States of the Union

THE DREAMS OF HUBERT HUMPHREY

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HUBERT H HUMPHREY

THERE WAS something unexpectedly comic, or parodic, about Hubert Horatio Humphrey He was a public hyperbole He talked too much, cried too much, perhaps yearned too much (or too openly) for the one electoral prize that proved beyond his grasp Even his name was an overstatement—all that alliteration, all that orotundity

Very early in his career he decided he wanted to be President of the United States of America When he was mayor of Minneapolis (1944-48) he and a small coterie of well-wishers would often stay up half the night dreaming Presidential dreams, inventing campaign scenarios, appointing whole cabinets (Walter Reuther was always Secretary of Labor) It was not so outlandish a dream Lots of young men back then were entering politics and starting to scramble up the steep mountain, all the while eyeing the pinnacle Like nearly everyone else in those ingenuous times, Humphrey took the American promise literally, he believed the son of a small-town druggist from North Dakota could some day "sit in the President's chair" if he was smart enough, quick enough, virtuous enough

He'd been a Boy Scout in North Dakota, and to the end of his days the Scout Laws seemed his personal credo He was *trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent* As things turned out, the admonitions to be "loyal" and "obedient" got him in trouble, deflecting his idealism and depriving him of the Presidency He couldn't help it, it was not in his character to challenge authority or to experiment with apostasy He was a good man, but he was not a bold one (Humphrey's political protegé in Minneapolis, Arthur Naftalin, has put it differently "He was not a revolutionary, although he *spoke* with a revolutionary fervor ")

The 1948 Democratic convention was the setting for Humphrey's lone flirtation with heresy—his successful championing of a civil rights plank in the party platform Humphrey won that fight because he was able to recruit such unlikely allies as Jake Arvey of Chicago and several other big-city bosses They were anxious to undermine Henry Wallace's radical third-party challenge, a strong civil rights plank seemed just the ticket

It was characteristic of Humphrey that he should interpret his mildly maverick civil rights stand as an act of filial obedience "People are people and as such they are entitled to respect," he said "I learned that from my daddy and mommy "

The speech he made that night, in 1948, as leader of the Young Turks was a typical Minnesota rouser It did everything it was supposed to do, instantly transforming Humphrey into a national figure and just as instantly transforming Strom Thurmond and his fellow Southerners into Dixiecrats (They collected 38 electoral votes that November) "There are those who say we are rushing this issue of civil rights," Humphrey shouted from the podium "I say we are 172 years late The time has arrived for the Democratic party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights "

I was a student then at the University of Minnesota I'd been leaning toward Henry Wallace and his guitar-playing cowboy running mate, Glen Taylor, but the speech made a convert of me, and I spent the fall passing out leaflets for Humphrey, who was running for the Senate He won by about 250,000 votes and helped Harry Truman carry Minnesota, a state the Republican Thomas E Dewey had thought was in his pocket

So our Hubert went to the United States Senate—a 37-year-old dynamo with only six years of political experience, most of it strictly local. His reputation had preceded him: to conservatives he was a *bête noire*, the young whippersnapper who had humiliated the Southern Democracy and temporarily driven it from leadership; to Northern liberals he was a dubious gift, a brilliant garrulous politician whose trustworthiness remained to be tested. Both sides resented his enthusiasms; they tended to see only his mountebank side—his downy-cheeked, rapid-fire bluster—and to ignore his serious side. For several months Hubert Humphrey was a pariah senator.

It is never easy to be shunned, and senatorial shunning is especially cruel. The club is small and élite, the inner circle is powerful. Few senators, including the most outstanding, have been able to survive for long outside the pale. Humphrey must have suffered terribly as an outcast; both his ambitions and his gregarious nature demanded acceptance. So he learned to please his colleagues. He bought white shirts and a dark suit; he began to *look* like a senator, although he wasn't yet talking like one. That came later, about the same time Lyndon B. Johnson started paying him some attention.

