

Vice Presidents of the United States

Hubert H. Humphrey (1965-1969)

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Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.



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I did not become vice president with Lyndon Johnson to cause him trouble.

-Hubert H. Humphrey, 1965

As vice president during 1968—arguably the United States' most politically turbulent post-World War II year—Hubert Humphrey faced an excruciating test of statesmanship. During a time of war in Southeast Asia when the stakes for this nation were great, Humphrey confronted an agonizing choice: whether to remain loyal to his president or to the dictates of his conscience. His failure to reconcile these powerful claims cost him the presidency. Yet few men, placed in his position, could have walked so agonizing a tightrope over so polarized a nation.

Near the end of his long career, an Associated Press poll of one thousand congressional administrative assistants cited Hubert Humphrey as the most effective senator of the preceding fifty years.¹ A biographer pronounced him "the premier lawmaker of his generation."² Widely recognized during his career as the leading progressive in American public life, the Minnesota senator was often ahead of public opinion—which eventually caught up with him. When it did, he was able to become one of Congress' most constructive legislators and a "trail blazer for civil rights and social justice."³ His story is one of rich accomplishment and shattering frustration.

Hubert Humphrey's oratorical talents, foremost among his abundant personal and political qualities, powered his rapid ascent to national prominence.⁴ Lyndon Johnson remarked that "Hubert has the greatest coordination of mind and tongue of anybody I know,"⁵ although Harry Truman was one among many who recognized that this "Rembrandt with words" frequently talked too much.⁶ Dubbed "Minnesota Chats,"⁷ by

Johnny Carson, Humphrey often left himself open to the charge that he was "a gabby extremist of the Left," a label that stuck with him despite his moves towards moderation.⁸ Any lapses of caution may have been the result of Humphrey the orator being an "incandescent improviser,"⁹ with overstatement being the price he paid for his dazzling eloquence.

Humphrey drew his oratorical power from his emotional temperament, which sometimes left him in tears on the stump, undoubtedly moving many in his audience. He would say that he had a "zealous righteousness burning within him," yet his ultimate legislative accomplishments were achieved when he moderated the firebrand and willingly compromised with his opponents.¹⁰ In fact, Humphrey learned to combine his rhetorical talents effectively with his substantive goals by developing into a persuader and for the most part foregoing intimidation, unlike his colleague and mentor Lyndon Johnson. It is not surprising that, while Johnson hated the powerlessness of the vice-presidency, Humphrey relished the national podium it offered.

A Prairie Progressive

The origins of the Minnesotan's "zealous righteousness" can be found in his home state's tradition of agrarian reformism that tenaciously promoted "the disinherited" underdogs at the expense of "the interests."¹¹ Humphrey personally was a warm, sincere, even "corny" populist, an old-time prairie progressive politically descended from the likes of William Jennings Bryan, George Norris, and Robert La Follette, Sr.

Born in South Dakota in 1911, Humphrey learned his ideology first hand in the persistent agricultural depression of the Midwest during the 1920s and 1930s. He and his family were victims, like so many others, of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression that had evicted them from their home and business. Humphrey's poor, rural upbringing stirred both him and his pharmacist father to become politically conscious, ardent New Dealers. Thus Humphrey was "permanently marked by the Depression," which in turn stimulated him to study and teach college political science in the employ of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration.¹² After Humphrey became an administrator in that agency, the Minnesota Democratic party recognized his oratorical talents and, in their search for "new blood," tapped him as candidate for mayor of Minneapolis.¹³ Although he lost his first race in 1943, he succeeded in 1945. This post would prove to be Humphrey's sole executive experience until the time of his vice-presidency. He made the most of it, successfully impressing his reformist principles on organized crime by stretching his mayoral powers to their limit on the strength of his personality and his ability to control the city's various factions.

Hubert Humphrey's mayoral success and visibility propelled him directly into the Senate for a career that would encompass five terms. He was first elected in 1948 after gaining national attention at the Democratic National Convention with his historic plea for civil rights legislation. Although no strong constituency existed for this issue in Minnesota, the position was in line with Humphrey's championing of others among his state's underdogs,

including farmers, labor, and small business. In hammering his civil rights plank into the platform, Humphrey helped to bring the breakaway progressive supporters of Henry Wallace back into the Democratic fold, while simultaneously prompting the Dixiecrats to walk out of the convention hall and the party.

