-government, anti-abortion, pro-law-and-order, just as was Trump's. It is also clear that 1968 was a dividing line in the evolution of partisan politics and a realignment of the American electorate, it is just a question of how long the American people will suffer because of these changes. For O'Donnell, Eugene McCarthy is his hero

because he was the first one to take the risk and try and end the war. Bobby Kennedy, is also his hero, but he was not the first to challenge an incumbent president as McCarthy had. In conclusion, I would recommend that O'Donnell include more of his comments that have been on display recently on various programs on MSNBC, because they strengthen his overall narrative argument.

Peter Mcloughlin says

The election of 1968 was a realignment election. It signaled the beginning of the end for the New Deal Coalition that was established with FDR. It was a tumultuous year. Martin Luther King and RFK were assassinated, the Melee at the Democratic convention in Chicago, Tet Offensive, and as icing on the cake the election of Richard Milhouse Nixon to the presidency also being the most divisive candidate in the field. I was one at the time. Good thing I had no clue what was going on or I would have been very angry probably as angry as my elders who did.

6/29/2018

Very detailed picture of a political story that I am intimately familiar. The landmarks of that pivotal year are on display plus plenty of the backroom deals that didn't make headlines at the time. What has transpired in the past fifty years shows how far US politics has degenerated. Some good things have happened since 1968 (the rights revolution for one) but a lot of our ugliest political impulses have been feed and tended to since Nixon got elected in 68.

David Longo says

"Playing With Fire" is an informative book about the trials and tribulations of the 1968 U.S. presidential election by MSNBC news host Lawrence O'Donnell. I like O'Donnell on TV. I wasn't sure I would feel the same way about him as an author. I did, however. O'Donnell was quite detailed and always remained on track. He didn't write with quite the panache of Jay Winik or David Halberstam. I could let that slide, however. Few historians are such fine stylists. To sum, "Playing With Fire" was, for me, worth the risk. I would happily read something else from Lawrence O'Donnell in the future.

Scott Hitchcock says

This was comprehensive, entertaining, filled in some knowledge gaps and most importantly for me had no sacred cows.

Covering the events that led all of the candidates up to the election, the pop culture elements, the assassinations, civil rights, the Vietnam war and everything else O'Donnell really sets the stage. Then he drives it some with a compelling tension of the events where you really see from the perspective of each candidate. Their mistakes, misgivings, flaws and triumphs all spelled out.

It's hard not to see the turbulent 60's as repeating themselves as race and economic divides dominate the news feeds and protestors are viewed as civil disruptors. A tale of caution as we move forward while stuck in the past.

Tracy Rowan says

I was sixteen in 1968, and I remember being a Gene McCarthy supporter in spite of my inability to vote. I was anti-war, as were most of my friends, I was pro civil rights, and was discovering my conscience slowly but surely. I also lived in Chicago and have vivid memories of the bloody protests and the subsequent trial of the "Chicago 7." Remembering these things has given me more of a perspective on current events than a younger person might have. I understand protest and confrontation. I understand the need to be involved. I lived through Watergate and I understand the nature of political corruption.

Or I thought I did until I immersed myself in O'Donnell's account of the events which made Richard Nixon President of the United States, a complex, difficult, often painful process of backroom deals, back-stabbing, and cynical maneuvering by virtually every actor on that stage. I learned a great deal about history that I thought I knew well, and learned that a great many of the people involved in this drama were far less admirable than I had imagined. Or maybe I should just say they were more human than they appeared to be at the time.

I would urge you to read this book if you're at all interested in the people and politics of that era and especially that campaign. I was fascinated by the portraits of the major players from Johnson, who crippled himself by adhering to a losing strategy in Vietnam to the detriment of his legacy in other areas such as civil rights, Nixon who was a brilliant politician, but who put all that intellect to work in self-serving ways, Bobby Kennedy who was opaque and manipulative, and Eugene McCarthy who was a decent human being but utterly unfit to be president. They, and the more minor players in this drama, are wonderfully drawn by O'Donnell in this rich narrative.

