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HIS 5014 – History of American Presidency

October 21, 2017

Gaming the Election: Historicity of *1960 The Making of the President* Board Game

The 1960 election between Nixon and Kennedy is noted as one of the closest elections in US History. Both candidates went to bed late Tuesday night/early Wednesday morning without either knowing for certain if he had won. At 5:35am, when Michigan's votes were totaled giving Kennedy the 20 electoral votes needed to surpass the 269 threshold, the Chief of the Secret Service called in a platoon of 16 agents at 5:45am to begin guarding the President-elect as he slept in his Hyannis Port family compound (T. White 386). Kennedy narrowly squeaked by in the popular vote, holding only a little less than 113,000 popular votes (T. White 393). And though Nixon carried more states than Kennedy (26 to 22), it was Kennedy's 303 electoral votes to Nixon's 219 that gave him the victory (T. White 390).

The drama of this campaign has been captured in many forms from books to documentaries to television shows. In 1961, Theodore White wrote *The Making of the President, 1960*. He was an embedded reporter during the campaign. While he split his time with both candidates, White found it easier to access stories from Kennedy's camp than from Nixon's because Nixon was suspicious of and less welcoming to the media (T. White 375). In 1963, the contents of White's book were turned into a documentary film by the same name (Rorabaugh 231). Fans of the AMC show *Mad Men* (2007 Lionsgate) may recall that the 1960 campaign and election was a reoccurring sub-plot during the second half of the first season (Rosenberg).

The remembrance of the 1960 campaign is doubtlessly amplified by Kennedy's assassination three years later. That tragic event has helped seal the image and favorability of Kennedy in the minds of Americans for decades to follow. According to Mark White, "subsequent opinion polls have revealed the reverence most Americans continue to feel for JFK" (226-227). For some Americans, Kennedy is remembered as the greatest president since FDR (M. White 226). It should also be noted that Nixon's resignation nearly fourteen years later has also likely added some fascination to the memory of 1960.

Added to a body of work that captures the fascination for this election is a board game called *1960: The Making of the President* by Jason Matthews and Christian Leonhard. The game was first published in 2007 by Z-man games and was reprinted by GMT Games in 2017. The game is highly ranked among hobby board gamers, placing 141st among over 94,000 entries listed on BoardGameGeek.com at the time of this writing ("1960"). *1960: The Making of the President* is a faithful representation of the campaign and election, and the game is useful for students of history who want to learn about its events.

Before examining the historicity of the game, it will be helpful to consider key factors that played out in the election. These factors will be considered when analyzing the game. Finally, a brief discussion will be presented as to how the game can be used to help history students learn about the 1960 campaign and election.

Many aspects of the 1960 campaign and world events that occurred at the time became key factors that played out during the election. Television media was becoming more influential, and this was the first time television debates would be used during the campaign. Kennedy's Catholic faith received much attention; this was first time a non-Protestant candidate would be elected. Tension over Civil Rights for African Americans was increasing. The Cold War was

heating up. These and a string of unfortunate health events combined with a poorly executed strategy on Nixon's behalf all combined to make the race for the presidency extremely tight.

In 1960, television had grown to become an influential form of media. In the ten years between 1950 and 1960, television sales had exploded. Only 11 percent of American families owned a TV in 1950. By 1960, this number had grown to 88 percent (T. White 316). September 26, 1960 was an historical date. For the first time, Americans could watch presidential candidates debate each on TV other instead of merely listening to them on the radio (T. White 315). The topic was set. The candidates would debate on domestic issues and the economy (Rorabaugh 151).

The impact of this new technology was significant. Some have argued that the four television debates were of decisive importance to the election (M. White 231). To illustrate how television was a game changer, those who listened to the first Kennedy-Nixon debate on the radio thought that the candidates had performed evenly (T. White 327). Mark White writes, "Nixon's voice was more resonant and sonorous than Kennedy's, and that to some degree accounts for the way the radio audience perceived the debate" (231). Those who watched the debate on TV, however, thought that Nixon had performed poorly (T. White 327). It didn't help that Nixon was arrogant about his preparation for this first debate. He had originally hoped for only one televised debate in which he believed he would "eliminate Kennedy with a roundhouse swing" (T. White 319). Kennedy's team wanted five debates. They settled on four. While Kennedy spent hours with his "Brain Trust" rehearsing potential questions for the first debate, Nixon had spent the day alone with his wife (T. White 320-321). The television camera was not friendly to Nixon. Opting not to use theatrical makeup, Nixon applied Lazy Shave prior to the debate, which began to streak under the heat of the lights. Nixon's deep set eyes, thick brows,

and “transparent” skin showing a 5 o’clock shadow did not look good on television (T. White 326).