In the Senate

Humphrey's headline-grabbing civil rights speech appealed to Minneapolis' liberal community, and his stand in favor of the Marshall Plan and against the Taft-Hartley labor-management relations law attracted the support of farmers and labor. As a result, Minnesota elected a Democrat to the Senate for the first time since 1901. In his first feisty days in the Senate, Humphrey immediately moved to the cutting edge of liberalism by introducing dozens of bills in support of programs to increase aid to schools, expand the Labor Department, rescind corporate tax loopholes, and establish a health insurance program that was eventually enacted a decade and a half later as Medicare. In addition, Humphrey spoke as a freshman senator on hundreds of topics with the ardor of a moralizing reformer. Accustomed to discussing candidly and openly policy matters that disturbed him, the junior senator quickly ran afoul of the Senate's conservative establishment. He found that many senators snubbed him for his support of the Democratic party's 1948 civil rights plank and, as Senator Robert C. Byrd has written, Humphrey "chose his first battles poorly, once rising to demand the abolition of the Joint Committee on the Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures as a nonessential expenditure." Committee chairman Harry Byrd, Sr., happened to be away from the Senate floor at the time, but he and other powerful senior senators punished this breach of decorum by further isolating Humphrey.¹⁴

Yet Humphrey, under the guidance of Democratic leader Lyndon Johnson, soon moderated his ways, if not his goals. As *New York Times* congressional correspondent William S. White observed in his classic study of the early 1950s Senate, Humphrey's slow ascent to grace was [due to] the clear, but far from simple, fact that he had in him so many latently Senatorial qualities. Not long had he been around before it became evident that, notwithstanding his regrettable past, he had a tactile sense of the moods and the habits and the mind of the place.¹⁵ By the mid-1950s, Humphrey had moved into the ranks of the Senate's "Inner Club." It is hardly surprising that a politician so filled with energy and vision had presidential ambitions dating from the time of his mayoral election. Indeed, on six occasions during his career Humphrey sought either the presidency or the vice-presidency. His first foray into the vice-presidential race was 1952, but it was the 1956 contest that revealed the essential Humphrey, as he campaigned vigorously for that office after presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson threw open the nomination. Undaunted by his failure in that contest, Humphrey continued his advocacy role in the Senate. Then, in 1958, during a visit to the Soviet Union as part of a fact-finding trip to Europe, Humphrey engaged in a historic eight-and-a-half-hour impromptu conversation on disarmament with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. This event thrust him into the international spotlight, and the publicity he gained made him an instant presidential candidate for 1960. Yet Humphrey,

a longtime proponent of disarmament, then paradoxically exploited this publicity to criticize President Dwight Eisenhower for allowing a "missile gap" to develop. In 1960 a defense issue of a more personal stripe helped to undermine Humphrey's presidential bid. More than in any other of his many election years, his World War II draft deferment—first as a father and then for a medical condition identified as a right scrotal hernia¹⁶—was used against him in the primaries. Although Humphrey's draft status seemed to invite exploitation by his political opponents, his chronic lack of campaign funds and organization, as well as his moderate liberal image, actually lost him the nomination.

Out of defeat, the irrepressible Minnesotan snatched senatorial victory by becoming the choice of departing Majority Leader and Vice President-elect Lyndon Johnson for Senate majority whip. Humphrey used his new post to become a driving force in the Senate. Johnson had promoted Humphrey for this leadership position as a reward for his cooperation in the Senate and to solidify a relationship for the benefit of the Kennedy administration. Newly elected Majority Leader Mike Mansfield noted Humphrey's "vibrant personality and phenomenal energy." These traits, coupled with a new-found pragmatism, gained him appointment to the Appropriations Committee and a solid record of legislative accomplishment.¹⁷ Humphrey went on to become a major congressional supporter of a number of New Frontier programs, many of which had been originally outlined in his own bills in the 1950s. Chief among these were the Job Corps, the Peace Corps, an extension of the Food for Peace program, and "a score of progressive measures" pertaining to health, education, and welfare.¹⁸

Humphrey's role in pressing for the landmark 1963 Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union ranks as one of his greatest triumphs. A supporter of disarmament since the 1950s, he helped persuade President Eisenhower to follow the Soviets into a voluntary testing moratorium. Humphrey was a follower of George Kennan's geo-strategic analysis, which counselled a moderate course designed selectively and nonprovocatively to contain Soviet probes into areas vital to the United States. This middle way between provocation and disarmament also encouraged pragmatic negotiations, and Humphrey continued to prod President John F. Kennedy into the more permanent test ban treaty and the establishment of a U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. At the treaty-signing ceremony, President Kennedy recognized Humphrey's years of often lonely efforts, commenting, "Hubert, this is your treaty—and it had better work."¹⁹

The principal items on Humphrey's longstanding domestic legislative agenda failed to advance significantly until the so-called "Great Society" period that followed Kennedy's death. The first, and perhaps biggest, breakthrough came with passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which he managed in a Senate obstructed by southern filibusterers. In working for that legislation, Humphrey skilfully combined his talent as a soft-spoken, behind-the-scenes negotiator with a rhetorical hard sell focused on the media. Humphrey's subsequent record of legislative achievement was remarkable. With his support, federal aid to farmers and rural areas increased, as did the new food stamp

program and foreign-aid food exports that benefitted the farms. Congress authorized scholarships, scientific research grants, aid to schools, rehabilitation of dropouts, and vocational guidance. Legislation promoted public power projects, mass transportation, public housing, and greater unemployment benefits.

