Lawrence O'Donnell's 'Playing with Fire':
The election that ignited the future

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by Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer

Playing with Fire

The 1968 Election and the Transformation of American Politics

By Lawrence O'Donnell

Penguin. 496 pp. $28

Reviewed by
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The year 1968 was tumultuous for the United States. The Tet Offensive convinced many Americans that the Vietnam War was all but lost. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and riots broke out all over the country. The presidential race, Lawrence O'Donnell reminds us, seemed to show that the center would not, could not, and perhaps should not hold.
In *Playing with Fire*, O'Donnell (former senior adviser to Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, executive producer of the TV series *The West Wing*, and now host of *The Last Word* on MSNBC) gives a lively account of the '68 campaign. He breaks little new ground and steps on his narrative to take shots at Donald Trump. But he does capture the twists and turns in the primary races and the general election contest among Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, and third-party candidate George Wallace, with consummate skill in selecting and presenting incidents and comments that reveal character in the important players.

Humphrey, he writes, was a good enough politician to know how empty his speech was declaring his candidacy. Eugene McCarthy was moody and mercurial, but also courageous in opposing President Lyndon Johnson when no other antiwar politician would take the political risk. And, as O'Donnell reminds us, at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, McCarthy agreed to withdraw in favor of Ted Kennedy, to do "what he had first set out to do - stop the war."

Although he regrets that Robert Kennedy was slow to enter the race, O'Donnell praises what he regards as the transformative domestic and international social-justice agenda Kennedy articulated on the campaign trail.

Drawing on recently discovered "smoking gun" notes written by H.R. Haldeman, O'Donnell insists that by enlisting Anna Chennault to help delay the peace talks with North Vietnam, Richard Nixon committed treason, a crime far worse than Watergate.

The what-ifs listed at the end of *Playing with Fire* underscore O'Donnell's emphasis on the role of individuals (for good and ill) in changing the course of history. Although he claims the peace movement "won" in 1968, however, O'Donnell does not spend all that much time on the impact of collective action and domestic and international social and economic forces. This issue, it seems to me, is well worth our attention. For 2017 as well as 1968.

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