Though the first debate was especially brutal to Nixon, he improved during the future debates, arguably scoring a win in the third round (T. White 327). No doubt, the debates as a whole were disastrous to Nixon, but television also became a powerful tool for Nixon in the final stage of the campaign. Nearly two million dollars were spent during last ten days prior to the election in addition to soliciting the help from the popular President Eisenhower (Rorabaugh 171). According to Theodore White, this last minute television operation “contributed mightily to the last Nixon surge” (350).

Television may have been Nixon’s greatest challenge, but being Catholic was Kennedy’s. Prior to Kennedy’s election, no non-Protestant had held the Office. Kenney’s faith would prove to be one of the most formidable challenges he faced during his candidacy. Protestant Christianity dominated the religious landscape of 1960s America. The largest concern for Protestant voters was a belief that a Catholic president would become a puppet of the Vatican (T. White 274). About this subject, Theodore White wrote, “To persuade the dominant community of Protestant Americans that he was bound by no doctrine espoused by some obscure Pope at some other time in some other country but, rather, that he sought his authority only from their will and their free choice as citizens—this, then, became the first imperative of John F. Kennedy, who believed no other” (274).

Before Kennedy was the democratic nominee, the Catholic issue was put to test during the Wisconsin and West Virginia primaries. Kennedy was campaigning against Humphrey, and it became clear to Kennedy that he needed to address the question head on. In a brilliant move during the days leading up to the West Virginian primary, Kennedy turned the question into an

issue of tolerance. According to Theodore White, “Once the issue had been pitched as tolerance versus intolerance, there was only one way for a West Virginian to demonstrate tolerance—and that was by voting for Kennedy” (131). In early September, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, a well-known Protestant minister, signed a statement opposing a Catholic as President (Rorabaugh 143). Peale later regretted this action and retracted his support of the statement. Soon after, Kennedy accepted an invitation to speak to the Greater Huston Ministerial Association. W. J. Rorabaugh called Kennedy’s decision to live broadcast this speech on TV a “high-risk gamble”(144). But it was one that paid off. Kennedy was applauded for his courage, and the footage from the event was played on television stations all over the country throughout the rest of the campaign (Rorabaugh 145). This tactic likely helped strengthen Kennedy’s Protestant-Democrat vote as well as the Catholic-Republican vote (Rorabaugh 145).

One of the greatest domestic issues facing America in 1960 was Civil Rights. Though publicly somewhat ambiguous about their positions, both candidates favored Civil Rights. Their pro-Civil Rights stances would help secure the black vote in the North, but both also realized a strong public stance would jeopardize the white vote in the South. Each walked a fine line to try to have both sets of votes.

Throughout the campaign, several Civil Rights-related events were notable. Kennedy’s pick of Johnson, a Senator from Texas, for his running mate was strategic for helping him garner the Southern vote (T. White 205). Towards the end of the campaign, Nixon’s running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge made a pledge during a visit to East Harlem that if elected, Nixon would name an African American to the cabinet. This infuriated Nixon, believing such a deal made public would cost him millions of white-southern votes (T. White 333). Possibly the most significant Civil Rights-related event was when Martin Luther King Jr. was sentenced to four

months of hard labor after being arrested during a sit-in. This caused great concern for his pregnant wife, who was convinced that, since he was shipped out of Atlanta to Reidsville, he would be killed (Rorabaugh 168). When Kennedy found out about the incident, he made a personal call to Mrs. King. Kennedy's brother, Bobby, made a call to a local judge and demanded King's release (Rorabaugh 169). The response made a strong impression on MLKJ's father, a Protestant minister who had doubts about the Catholic candidate. Kennedy's act of compassion caused the senior King to switch his support to Kennedy (Rorabaugh 170). Thousands of black voters followed suit. Theodore White considered this decision, "ranked among the most crucial of the last few weeks" (361). Throughout this incident, Nixon remained strangely silent, something the Kennedy camp leveraged for the black vote all over the country (Roabaugh 170).

In addition to the domestic issues that the candidates were addressing, the most dominant foreign policy issue demanding their attention was the Cold War. There was much similarity between the two candidates on the issue of foreign policy. Both were staunchly against Communism. Kennedy's strong stance was peculiar for a Democrat; however, his brother's working relationship with Joe McCarthy explained Kennedy's disdain for the philosophy (Rorabaugh 42). In the days leading up to the West Virginian primary, Soviet fighters shot down an American U-2 spy plane. The pilot, Francis G. Powers, was captured by the Soviets and put on trial. The incident set off a new low point in American-Soviet relations. It ruptured a summit that was to take place a few days later between Eisenhower and Krushchev (T. White 138). Foreign policy became the subject of the second and third televised debates. The matter of Quemoy and Matsu was brought up in both debates. While Nixon was thought to have the better

arguments, Kennedy held his own by criticizing America's deteriorating strength and prestige in Asia (Rorabaugh 155).