While the Minnesota senator could claim credit for helping to create millions of jobs, he also reaped the scorn of critics fearful of deficit spending. Humphrey replied that "a balanced budget is a futile dream," which could not be attained anyway until "the world is in balance." Dismissing those "Scrooges" who harbored a "bookkeeper's mentality," Humphrey, a self-proclaimed "jolly Santa," reiterated his priority, people's "needs and desires."²⁰

Campaigning for Vice President

Hubert Humphrey was convinced he could fulfill these "needs and desires" only by becoming president. He saw the vice-presidency as the major stepping stone to this objective, reasoning that, as vice president, he would also have greater access to the president than he did as Senate whip. Humphrey believed he would need the national prominence of the vice-presidential office to secure the presidency because he lacked the requisite financial base to run such a large national campaign. Since 1945 the vice-presidency had come to be viewed as a viable springboard to the presidency—a notion furthered by the near success of Vice President Nixon in the 1960 presidential contest. Yet Humphrey recognized that the vice-presidential office itself was "awkward" and "unnatural" for an energetic politician.²¹

Humphrey realized that he would have to pay the price for his greater access to power by compromising some of his principles, because, above all, Johnson demanded loyalty from his vice president. But in 1964, the cost did not appear to be substantial, since Johnson needed Humphrey and the entrée he provided to the Democratic party's liberal wing. There was, however, never any question as to who was boss. Even when both men served together in the Senate, their relationship was "one of domination-subordination."²² Humphrey had been Johnson's protégé, his "faithful lieutenant" and go-between with the liberals.²³ It is ironic that when Humphrey actually became Johnson's vice president, one of the closest political relationships in Congress eventually turned into one of the most mutually frustrating presidential-vice-presidential relationships in history. This conflict occurred even though the new vice president sought to accommodate the chief executive by adopting a more conservative stance on both domestic and foreign policy issues, with the resulting erosion of his former liberal credentials.

Johnson succeeded in effectively manipulating Humphrey by running hot and cold, alternately favoring and punishing him. Such behavior modification began early in the political season of 1964, when Johnson played Humphrey off against rivals for the vice-presidency, encouraging all the potential candidates to campaign publicly for popular support. Humphrey's political adroitness in arranging a compromise solution for the racially divided Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention impressed

Johnson and finally clinched the nomination for the Minnesotan. Humphrey augmented his popularity by delivering a speech at the convention with a famous refrain attacking right-wing opposition to the Great Society programs that many Republicans had indeed voted for: "But not Senator Goldwater."²⁴ The charges by the Republican vice-presidential candidate William Miller during the fall campaign that Humphrey was a "radical," on the "left bank . . . of the Democratic Party"²⁵ had little impact on the voters. Humphrey campaigned persuasively, dispelling his past reputation as a "flaming radical" by explaining that, although he retained his old goals, he was now willing to take an incremental approach and "make what progress is available at the moment."²⁶

Lobbying for the Administration

After the landslide mandate of the 1964 election, Humphrey enthusiastically reverted to type and became, according to biographer Albert Eisele, "the busiest vice president in history during his first year in office."²⁷ An active vice-presidential lobbyist, he sought to trade on his former status as "one of the most well-liked members of the Senate."²⁸ Concentrating on selling Congress and the nation on the domestic measures to bring about the Great Society, Humphrey maintained a degree of involvement that was unprecedented for a vice president. No previous vice president had been so intimately associated with crafting such a body of legislation. The "legislation long dear to his heart" included the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Medicare, establishment of the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Office of Economic Opportunity, and creation of the Head Start program.²⁹ Humphrey's vision for the Great Society included providing federal funds for the National Endowment for the Arts, the Public Broadcasting Service, and solar energy research. Instrumental in passage of the Food Stamp Act of 1964, Humphrey was also the White House's most vigorous salesman in persuading farmers to accept the Model Cities program, African-Americans to abide the draft, and conservatives to tolerate the expanded welfare state.³⁰

The president assigned Humphrey his primary job inside the halls of Congress, where his knowledge and contacts would be invaluable. After presiding in the Senate chamber, Humphrey took his campaign for the administration's agenda into the adjacent cloakrooms—the most effective legislative venue, as his long years of experience had taught him. Humphrey's tenure as a member also made him acutely aware of the Senate's unwritten codes of behavior. The vice president understood that as Senate president he must never forget the difference between its chamber and its cloakrooms: now that he was no longer a regular member of the "club," he must confine his political dealings to the cloakrooms, while limiting his chamber activities to the strictly procedural. After Johnson announced in 1965 that his Great Society programs and the mission in Vietnam could be accomplished simultaneously, Humphrey worked the Senate on a daily basis, encouraging the sale of some raw materials from the U.S. strategic stockpile to pay for the rapidly escalating costs of military involvement, since the administration did not propose to increase taxes.