One thing about this book which both amused and bemused me was O'Donnell's jabs at Donald Trump, a thread that ran through the book for reasons not immediately clear to me. O'Donnell isn't a cheap-shot kind of guy. He's thoughtful, well-informed, and pretty even-handed, so the connections to Trump should have been provoked by practical reasons, right?

Well it took me long enough to suss them out. This book isn't just about 1968 and Nixon, and Vietnam, it's about the here and now. The comments about Trump aren't just jabs, they're sharp and incisive parallels to the worst of the world in 1968, the things we really should have left behind us, but can't seem to shake off. 1968 was, after all, the end of the liberal wing of the Republican party. It was the year when the Dixie-crats drew the line in the sand on integration (They were not having it!) the war in Vietnam (Yes, please.) and the role of authoritarianism in government. (They were Law and Order guys right down the line.) It was the year when southern Democrats stopped being democratic and turned into the moderate wing of the Republican party.

The parallels that O'Donnell draws become quite clear when he discusses Richard Nixon's greatest crime, which had nothing to do with Watergate. He colluded with Nguyen V?n Thi?u to keep South Vietnam out of peace talks until after the election which he expected to win (and did.) For Nixon, American lives were far less important than his political future. What he did was technically treason, and the only reason he wasn't called out on it was that Johnson and his advisers felt that win or lose, charging Nixon with treason would do more harm to the country than good. That collusion has clear parallels to the Trump campaign and Russia, though the extent of Trump's involvement isn't actually known as of this writing. And the law that made Nixon's actions treasonous probably don't apply to the Russia scandal, though again, that's not wholly clear at this time.

By the end, understanding those parallels between then and now, the deep divisions in this country, the fears and concerns, the push-pull of civil rights, it was heartening to listen to O'Donnell's epilogue in which he reminds us of the most important thing of all: Our participation in this process is what made a difference. The anti-war movement saved lives.

Political participation is life and death.

I really recommend this book to anyone who wants to read it as history, as a cautionary tale, as biographical material, or just as a surprisingly exciting story about the ins and outs of politics. I would cheerfully read anything O'Donnell has written, and would happily listen to his narration of any political history because he was just that good.

Jason says

I'd like to begin this review with a question. How do you follow up reading and reviewing the most highly-anticipated book of the year? In my case it was simple to go from one presidential campaign to another. Although the campaign that I chose was not just any campaign it was the granddaddy of all presidential campaigns: the campaign of 1968.

Of course, I was not alive in 1968 but having studied the 1960s at length I can readily assure you that I am quite familiar with the causes and the outcome of this campaign. As we all should be aware next year marks the 50th anniversary of the Year 1968 and all of its myriad causes and issues. So in a way I guess you could say that I was not willing to wait until January to read this book. I'm glad that I didn't, however I felt that the book really didn't per se concentrate on the actual 1968 presidential campaign but dealt more with the run-up and the causes and issues of said campaign. Much of this book reminded me of the game change series in the regard and that's it was basically structured where the author dealt with one political party at length and then switched jarringly to the opposition.

The year 1968 had everything seemingly going for it. However you look at it there was something in it for everyone. It was the year of the "Dump Johnson" movement as well as the year of the "New Nixon". Of course both Robert Kennedy and the crux of the Civil Rights movement as well occur seemingly at times in tandem. If anything reading this book has caused me to want to read next year Teddy White's third volume of his Making of the President quartet as well as delve deeper into the Vietnam War itself.

Barbara (The Bibliophage) says

This is an intense political history, focused on the events of the 1968 US Presidential election. It covers a dozen people, from candidates to the sitting President. There are two assassinations, multiple protest, and one terrible, unwinnable war. Not exactly light reading. But O'Donnell weaves the stories together into a compelling account. I'm very glad I read it, even though it took me a long time.

