



‘Hubert Humphrey’ Review: The Man From Minnesota

Unlike many Democrats who lost in their bid for the White House, “The Happy Warrior” was actually qualified to be the president. His undoing was in being Lyndon Johnson’s poodle in support of the Vietnam War



Humphrey with Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House. PHOTO: MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

By Edward Kosner
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If the Democrats ever want to sculpt their own Mount Losemore, they have plenty of eligible candidates for a monument to presidential defeat, among them: William Jennings Bryan, Al Smith, Adlai Stevenson, George McGovern, Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, Al Gore, John Kerry and Hillary Clinton. A prominent spot would have to be reserved for Smith’s successor as “The Happy Warrior,” Hubert Horatio Humphrey.

Unlike some of his fellow losers, Humphrey was actually qualified to be president of the United States. First as mayor of Minneapolis and then as the five-term senator from Minnesota, he was an eloquent and courageous liberal voice—a “liberal without apology,” as he described himself—in the mid-20th-century Democratic Party, in which Southern conservatives still held significant power. It was his profound misfortune—and evidence of his own fallibility—that he became Lyndon Johnson’s poodle in support of the Vietnam War, which derailed LBJ’s hope of re-election in 1968 and then doomed Humphrey as the Democratic candidate against Richard Nixon.

HUBERT HUMPHREY: THE CONSCIENCE OF THE COUNTRY

By Arnold A. Offner
Yale, 490 pages, \$35

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Senate in Harry Truman’s upset of Thomas E. Dewey in 1948, there was no stopping him from reaching for the White House.

Remarkably, given all he achieved, there have been few full-scale biographies of Humphrey, who died of cancer at 66 in 1978. The new “Hubert Humphrey: The Conscience of the Country” by Arnold A. Offner, an emeritus professor of history at Lafayette College, is a painstaking and, as the subtitle suggests, a generally admiring portrait of a more complex and compelling political figure than the caricature his detractors draw of a gabby bleeding heart.

Mr. Offner perhaps overrates his subject as “the most successful legislator” in American history. His just-the-facts approach can be tedious, and few passages are worth quoting. But there are some surprising nuggets: Humphrey could claim to have originated the ideas for the Peace Corps and the “hotline” between Washington and Moscow, and he gave LBJ the key line (“Let us continue”) for his first speech to the nation after the Kennedy assassination.



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The narrative does gain heat as Humphrey contracts White House fever. He made his first splash at the 1948 Democratic convention in Philadelphia, with an eloquent speech urging the party to campaign on an aggressive civil-rights platform. This prompted a walkout by some Southern delegations and midwifed the Dixiecrat ticket headed by Strom Thurmond. Along with Henry Wallace’s Communist-influenced Progressive Party, Thurmond and his segregationists bedeviled Truman’s “Give ‘em hell” campaign against Dewey.

As a freshman senator, Humphrey tangled with one of the leading Southern oligarchs, Harry Byrd of Virginia, and was quickly humiliated. He described himself as “lonely, broke, and bitter” during that first year, Mr. Offner writes, and sometimes wept while driving home from the Capitol. Then he fell under the sway of Lyndon Johnson, the nascent Svengali of the Senate, and Humphrey’s destiny began to unfold. First as leader of the minority and then as the masterful majority leader, LBJ bullied and courted Humphrey, using him to wrangle other restive liberals and rewarding him with access and plum committee assignments. Humphrey thrived. He began to see himself as presidential material and took a cram course in foreign policy with long trips to Europe and Latin America. A fierce opponent of Communists in the American labor movement, he evolved quickly into a scourge of the Soviets as well.

Ever broke, with his cloying bonhomie, motormouth, and off-the-rack suits, Humphrey knew that he would always be a long shot for

the White House, but he couldn’t resist. He’d been a fervent loyalist of Adlai Stevenson, the thinking man’s Democrat and the big loser to Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. When Stevenson was renominated in 1956, Humphrey made a stab at being his running mate, even though he knew Stevenson was doomed to an even bigger drubbing. He found himself in a scrum with John F. Kennedy, the rich, glamorous young senator from Massachusetts, and Sen. Estes Kefauver, the Tennessee populist and inquisitor of the Mafia who fancied coonskin caps and prevailed when Stevenson threw the choice to the convention.

Four years later, Humphrey and JFK faced off again—this time for the presidential nomination, although there was still some sentiment for Stevenson, and Lyndon Johnson was lurking in the weeds, waiting for the front runners to falter. Humphrey hoped to stop Kennedy in West Virginia, overwhelmingly Protestant and a labor bastion. But Kennedy shellacked Humphrey on primary day, bolstering his genuine appeal to voters with generous “walking around money” from his father’s fortune.

That defeat, as it happened, opened the way for Humphrey. JFK chose Johnson as his running mate, and LBJ succeeded the murdered Kennedy. Humphrey spearheaded the new president’s drive to pass civil-rights legislation in the aftermath of the assassination—much of it reminiscent of his plea to the 1948 convention. Now Johnson’s logical partner in the 1964 race against Barry Goldwater was the great Northern liberal hope, Hubert Horatio Humphrey. That didn’t stop Johnson from tormenting the eager Humphrey with demands for slavish loyalty and hints that he might pick someone else.

Vietnam was Humphrey’s Waterloo. At the start of the new administration, the vice president and some of his dovish allies counseled LBJ against getting deeply involved in what was essentially a civil war between the South Vietnamese and the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese sponsors. But the president was set in his course. Humphrey’s memos infuriated Johnson, who froze him out and wiretapped his home and offices. It was excruciating punishment for Humphrey, who was, as Mr. Offner writes, “dependent emotionally” on his master’s favor.

He quickly toed the line and, as Johnson escalated the war, grew more strident in his support. This further alienated Humphrey from the liberals who had supported him for decades, including his protégé as Minnesota’s junior senator, Eugene McCarthy. Worse for Humphrey, Robert F. Kennedy, now a senator from New York, became a darling of the burgeoning antiwar movement, spurring talk that Johnson would save himself by dumping Humphrey in 1968 and swapping in RFK.

Everything fell apart in the first months of ‘68. Johnson came so close to losing the New Hampshire primary to McCarthy and his peaceniks that he dropped out. The electrifying Kennedy was killed the night he won the California primary in June. The Democrats’ nightmare of a convention in August traumatized the party and ultimately sent Humphrey, a Vietnam casualty himself, stumbling off to battle Nixon in the fall.

Johnson was no help. He sadiistically undercut Humphrey and kept from him intelligence that Nixon was secretly urging the South Vietnamese to stall peace talks until he could get them a better deal. Starting far behind, Humphrey closed the gap in the final weeks but still lost the presidential election to Nixon by barely half a million votes out of more than 72 million cast.

Would history have turned out differently if Humphrey had stuck to his instinct to oppose a land war in Asia? Perhaps, but it would have taken more will than he could muster to oppose Johnson and the national-security team he inherited from Kennedy—including Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy—and the generals within his own administration. The alpha male Johnson ruled Humphrey, who returned to the Senate and made a few feints at running for president in 1972 and 1976.

Humphrey missed the ultimate prize in American politics, but, aside from Vietnam, he was on the right side of history on most issues. Mr. Offner gives him the last word on his own career, and it’s uncharacteristically concise. Told by his cancer doctor of his dire prognosis, Humphrey replied, “I didn’t quite make history, but they knew I was here.”

—Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News and the author of a memoir, “It’s News to Me.”

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