Humphrey's lobbying activity on Capitol Hill reflected his style of perpetual exertion. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield utilized the vice president's consensus-gathering talents when he asked him to mediate between contentious factions supporting the 1965 Voting Rights bill. The next year, the vice president dealt directly with congressional leaders to push the administration's version of the Model Cities bill.³¹ Humphrey understood that he no longer had any legislative authority, but in his capacity as the president's "field marshal on Capitol Hill," he "collect[ed]" debts that were "due" him from his past accumulation of goodwill. In 1965, Humphrey spent far more time in his chandeliered office a few steps from the Senate chamber than he did across town in the Old Executive Office Building. On Capitol Hill he exercised his skills as a "legislative troubleshooter" and "intermediary" between factions. "Time and again," the vice president "delivered votes from lawmakers who seemed immune to blandishments from any other quarter." According to *Newsweek's* Charles Roberts, Humphrey sometimes cautioned senators in the cloakroom that he would be obligated to make unflattering speeches about them in their districts if they did not vote his way.³²

By 1966, however, Great Society programs began to stall in Congress and racial tensions mounted, prompting Humphrey to increase the pressure for summer jobs for inner city youth. In frustration, the vice president blurted out one day that, if he were a slum dweller, immersed in rats and garbage, he himself might "revolt."³³ When riots broke out a week later, Humphrey, under fire from both critics and the White House, qualified his earlier statement by adding that "we cannot condone violence."³⁴ And when urban riots flared again in the summer of 1967, while the administration's agenda remained in limbo, Humphrey called for a "Marshall Plan" for the cities.³⁵ Johnson, burdened by soaring inflation, interest rates, and government debt, immediately rebuked his vice president, who did not mention his plan again.

On the domestic front Humphrey was motivated by the disparity in standards of living he observed in the richest country on earth. He constantly pressed for increases in Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Social Security, and welfare benefits.³⁶ The glory of the Great Society was its future-oriented generosity, yet as the economic consequences became apparent, President Johnson grew more fiscally conservative. As a result, Vice President Humphrey felt doubly cheated, not only because his long-held vision was being constrained, but also because, despite his continuous congressional lobbying efforts, the more parsimonious president—and not he—received all the credit for the successes that were achieved.³⁷ Nevertheless, Humphrey could hardly be dissatisfied with the results of the domestic policy labors that he so enjoyed.

A Varied Role

Although domestic legislation consumed most of Humphrey's energies early in his term, his vice-presidential role can be divided into roughly three separate functions. He was, at various times, the executive branch's representative in the Senate, the chief of numerous executive councils, and the president's spokesman-at-large. Among the statutory duties assigned to the vice-presidency were the administration of oceanography and the space

race. As the chairman of councils on topics ranging from Native Americans to the environment, youth, and tourism, Humphrey served as titular head of a wide variety of executive branch enterprises.

But Humphrey soon abandoned most of these White House duties when he realized that the president personally controlled everything of significance. He did, however, maintain his role as liaison to the country's mayors, a duty that dovetailed nicely with his assignment as civil rights coordinator and liaison to the country's African American leaders. These activities were all part of Humphrey's political mission to reduce racial inequities and conflicts by instituting just governance.

In 1966, with the Great Society's remaining legislation stalled in Congress, Humphrey used his vice-presidential platform to support Democrats seeking congressional seats in the coming midterm elections. To that end, Humphrey campaigned in almost every state as party cheerleader and presidential surrogate. He also used his liaison duties to channel political information back to the president, thereby influencing the aid many candidates would receive and gaining a substantial hand in overall campaign strategy. Humphrey proved to be a vigorous campaigner. As the escalating war in Vietnam slowly smothered domestic legislative initiatives, he advised campaigners to "Run on Vietnam" and became the administration's "chief spear carrier."³⁸

Despite Humphrey's energetic Senate lobbying, by 1966 events had shifted the focus of his vice-presidency from Capitol Hill to the White House. Indeed, he became the most active White House spokesman, and his nationwide speaking tours were geared to a "frantic pace."³⁹ Humphrey's frenzy may be traced in part to the insecurity that his mercurial and manipulative boss engendered. Johnson had a "routine of slapping Humphrey one day and stroking him the next."⁴⁰ The president would publicly praise his vice president and then, shortly afterward, exclude him from the inner councils, chiefly because Humphrey talked too much and too freely in public. Johnson, inordinately concerned with leaks and their relationship to loquacity, ended up giving Humphrey little opportunity to contribute to administration policy decisions. The more Humphrey was shut out, the more he became a mere "political spokesman," as he put it, falling back on his formidable rhetorical talents.⁴¹ This choice reflected not only his pledge of loyalty to the president, but also his inclination to seek compromise.