Full review at TheBibliophage.com.

Just A. Bean says

For those wondering about author bias, I would say that he's an MSNBC host, profoundly anti-Vietnam war, and quite possibly a Bernie Bro (this unconfirmed, but I have suspicions). He doesn't like Nixon or Regan, but he doesn't seem to like Humphrey either. He's mixed on the LBJ, Kennedy family and most of the rest of the players. (Most of which means that I more or less agree with his politics, even if he strikes me as somewhat to the right of what I'd call a socialist, and probably not what I'd call a feminist.) I'd say he doesn't try too hard to hide any of this in the text. He manages to keep his personal memories of the time more or less out of it, save as the very occasional side comment.

This book reads something like "Politics I've Heard Of: The Middle Years," since most of my '60s reading has been on the grassroots stuff like SDS and the Black Panther Party, and most of my politics reading was either more WWII-adjacent or more recent. We see the end of the careers of a number of the WWII people, and either the start of the careers of the recent people, or the parents of the more recent people (Hi, Mittens!). Plus it covers an awkward growing period in politics where the presidential candidate selection process was neither fish nor fowl, and TV was just becoming fully integrated, and oh yeah, there was a war on.

The style is chatty and skims a lot of detail (noticeable when we hit areas I'd covered elsewhere). The author read his own audiobook, which he did well, often doing credible impressions of the various players making speeches and never droning (and certainly not debasing my impression that he was fond of his own voice). His portraits of the personalities of the politicians involved seems pretty solidly researched (mentions of Caro for LBJ, for example), and he uses a lot of transcripts and speeches when he can. I'd be interested to see a paper copy for the end notes.

The three claims of the book are that the 1968 election was one of the zaniest in US history and that the story is worth telling on those grounds; that decisions and outcomes of the election permanently changed the way US elections were run on a number of levels and transitioned the electoral system from the WWII era to more or less the shape it currently takes, and finally that even though the peace ticket failed it helped end the Vietnamese-American War. There are also minor points about continuity with the 2016 election that one feels the author couldn't resist.

I would say that well it's a story worth telling, and was certainly entertaining, the zaniest election prize is a hard one to hold. Almost all of the elections before, during and after the US Civil War could probably give it a run for its money, and the 1868 Johnson-Grant election would beat the pants off it when it comes to flat out odd. How many times has a sitting president run for election on *the opposing party's ticket*? The transition argument is more convincing, and probably some of the most interesting sections of the book were to do with how completely different the electoral system was fifty years ago, and how that changed how politics were played, as well as the evolution of television advertising and coverage and the impact of protests. The argument that Gene McCarthy's run as a peace candidate against a sitting president in his own party legitimised the anti-war protests with the political mainstream and helped end the Vietnam war isn't really well laid out. One can tell that O'Donnell sees a lot of himself in McCarthy (a fellow Catholic), and hates to say it was all for nothing, or perhaps even ensured that Nixon got in and extended the war. That made me roll my eyes at the conclusion section a bit, but didn't ruin the book.

From my perspective, the book is most interesting on the grounds of an entertaining story, and it holds that pretty well. Bobby Kennedy, LBJ and especially Gene McCarthy hold down the flawed and often tragic hero roles; Nixon is, as always, history's most convincing villain, and there's enough plotting and scheming to fill an epic fantasy trilogy. Would rec if you're interested in more or less the establishment side of the period, be it a liberal one, and lots of gossip and plotting.

