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'Twenty-Five St. Patrick's Days Ago . . .'

Robert Kennedy was a very different kind of candidate.

It was not like most presidential campaigns where the terminally careful candidate strives not to make waves, mistakes or powerful enemies. It was a different campaign, one where the presidential candidate would regularly and harshly scold his audiences for their selfishness. For the candidate, it was not enough merely to comfort the afflicted who loved him; he deliberately chose to afflict the comfortable as well.

Twenty-five St. Patrick's Days ago, after hesitating probably too long, Robert Kennedy began his run for president. Since 1968, an awful lot has changed in our country and in our world. But the legacy of Robert Kennedy is timeless: That rare candidate who has the guts to tell an audience both what the candidate obviously believes and what the audience obviously does not want to hear can succeed politically and, more important, move a people.

Since Robert Kennedy, in the insightful words of the conservative thinker, Jeffrey Bell, "no liberal leader has come close to uniting blacks and northern working-class whites." Never was that special appeal of RFK more apparent than on May 6, 1968, when his open convertible was cheered by the crowds on the streets of Gary, Ind. On one side of the candidate was Tony Zale, a hometown hero to the Eastern European Americans and former middleweight champion, and on the other Richard Hatcher, the first black mayor of the city.

During the last quarter century of clear Republican dominance of our presidential politics, the GOP had been the warrior party of big shoulders, quick fists and growing defense budgets. During that same time, the Democrats had been the nurturing, compassionate, more traditionally maternal party, especially good with children, the sick and the elderly.

Uniquely, Robert Kennedy was both authentic warrior and genuine nurturer. Tough and combative, called "ruthless" by his elitist critics, Kennedy relentlessly preached a political gospel of compassion. His backbone was rock hard; his heart did bleed for all those who lived on the margin and in the shadows.

Earlier in Indianapolis, Robert Kennedy, according to The Post's David Broder, had "encountered the sharpest heckling of his Indiana campaign at the Indiana University Medical Center." Kennedy was there "booed and hissed as his observations on Social Security, segregation, the draft and the relationship of government and medicine drew strong opposition from many in his audience." One medical student demanded of Robert Kennedy: "Where are you going to get the money for all these federally subsidized programs you are talking about?" In reply, conspicuous for its



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concise candor, Kennedy made his campaign managers wince: "From you."

There was none of the old reliable politician's talk about waste, fraud and abuse or closing loopholes. Kennedy simply and straightforwardly spoke the allegedly unpalatable truth. He afflicted the comfortable.

Only three weeks later at Creighton University in Omaha, just two days before the Nebraska primary, Kennedy asked how many of his mostly college audience favored deferring students from the draft then in effect. The majority of the hands went up. Kennedy made no effort to conceal his indignation.

"Look around you. How many black faces do you see here? How many American Indians, how many Mexican Americans? . . . If you look at any regiment or division of paratroopers in Vietnam, 45 percent of them are black. You're the most exclusive minority in the world. Are you

just going to sit on your duffs and do nothing or just carry signs in protest?"

In Indianapolis and Omaha, Robert Kennedy told all of us he knew he could not get everyone's vote, that he was willing to write off some constituencies. In Gary, Robert Kennedy offered a Democratic populist vision that embraced and appealed to both American blacks and American working-class whites.

RFK's populism argued that just as schools test students, communities ought to be able to test their schools, that the federal welfare program was destructive and hurtful to the poor and that, because he believed in a government that was effective and energetic, decentralization of power away from Washington must be achieved. That was liberal heresy in 1968.

Full disclosure and the conflict of interest fever require that I reveal that I worked for Robert Kennedy in that 1968 campaign. And 25 years later, I still miss him.