With the situation in Vietnam heating up, Johnson made Humphrey his primary spokesman on war policy. The vice president duly visited university campuses to answer questions and reiterate the administration's policy line. But his new, more conservative stance began to alienate liberal supporters as he uttered such hawkish assertions as, "only the Viet Cong commit atrocities."⁴²

Anticommunist and Internationalist

The president also sent Humphrey to Europe to gather support for the administration's war policy, along with a nuclear nonproliferation treaty, increased East-West trade, and

international monetary reform. Although many considered the vice president's efforts on his European trip a diplomatic success, he encountered antiwar demonstrators everywhere he went. Humphrey handily dismissed these Europeans as "Communist led,"⁴³ an assessment in keeping with his political record, since he had supported United States cold war policy since 1950. Even as mayor, Humphrey had battled Communists and pro-Soviet leftists for control of his Democratic-Farmer-Labor party. In the Senate, Humphrey had joined the anticommunist crusade in the interest of protecting his noncommunist friends in labor unions. Ideologically, he had always been an internationalist, a Wilsonian, committed to worldwide free trade and open markets, which would, "coincidentally," benefit his Minnesota farm constituents.

The Minnesota Democrat was not always consistent in his internationalist motivations and foreign policy views. For example, although he was a longtime advocate of disarmament, chairman of the Senate disarmament subcommittee, and later father of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963, Humphrey had also attacked the Eisenhower administration's "missile gap" in 1960. Even though he may have indulged in a measure of political inconsistency, his views were fundamentally moderate. He never espoused unilateral disarmament but rather supported an active policy of negotiating mutual nuclear and conventional cutbacks with the Soviets. While he advocated outright independence for the "captive nations" of Eastern Europe, he denounced Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' "brinkmanship" over Vietnam, Taiwan, and Korea as a dangerous game of threatening to use massive nuclear force.

Humphrey's record on the cold war at home was even more complex. He had voted for the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950 and had introduced the Communist Control Act of 1954, both of which severely repressed those identified as American Communists. Humphrey later regretted his participation in the latter act and called for its repeal. Yet, at the time, he was silent regarding the actions of Senator Joseph McCarthy, even though he did deplore the "psychosis of fear" and "this madness of know-nothingness."⁴⁴ In the 1950s Humphrey supported the generally held view that agents of foreign governments committed to the overthrow of the U.S. government were not entitled to civil liberties. Yet, this stance could also be explained as a cynical attempt to save the Democrats from the "soft on communism" label, especially during the election year of 1954, the apogee of McCarthyism.

While Humphrey's staunch anticommunism became even more pronounced as he progressed into the upper echelons of the "Establishment," he struggled to maintain his position as a moderate, shifting nimbly to the right and left of center as the circumstances warranted—the so-called "Humphrey duality."⁴⁵ By the time of the 1964 presidential campaign, Humphrey labeled Goldwater and his faction as "reactionary," predicting that, if Goldwater were elected, he would institute a "nuclear reign of terror."⁴⁶ In spite of his strong anticommunism, Humphrey feared that an East-West confrontation could escalate into nuclear warfare. Thus, his conservative detractors were able to label him "soft on communism" when the compromiser in him proposed, for instance, the solution of coalition governments in Southeast Asia.⁴⁷ Humphrey believed that, if the native

Communist and anticommunist elements could pragmatically combine in a parliamentary forum, the local military conflict would be less likely to engender an eventual superpower confrontation.

The Vietnam War I: Opposition

As early as 1954, Humphrey had opposed any continuance of the French war in Vietnam by the United States. On that issue, his pre-vice-presidential foreign policy can generally be described as "dovish," despite the often precarious balance he sought to strike. Humphrey did lead the effort to ratify the SEATO treaty in 1955 and asserted in 1960 that, "I happen to believe that the most dangerous, aggressive force in the world today is Communist China."⁴⁸ But for Vietnam, he advocated the counterinsurgency techniques of General Edward Lansdale that, rather than a conventional military strategy, emphasized an unconventional and, above all, a political solution incorporating a "rural reconstruction" program.⁴⁹ In the 1964 campaign, although Humphrey endorsed a "free civilization" resisting the "expansion of Communist power," he remained a relatively consistent moderate as the campaign's political rhetoric focused more on domestic affairs and the larger cold war, in which the Democrats appeared more moderate than the saber-rattling Goldwater and his running mate, William Miller.⁵⁰

Just a few weeks after the newly elected Johnson administration took office, however, the Viet Cong attacked and killed American troops in South Vietnam, spurring the president to retaliate by bombing the North. Humphrey, virtually alone among Johnson's inner circle, immediately opposed this "Operation Rolling Thunder" with several arguments. The first was drawn from the advice of Undersecretary of State George Ball. A former member of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey after World War II, Ball understood the limited capabilities of the U.S. Air Force. Humphrey himself reminded the cabinet that the United States' experience in Korea demonstrated the pitfalls of the nation engaging in a land war in Asia, even though that earlier conflict had indeed represented a clearer case of a conventional invasion. Citing that precedent, Humphrey warned that U.S. escalation in Vietnam could provoke an intervention by the Chinese or even by the Soviets, with potential nuclear consequences. The vice president asked what good reason the United States could have to interject itself into "that faraway conflict" when "no lasting solution can be imposed by a foreign army."⁵¹

