In the United States, 1968 was a turbulent and traumatic year. The Tet offensive convinced many Americans that the communists were winning the war in Vietnam. Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, and riots erupted in dozens of cities. Moments after he declared victory in the California presidential primary, Sen. Robert Kennedy, D-Mass., was murdered. While delegates at the Democratic National Convention were selecting Hubert Humphrey as their candidate for president, clashes between protesters and police bloodied the streets of Chicago.

In “American Maelstrom,” Michael Cohen, a columnist for The Boston Globe and The Guardian newspapers and the editor of a book on great campaign speeches of the 20th century, provides substantial support for the widely held view that the presidential election was a pivotal moment in American politics, marking a growing sense of alienation among middle- and working-class whites, a shift from New Deal liberalism to anti-government conservatism, and a shattering of the bi-partisan Cold War foreign policy consensus. In essence, Cohen indicates, “it’s never stopped being 1968.”

Embedded in Cohen’s vivid narrative are smart, sharply-etched portraits of President Lyndon Johnson and the eight men — Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller, George Romney and Ronald Reagan — who had caught the presidential virus.

Had Johnson de-escalated the war in Vietnam in the fall of 1967, Cohen suggests, he almost certainly would not have been forced from the race. Cohen demonstrates that Kennedy did not put together a multiracial coalition. In fact, Kennedy’s popularity among white voters declined during his months on the campaign trail.

McCarthy, Cohen writes, often acted like “a bemused bystander to the political process he’d helped to
upend.” McCarthy’s behavior “provides compelling evidence that he was no leader.” Nixon’s greatest asset, according to Cohen, was a platitudinous vagueness on domestic and foreign policy issues, including his plan to end the war in Vietnam.

And Cohen speculates that Humphrey would have won the election had he not “done what he had done repeatedly since he entered the political arena in 1948: engaged in a series of humiliating backtracks and capitulations” (on Vietnam) to appease President Johnson, who he mistakenly believed held his political fate in his hands.

In laying out the legacy of the election of 1968, “American Maelstrom” invites comparisons to the presidential campaign of 2016.

In one respect, Cohen implies, McCarthy was a statesman. Convinced that by intervening in a civil war in Vietnam and questioning the patriotism of dissenters President Johnson had coarsened political discourse and bred feelings of helplessness, especially among young Americans, McCarthy was determined to make a rational case for change and not engage in invective, even if such an approach hurt him at the ballot box.

“The Christian in politics,” McCarthy would write, in advice well worth heeding, “should shun the devices of the demagogue at all times, but especially at a time when anxiety is great, when tension is high, when uncertainty prevails, and emotion tends to be in the ascendancy.”