Ever a shrewd judge of men, Johnson early on spotted Hubert Humphrey as someone worth cultivating—and teaching. Humphrey was a Northern liberal, and Johnson needed a friend in Yankee court, first to help him become Democratic leader in the Senate and later to further his Presidential aspirations. Humphrey was useful in both instances, especially at the 1960 convention in Los Angeles when, at Johnson's request, he withheld his 40 delegates from the Kennedy bandwagon, hoping thus to create a deadlock and an opportunity for Johnson.

Johnson spoke frequently and eloquently about Humphrey's many talents, but their relationship was never on an equal footing. From the start LBJ was Humphrey's mentor, instructing him on how to compromise, how to wheel and deal, how to get power inside the inner circle. I think Johnson had a lot to do with Humphrey's success, and perhaps as much to do, ultimately, with his failure. Under Johnson's tutelage that loyal streak in Hubert—so essential to the character of any politician—shaded into obedience. By all accounts LBJ was one of the most persuasive men in the history of American politics, and Humphrey, to put the best face on it, was far from immovable.

He was making a name for himself in those McCarthyist days as a crusading Cold Warrior, both abroad and at home; it was not always a pretty sight. In 1954 he sponsored a bill that not even Joseph McCarthy had the nerve to propose. It declared that since the Communist party preached subversion, "anyone who knowingly participates in the Communist conspiracy . . . no longer holds allegiance to the United States." The bill passed the Senate 79-1. Only Estes Kefauver dared to vote against it.

Humphrey was undoubtedly honest in his fear of Communism, and it was a time to be scared, but he frequently failed to consider the civil-liberties implications of his actions, and under Johnson's instruction he seemed to turn cynical about tactics. His bill was plainly unconstitutional. Just as plainly, it was a message to conservative Democrats that he was a safe bet for the Vice Presidential nomination in 1956. But Adlai Stevenson let the delegates decide—and they chose Kefauver!

By 1964 neither Hubert nor I was a Young Turk any longer, and I'd stopped being a total fan. But the Johnson-Humphrey ticket, considering the opposition, was the only game in town, so I joined it and wrote a few speeches for Humphrey. (Actually, nobody ever wrote a *speech* for him; what one did was string together a bunch of facts and hope a few of them would surface amid the HHH word-torrent.) His victory that year was the beginning of the end, although no one knew it then. He was in LBJ's power—under the King's spell—and the bewitchment was fatal.

Whatever Humphrey thought of Johnson's Vietnam madness, a sense of loyalty rendered him mute—no, not mute but aggressively protective of the Administration's position. He went so far as to tell a University of Michigan audience that while 95 per cent of those opposed to the war were loyal Americans, the other 5 per cent were "in the pay of foreign governments." And after he sewed up the Presidential nomination in 1968—was already, in fact, the anointed leader of his party—Humphrey was still unwilling or unable to exorcise the Johnson hex. For three days at the convention he was silent while 70 million television viewers watched Mayor Daley's Chicago police run amuk, clobbering hippies, war-protesters and innocent bystanders without fear or favor. On the fourth day Humphrey at last expressed an opinion. "I am certain," he said, "that most of the violent protesters do not come from Chicago." At that moment, in my judgment, he lost the election.

Each of us is a prisoner of his talents and defects, and Humphrey possessed both in astonishing abundance. He was a man of passion but also one of remarkable knowledge. He learned much, remembered much and taught us much—a compelling political leader whom a majority of Americans could not quite bring themselves to follow, not even when the alternative was Richard Nixon.

In his sad, graceful dying, Hubert Humphrey finally won our last measure of trust, the trust we'd withheld when it had counted most. Now that the official mourning is over, we know we shall miss him—his tears, his hopes, his energies, his excesses, his wonderfully common touch. Like the rest of us, he was made considerably lower than the angels; unlike most of us, he chose a public discipline that daily tested his humanity. More often than not, he measured up.