In 1965 Humphrey pushed for a political resolution as the only hope to save not only the unstable government of South Vietnam, but also the full funding of the Great Society programs. The vice president included these points in both verbal counsel and memos to the president, also reminding him that direct bombing by the United States had been Goldwater's position during the campaign. Humphrey predicted that the president would eventually be opposed not by the Republicans, but more dangerously, from within his own party. Johnson's response was increasingly to freeze the vice president out of the Vietnam councils, forcing him to concentrate on Great Society issues. Although Humphrey lost access to the president because of a variety of injudicious public comments, the gulf over Vietnam was the principal cause of his year-long executive

exile. This period proved to be the turning point not only of his vice-presidency, but also of his political career.

The Vietnam War II: A Change of Position

As Humphrey's legislative and executive opportunities dwindled, the penitent vice president eventually became only too happy to carry out the new role Johnson had assigned him, that of special envoy. The president sent him on propaganda and fact-finding trips to Southeast Asia to gather evidence of Chinese aggression. On his first trip in early 1966, Humphrey was strongly influenced by the hawkish views of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and General William Westmoreland. So eager was Humphrey to regain the good graces of the president that, even as early as November 1965, he had reported back from his visits to college campuses, which were now holding "teach-ins" against the war, that students were increasingly supporting the Vietnam policy. As Humphrey found that his hopes for compromise were not always attainable, he began to make his irrevocable political choice between loyalty to his lifelong conscience and loyalty to Lyndon Johnson. "I did not become vice president with Lyndon Johnson to cause him trouble," he declared in 1965.⁵² The president may have somewhat appeased Humphrey just before his February 1966 conversion with the Christmas 1965 bombing pause of which Johnson said that he was now trying "Hubert's way."⁵³

Humphrey departed on his extended peace offensive throughout Indochina and South Asia, which even included some impromptu, and ultimately fruitless, negotiations with Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin in India. At the end of this publicity-laden circuit, Johnson continued his pattern of molding Humphrey's behavior. The president rewarded—or exploited—depending on one's perspective, Humphrey's demonstration of renewed loyalty by permitting him to announce ambitious plans "to export the Great Society to Asian countries," like South Vietnam.⁵⁴ Humphrey instinctively responded to the idea of extending the war on poverty and injustice to other nations. During the vice president's grand tour of South and Southeast Asian capitals, the local leaders easily persuaded him that the Red Chinese menace and its advance "agent North Vietnam" necessitated U.S. military aid to their countries.⁵⁵ Humphrey returned to the United States convinced that Chinese "imperialism and expansion" threatened to topple Asian dominos as far as Australia.⁵⁶ He dismissed Senator Mike Mansfield and other skeptical senators as having missed the "big picture" regarding the Communist "master plan" and the Chinese "epidemic [that] we must stop" before they come "closer to home" and all the way to Honolulu and San Francisco.⁵⁷ When Senator Robert F. Kennedy suggested the possibility of a coalition government for South Vietnam, a position Humphrey himself had espoused in his pre-vice-presidential days, the vice president retorted that would be like "putting a fox in a chicken coop."⁵⁸ Humphrey soon came to regret the memorable quality of some of his more strident statements, as he lost the support of many liberals and midwestern progressives who now characterized him as being "more royalist than the crown."⁵⁹ *Newsweek* magazine observed that Humphrey was "the scrappiest warrior in the White House phalanx."⁶⁰

The Vietnam War III: Public Support and Private Doubts

Johnson again tapped Humphrey's inherent exuberance in a successful campaign to persuade Congress to vote more money for the war. As one Democratic liberal commented, the vice president was "one hell of a salesman."⁶¹ Humphrey declared that his new position was born out of "conscience"⁶² and that the war was "a matter of survival." He pointed out that "Vietnam today is as close to the U.S. as London was in 1940" and would require the same kind of long-term U.S. commitment.⁶³ Such statements were more than enough to get Humphrey readmitted to the administration's inner circle of Vietnam advisers. Having done his duty, the vice president was rewarded with a second trip to Southeast Asia in 1967. There, shortly after hearing another of General William Westmoreland's optimistic estimates, he publicly hailed the Vietnam war as "our great adventure," which was making the world freer and better.⁶⁴

Humphrey's closest foreign policy adviser, George Ball, recognized that the vice president "could never do anything half heartedly." Yet as a genuine intimate, Ball also knew that "Humphrey's loyal and excessively exuberant support" masked a vice president who "was personally revolted by the war."⁶⁵ Ball believed that a Humphrey administration would pull out of Vietnam quickly. Although Humphrey had no input into the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy, as Defense Secretary Clark Clifford was well aware, the vice president did join Clifford's faction in the White House, which advocated a more dovish diplomacy. This group pushed for a pause in bombing North Vietnam without precondition as an inducement to the Communists to reciprocate. The more hawkish faction demanded advance concessions by the North Vietnamese. Humphrey was caught between loyally supporting the hawks in public and actually being antiwar, "in his heart."⁶⁶