Mehrsa says

In my book (The Color of Money), I have a chapter on the 1968 election and as I was writing it, I was thinking "you could write a whole library on this election!" This book is a worthy first volume for that library. I think we are far enough out and every strand of American politics that either died or was born during that election has played out. The harvest has been an ugly one. But it all started in 1968. I've read a lot of books about the 2016 election as well and none have been satisfying. This one was. There is more in here that will illuminate the current climate than anything about the 2016 election. The one thing is that it read more like a bio of McCarthy than an analysis of the changing nature of America and what led to the election results and the tensions that the candidates exploited. So it's a great first book to the library--let's fill it with more books that talk about the neoliberalism, the "real Americanism," the "libertarianism," the "states rights disguised as segregationism" that all started in 1968. America changed dramatically between 1963 and 1968 and the ways it split the country are still corroding it today.

Penn Jillette says

LOD is one of my best friends. I love his writing and I love him on TV, but the best is when he gets on a jag late at night when we're chatting and just turns world events into a story. This book is the closest I've experienced to that joy being done for the public.

I was 13 in 1968 and I knew all these names and words, but never knew the story. Now I feel I know the story.

This book is opinionated, but it's not liberal porn. I loved it.

Barbara says

I have been staring at this computer screen for half an hour, trying to find the words to explain how I feel. I think I am so unable to find the words because I am struggling with my 18-year-old self.

Lawrence O'Donnell has captured so many of the feelings from that incredible year. This book is not just a recounting of the events that happened in 1968. It also reminds me viscerally of how I felt the year I graduated from high school. As O'Donnell describes each of those monumental occurrences: the war in Viet Nam, the politics of Nixon, McCarthy, Humphrey, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr and Bobby Kennedy, I found myself drawn back to my reactions.

I can see the little black and white TV in my younger sister's room to see the news about MLK's shooting. I can remember someone writing in my yearbook about her hope that Bobby would survive. And I remember all the boys from the neighborhood who were drafted for whom there were no student deferments (not on the poor side of the town).

Maybe this book works so well for me because I have such vivid memories and O'Donnell's story-telling uses those memories to talk about that year. He also draws connections between then and now. Those connections give me hope. We survived then. We can survive now.

I recommend this to everyone interested in modern history, especially those who remember 1968.

Erin says

Until 2016 the most wild and complex modern election was the 1968 election. If a screenwriter had written the '68 election no one would have believed it. Assassinations, riots, treason, war, and literal fist fights on the floor of the Democratic convention. 1968 was the year that modern campaigning was truly invented and it laid the groundwork for the 2016 election of 45.

Lawrence O'Donnell is one of my favorite tv hosts. He's smart, funny, and blunt. I was afraid to read this book, I stared at it on my coffee table for a week debating if I should read it or not. I love politics but our current political climate makes me feel exhausted. I've always been a pessimist and with every passing day my view of my country drops lower and lower. I feared this book would make me sadder.

I wasn't alive in the 1960's but it is one of my favorite time periods. It was a revolutionary time women's lib, civil rights, Vietnam, and almost yearly assassinations. A lot of the progress made in that decade is currently under attack. Why are we still fighting about a woman's right to use birth control? Why was the Civil Rights Act gutted? How is it that a racist like George Wallace was too extreme to be elected in the 60's but America elected one in 2016?

With Playing With Fire Lawrence O'Donnell attempts to explain how we got here. I highly recommend this book.

Christopher Saunders says

Many recent works have revisited the tumultuous 1968 presidential election, which seeded many of the conflicts and resentments American politics still wrestles with today. Though covering well-trod ground, MSNBC host O'Donnell teases a gripping narrative bristling with fresh, provocative insights.

Most of the book focuses on the Democratic primaries between Lyndon Johnson, still clinging to hope for reelection despite the Vietnam War's increasing unpopularity (ultimately dropping out for his Vice President Hubert Humphrey), the insurgent candidacy of Eugene McCarthy and the tragic last campaign of Robert Kennedy, resulting in a disastrous Democratic civil war. O'Donnell captures these conflicts and personalities with insight, weighing their respective strengths and weaknesses: he praises Kennedy's sincere conversion to the antiwar movement while excoriating his vacillation in entering the race; similarly, he views McCarthy as a weak, hesitant, vain campaigner, but also the bravest candidate running. "Without McCarthy," O'Donnell writes, "the Vietnam War would not have ended in 1973." It may seem hyperbolic, but there's enough truth for it to register.