The final set of key factors in the election of 1960 was the candidates' health and ability to steward the vision of their campaigns. Kennedy overused his voice during the primary season leading to a throat infection. As a result, Kennedy began using a vocal coach to help his voice endure the demand of campaign speaking (T. White 283).

A more unfortunate setback for Nixon happened in late August when he banged his kneecap on a car door. The injury turned into an infection that forced a two-week hospitalization (T. White 307). The knee injury would continue to haunt Nixon throughout the campaign. Not only did the time in the hospital leave him exhausted, he lost a lot of weight (T. White 310). As Nixon arrived for the first debate, he hit his knee again on the car door (T. White 322), surely not helping him during the already troubled performance.

Before injuring his knee, Nixon had made a promise to campaign in all fifty states. Contrary to the advice from his team to let this promise go unfulfilled (the American people would understand), and in his stubbornness, Nixon proceeded to exhaust himself by following through with his promise (T. White 333). Speaking of plan, Nixon's team was frustrated with him for not sticking to the plan developed throughout June and July. His stated method of operation was "flexibility" (T. White 300), which seems like a good cover for being a control-freak lacking vision. Nixon had surrounded himself with talent, but they felt Nixon had "reduced [them] all as clerks" (T. White 351).

Kennedy's campaign, on the other hand, was like a well-oiled machine. His team, formed with the best talent money could buy (Rorabaugh 3), had a strategic plan that was executed with little deviation. For example, Theodore White writes about how two men of Kennedy's "Brain

Trust,” Goodwin and Sorensen, worked in tandem over a two-day period, tag teaming to write speeches and help Kennedy prepare two important positions about two major American policies (363-364). All throughout Kennedy’s campaign, the movements of the team were well orchestrated.

It is difficult to assess if any one of these key factors was what gave Kennedy the victory. Margins were so slim that, had any of these factors played out differently, there was a chance that America could have awakened on November 8, 1960 with Nixon as president. Part of the fascination with this or any narrow election is the “what if” game. A way for students of history to explore the “what ifs” of this particular election is to play the game *1960: The Making of the President*. A brief analysis of the game will reveal that *1960: The Making of the President* (from now on shortened as “1960”) is a faithful representation of the election and is a useful tool for the American History classroom.

1960 sets itself apart from many other election-themed board games in that it is focused on this particular year, including many of the historical events that took place during this period. The game is for two players who take on the role of either Nixon or Kennedy. The game’s board features a map of the United States with each state’s title displaying a banner of color that indicates an influential edge to one of the candidates. The game’s system is built around eight rounds. Each round is meant to represent a week of the fall campaign. There are two additional rounds that play somewhat differently: a debate round that takes place between rounds six and seven and the election round, which ends the game. During each normal round, players take turns playing Campaign Cards. These 97 cards make up the heart of the game, and each one features an historical event that took place during the campaign. The card is also worth a certain amount of Campaign Points (from now on shortened as “CP”). CP can be used to add influence to states,

to the media, or to one of three issues: Defense, Civil Rights, or the Economy. Influence in all of these areas is tracked using cubes of a player's color. As influence in one area is added, the opposing player's cubes must be removed from that area before the other player's cubes can be added. For example, if the Nixon player adds four influence cubes to a state where the Kennedy player already has two, then two of Nixon's cubes are spent to remove the two Kennedy cubes before the remaining two Nixon cubes are added to the state. This mechanism creates a tug-of-war feeling within every aspect of the game.

Cards must be played either as an Event or as CP. Therefore, the crucial choice players make on each turn is how to use their cards. What keeps the game tense is that any card played for its CP may then be used by the opposing player for its Event ability if the event favors that player. For example, one player might play the "Martin Luther King Arrested" card for its 4 CP (the highest possible number), but then the opposing player can spend some momentum to take the effect of the Event, which, in this example, is to gain 3 influence on the Civil Rights issue (*Matthews Card #23*).

Cards also contain icons and other information useful during the debate and election rounds. During the debate round, players pause their normal actions to play cards that have been saved during previous rounds. These cards are used to score influence on the three issues of Defense, Civil Rights, and the Economy. The winner of each debated issue receives additional influence cubes to be added to states. During the election round, players play cards that have been saved during the last two normal rounds of the game. For each card that is saved, players draw influence cubes from a bag, and any of the player's cubes that are drawn are added to state listed on the card. Once the election round is over, players count electoral votes. Each state on the map has a token that represents the amount of electoral votes belonging to the state. Players

collect these tokens for each state they have influence cubes. Players then add up all of their electoral votes, and the player with the most votes wins.