Humphrey had already begun to rediscover the doubts in his heart during his second trip to Southeast Asia. He observed the continuing indifference of South Vietnamese Generals Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky to their own forces and their apparently unlimited demands on the United States at the very time the war was supposedly being "de-Americanized." After that second trip, Humphrey implied to his close friend, Dr. Edgar Berman, that he identified with Republican presidential candidate George Romney, who had destroyed his political future by admitting in 1967 that he had been "brainwashed" by American officials into believing the United States was winning the war.⁶⁷ Berman later related that Humphrey had told him privately that the United States was "throwing lives and money down a corrupt rat hole" in South Vietnam.⁶⁸ When Humphrey sent a confidential memo suggesting this to Johnson, who was beginning to have private doubts of his own, the president typically became infuriated by the dissent. In fact, the vice president was the associate on whom Johnson took out most of his anger, remaining rigid in his insistence that it was the North Vietnamese who had to yield a concession first before U.S. deescalation could occur.

Neither the president nor the vice president, however, could ignore for long the fact that their administration was publicly backing a seemingly losing cause that was also

undermining Humphrey's homegrown American Great Society. When the U.S. bombing neither forced North Vietnam to the negotiating table nor did much strategic damage, since that country had little infrastructure, Humphrey in the spring of 1968 strongly advised a halt. This action was Humphrey's first serious divergence from Johnson's policy since 1965.

The 1968 Election

This vice-presidential advice, delivered just days before the end of March 1968, was not the only instance of a prominent Democrat dissenting from Johnson's policy. As Humphrey had predicted three years earlier, the president's own party was now sharply divided, resulting in a strong showing by the peace candidate, Senator Eugene McCarthy, in the New Hampshire and Wisconsin presidential primaries. When Johnson on March 31 announced his decision not to run for reelection, Humphrey was in Mexico City initialing a nuclear nonproliferation treaty. The vice president immediately became the Democratic frontrunner, although he declined to enter any primaries. Robert Kennedy's assassination in June, after winning the California primary, assured Humphrey the nomination by default but left the Democratic party in serious disarray. The path to the November election was strewn with other obstacles, as well, not the least of which was Humphrey's late start due to Johnson's last-minute surprise withdrawal. As a result, Humphrey lacked either sufficient campaign funds or a mature organization to apply them. Moreover, the vice president contributed to his own organizational inefficiency by decentralizing his campaign structure.

The Democrats projected an image of disorganization and chaos to the nation that year, as the party at one time or another split as many as four ways into factions supporting Humphrey, Johnson, Eugene McCarthy, and George Wallace. The raucous Chicago convention—with nationally televised images of police beating young antiwar protesters in the parks—further weakened Humphrey's standing in the polls, and the extreme polarization within the party prevented him from achieving his trademark unifying compromise. The vice president struggled to avoid either being too closely identified with the unpopular president, or dissociating himself so far that he would lose his Democratic party support and Johnson-controlled campaign funds. Even though Johnson had withdrawn from the race in March, the possibility remained that the president might reenter the campaign if circumstances allowed him to be drafted at the August convention. With this sword hanging over Humphrey's head, he did not feel secure enough to risk provoking Johnson into such a move by openly opposing the president's policy. As a result, the vice president had publicly associated himself with the president's policy for so long, that a post-convention switch would lack credibility with the voters. Johnson not only intimidated Humphrey, but he also cajoled the vice president into supporting the administration's line on the war in order to avoid jeopardizing the delicate Paris peace talks. Since Republican nominee Richard Nixon had adopted the patriotic stance of not criticizing Johnson's current handling of the war, Humphrey could not differentiate himself from his Republican opponent on that score without being perceived as disloyal either to the president, to the country, or to his own vice-presidential record.

In classic fashion, Humphrey presented ambiguous scenarios for a bombing halt and troop withdrawal. These proposals were directly rejected by Johnson, who thus appeared to move closer to Nixon! In the face of the national crisis, both candidates chose to divert their attention to the domestic problems of law and order and inflation.⁶⁹ As these issues, too, were inextricably bound to the war itself, all topics seemed to associate the party in power with the general chaos. Humphrey refused to repudiate either the positions taken during his vice-presidency or his belief that there would be a breakthrough at Paris. Johnson had convinced Humphrey that the latter was imminent, even while denying his vice president detailed information from those negotiations.⁷⁰

Badly behind in the polls, Humphrey took to television in late September to try to solve the dilemma of his private opposition to the war and his public pledge to bring it to an "honorable conclusion."⁷¹ For the first time, he publicly proposed halting the bombing as an inducement to North Vietnamese reciprocity once he became president. As a result, his popularity rebounded in the final month of the campaign. When the election returns came in, Humphrey had collected 42.7 percent of the popular vote to Richard Nixon's 43.4 percent, although the Republican had 301 electoral votes to Humphrey's 191. Too many voters had remembered the vice president's overselling of the war and distrusted his recent apparent conversation.⁷²

After the election, Humphrey blamed the loss on his failure to break with Johnson but contended that he could not have proceeded differently. A more dovish or hawkish approach might not have secured Humphrey the presidency, but it is probable that a less ambivalent, less inconsistent message might have satisfied enough of the electorate. In the end, perhaps Humphrey could not have overcome the profound irony inherent in the fact that the war that gave him his presidential chance also took it away.