O'Donnell is less insightful on Richard Nixon and the Republicans, whom authors like Rick Perlstein have spent the past decade combing for every crumb of importance. He devotes a lot of time to Nixon's media savvy, carefully crafting his image as an elder statesman above petty divisions while fanning racial resentments and craving for "order" after a decade of demonstrations, riots and rising crime. Most interesting, perhaps, is O'Donnell's recounting of Nixon's convention maneuvers, from his manipulation of Strom Thurmond and other conservatives wavering towards Ronald Reagan to John Lindsay's quixotic bid for Vice President, which he views as the last stand of Republican liberals. Not to mention the account of Nixon's sabotaging the Paris Peace Talks, an old topic now but still brazen enough to shock. But O'Donnell

portrait of Nixon is the least-interesting aspect of the book, except perhaps his facile characterization of George Wallace, about whom he has little to say beyond obvious, shopworn comparisons to Donald Trump.

While not as thorough or densely detailed as other works on this election (Perlstein's Nixonland or Chester and Hodgson's old An American Melodrama), Playing With Fire still offers a compelling narrative of a tumultuous time, capturing the year's anger and confusion, sound and fury, riots and reaction in vivid detail. No one reading this book will come away doubting that most of the problems America faces today - an electorate deeply, angrily and often violently divided along racial, sectional and political lines, politicians who are all image and little substance, candidates doing anything, up to and including colluding with foreign governments, to win without being called to account - stem from 1968.

Joseph J. says

I received my copy through a Goodreads giveaway. I own White's The Making of the President 1968 and An American Melodrama; what else did I need to know about the tragic, tumultuous and eventful election of 1968? With the hindsight of 50 years and the election of 2016-PLENTY! I enjoy the author on MSNBC and was a fan of The West Wing which he produced; but O'Donnell is also a great writer who in these pages blends the past with the recent-the rise of Trump and Trumpism in the GOP. It hovers over these pages which bring to life the long departed: the ill cast and reluctant Eugene McCarthy, the tragic Bobby Kennedy, the ever controlling LBJ and the duplicitous Richard Nixon. An aside: as a 20 year old outside of the state Democratic convention in South Carolina I was thrilled when Hubert Humphrey shook my hand and called my name (from my name tag!). Four years later I mourned his passing; these pages remind me why I did not like him in 1968 as a candidate as he remained under the heavy thumb of LBJ. O'Donnell's account of the Chicago riots at the Democratic convention is detailed and colorful. As a native of South Carolina I well remember George Wallace campaign official (and later civil rights activist!) Tom Turnipseed (who could forget that name). Turnipseed and his wife both appear in these pages noting how watching the 2016 Trump campaign was so like George Wallace's ugly and race baiting 1968 run. In a similar vein the author recalls Pat Buchanan's appeal in his politics and notes Buchanan's honest assessment of how Trump's campaign succeeded on Buchanan's issues. But this is ultimately a well written history of a terrible and emotional campaign in a country torn apart by the Vietnam War. For all there is to criticize LBJ about, it is Richard Nixon's conniving in 1968 to underscore any peace overtures which also reverberates now as a campaign contacted a foreign government (in a time of war) to manipulate and sabotage a sitting administration and achieve electoral success-while American soldiers died! O'Donnell cites John Farrell's excellent new Nixon biography, and one also gains perspective reading both these works in light of Ken Burn's The Vietnam War. Indeed, O'Donnell raises the issue of treason in Nixon's campaign actions in 1968. This terrific book brings it all back, and I will treasure this ARC which I won through Goodreads as a reminder that times may be bad, but they've been bad before and we survived. We should learn from our history. We need leaders who know history. It repeats and sometimes tragically succeeds.