The historicity of *1960* is found within the game's 97 campaign cards. It should be noted that the designer, Jason Matthews, didn't set out to create a simulation. The cards don't list specific dates of the events, nor are they played in any type chronological order. Rather, the events come out as players choose them. Some history teachers may see the lack of dates as a weakness of the game, but Matthews doesn't see it that way. In an interview given to the Opinionated Gamers website, Matthews said, "I don't try to design 'simulations' as some game designers in the 70s or 80s once attempted. I am a game designer, and to do that correctly, I try to capture the 'feel' of my subject matter. The more that feel and game play mesh, the better the play experience" (Ligabue). What Matthews does by basing the game around these cards is bring the events of 1960 to the forefront and apply abstracted game mechanisms that relate to each event. The events bring flavor to the game, and from this, players will gain a sense of what the world was like in 1960. The mechanisms that follow attempt to abstract and connect the influential impact of the events to the overall election. Matthews recognizes that the feel of the game should match the historical feeling of the election. In another interview, Matthews said, "We want players sitting on the edge of their seats as those final cubes are pulled out of the bag. That's what the election was like. That's the experience we are trying to give" (Thompson).

1960 attempts to capture the key factors of the campaign and the feelings of how tight this election was. Each of the key factors mentioned above are present in the game. For example, the use of television and the televised debates are covered with event cards such as "Prime-Time Television" (Card #46), which gives the Nixon player three influence toward the media and "Lazy Shave" (Card #34), which gives the Kennedy player an advantage during the debate

round. Also throughout the game, players attempt to dominate regional media influence, which will make campaigning in a region more efficient. The player with the most media influence at the end of each round will also get to dictate the priorities of the key issues of Defense, Civil Rights, and Economy.

The key factor of Kennedy's Catholicism is represented with cards such as "Baptist Ministers" (Card #9) and "Norman Vincent Peale" (Card #73). When played as events, the effects of both cards decrease Kennedy's influence unless the "Greater Houston Ministerial Association" card (#1) is in play. Players gain a sense of how the candidates attempted to sway the American public about the Catholic question.

The Civil Rights factor is represented in the game as one of the three issues players are attempting to influence leading up to the Debate round. Many of the Campaign Card events are based on Civil Rights events such as the "Martin Luther King Arrested" card mentioned above or the "East Harlem Pledge" (Card #24). The tension between trying to win both northern black votes and southern white votes is captured with interesting mechanisms. The player leading in the Civil Rights issue may be forced to lose support in the South region when some of these cards are played.

The Cold War factor is woven throughout the game. Defense is also one of the three issues that players attempt to influence leading up to the Debate round. Campaign Cards about the Cold War, such as the "Quemoy and Matsu" card (#84) and the "Trial of Gary Powers" card (#62), impact the Defense issue. Unlike the Civil Rights issue where influence in one area may negatively impact another area, having influence in the Defense issue is always positive for the player.

The final key factor of the election, how candidates were able to maintain their health and steward their campaigns, is also captured in the game. Cards like “Nixon’s Knee” (Card #2) and “Harvard Brain Trust” (Card #35) give huge advantages to the Kennedy player, while cards like “Dwight D. Eisenhower” (Card #18) and “Republican TV Spots” (Card #75) do the same for the Nixon player. As a last ditch effort, players also have a one-time-use “Exhaustion” ability where they can place 5 CP anywhere on the board.

As players engage with *1960* they are immersed with the events of the campaign. The final feeling of immersion occurs as the electoral votes are counted during the Election round. Because the final electoral vote total is somewhat obfuscated by the cards that players save for this round, it is impossible for a player to feel one hundred percent certain about winning until the votes are actually counted. The process of tabulating the electoral votes at the end of the game creates a wonderful sense of suspense.

Because *1960* is such a historically immersive game, it would make for an enriching way for history students to learn about the Kennedy-Nixon election. Christopher Harris of the PlayPlayLearn site writes, “Not only do students come to appreciate the variety of influences on candidates, they are able to participate with the electoral process in a way that is difficult to recreate in the classroom” (Harris). The game plays in about 90 minutes, which makes it too long to play during a normal class period. One strategy teachers could employ is to divide the class into two teams and have them play the game one round a day over the course of about two weeks. About this strategy, Harris writes, “This approach reflects some of the best aspects of games in the classroom, as students work together, sharing strategies and solving problems” (Harris).

1960 is a board game that faithfully represents the historical events of the campaign and election between Kennedy and Nixon. Its Campaign Cards are rich with events that relate to the many key factors present in the election. And the game's mechanisms are built so the players can understand how the events connect to the influence each candidate had on various regions, states, and issues. As players resolve the game, they will likely feel the nail-biting tension the candidates felt on November 8, 1960. History teachers who want their students to have a greater understanding of this particular election will find a wonderful and enriching resource in this game. In the end, players will discover if they were able to remake history or rewrite it (Matthews 3).

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