Back in the Senate

Humphrey's electoral defeat finally removed the constraints of his office, allowing him to express his personal political opinions. He did so in his newspaper column, his memoirs, and as a college political science teacher, along with other educational ventures. Humphrey almost immediately began to seek the Minnesota Senate seat that Eugene McCarthy planned to vacate in 1970. Easily winning on his old populist platform and underplaying the Vietnam issue, Humphrey resumed his prior senatorial pattern of introducing an abundance of bills that were mostly domestic in content. As in his early Senate career, most of his new legislative proposals were stymied. Returning as a new senator without seniority or important committee assignments, Humphrey also had lost many of his valuable former contacts, who had left the Senate. The times had passed him by.

But the irrepressible warrior already had his eye on the 1972 presidential contest, believing he could successfully challenge Richard Nixon on economic issues. Humphrey also criticized the administration's rough handling of dissidents, asserting that "you can't have civil order without civil justice."⁷³ Still, he remained vulnerable on Vietnam,

especially after the 1971 publication of the Pentagon Papers, which revealed that a deceitful Johnson had decided before the 1964 election to bomb North Vietnam and thus escalate the war. These disclosures resuscitated Humphrey's image as Johnson's dupe or shill and convinced many citizens that the former vice president could not be trusted. Although leading in the national polls in December 1971, Humphrey was soon accused of waffling even on domestic issues, and another poll that same year found that he was viewed as "too talkative, too willing to take both sides of an issue."⁷⁴ Too many Democrats saw the former vice president as part of the "Establishment" and turned to his Senate colleague George McGovern as the agent of change. Despite failing to win the 1972 nomination, Humphrey tried unsuccessfully once more in 1976.

During his typically active Senate term, Humphrey became chairman of the Joint Economic Committee in 1975. In 1974 he introduced the highly ambitious Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment and National Growth bill, which eventually passed after his death in 1978. This final legislative monument symbolizes Humphrey's entire career, which was committed to "the humanitarian goals of the New Deal."⁷⁵ Humphrey realistically understood that his core constituency comprised those Americans from the lower social and economic classes — the disadvantaged underdogs — a positioning that flowed from what journalist Murray Kempton called Humphrey's "overabundance of feeling for humanity."⁷⁶ Although this instinct lit his way onto the public stage in 1948 when he made his singular stand for civil rights, his historical vision became blinded by his failure to recognize that the Vietnam war could destroy his hopes for the Great Society. Humphrey's digression into self-delusion had prompted him in 1968 to stump for "the politics of joy," a slogan that many viewed as entirely inappropriate in the midst of wartime and civil disorder.⁷⁷ Humphrey's greatest asset, his enthusiasm, paradoxically may have also been his greatest liability. In the course of pragmatically compromising on the chief issue of the day, Vietnam, he allowed himself to become the administration's loudest proponent of the war.

Although Humphrey's tactics may have sometimes veered off course, he understood the profound value of the strategy of compromise, without which, he said, the Great Society legislation would not have been possible. In 1971 Humphrey called himself a gradualist, the soundest course by which one can make "steady progress if we don't bite off too much."⁷⁸ In 1973, former Secretary of State Dean Rusk echoed Humphrey's self-assessment by characterizing him as "a liberal with common sense."⁷⁹ Humphrey was able to realize the difference between campaigning, where it was constructive to be partisan, and governing, where to hold grudges would be, in his words, "Neanderthal."⁸⁰ While this generosity of spirit made him incapable of being ruthless, a trait probably essential to a presidential aspirant, it also made him an ideal senator or vice president, an advocate and deal maker who "was a terrific fighter but no killer."⁸¹ As a result, the "Happy Warrior" in the public service knew enough defeats to ensure that his "name had become synonymous with cheerfulness in the face of adversity."⁸² Humphrey's behavior during his last days testifies to his awe-inspiring strength of character. Terminally ill and in great physical discomfort, he continued his senatorial workload with the same intensity and affability as always. He died on January 13, 1978.

Perhaps the key to Humphrey's indefatigable essence was that he placed personal political ambition below his support of a larger agenda. The innumerable bills that he introduced and shepherded through Congress demonstrate that, with Humphrey, the people and their issues came first.

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