

Too Nice To Finish First

REVIEW: 'True Believer: Hubert Humphrey's Quest for a More Just America' and 'Into the Bright Sunshine: Young Hubert Humphrey and the Fight for Civil Rights'

Washington Free Beacon, 23 June 2024. <https://freebeacon.com/culture/too-nice-to-finish-first/>

By David J. Garrow

Few Americans under age 65 will clearly recall the name Hubert Humphrey, who died in 1978 at age 66 after a landmark career as a U.S. senator, four tortured years as Lyndon B. Johnson's vice president, and a 1968 presidential loss to Richard Nixon. Both Samuel Freedman and James Traub are long-distinguished journalists and authors who also qualify as senior citizens; three decades ago this writer reviewed both Freedman's *Small Victories: The Real World of a Teacher, Her Students & Their High School* ([1990](#)) and Traub's *City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College* ([1994](#)).

These authors' two recent books address the same person in decidedly different ways. Freedman's *Into the Bright Sunshine* focuses on Humphrey's life from childhood in small town South Dakota through his election as mayor of Minneapolis to his 1948 national emergence as an unlikely champion of black civil rights at that year's Democratic National Convention. Traub covers that ground too in *True Believer*, but his is a full, traditional biography whose most gripping chapters detail Humphrey's agonizing service under Johnson and how the president's unbending embrace of the war in Vietnam ensured Humphrey's 1968 loss to Nixon.

Humphrey's economically pressed family lost their home when Hubert was 11, and only in 1938 as a married, 27-year-old University of Minnesota undergraduate did Humphrey find his adult footing thanks to a course titled American Constitutional Development, taught by a young political scientist Humphrey's own age, Evron Kirkpatrick—later best known as the spouse of Ronald Reagan's influential U.N. ambassador, Jeane. Kirkpatrick's course, writes Traub, was "the catapult that launched Humphrey on his life path," and the following year Humphrey moved his young family all the way to Baton Rouge, La., to begin a one-year master's degree in political science at Louisiana State University.

Life in Louisiana's rigidly segregated capital taught Humphrey multiple lessons. Witnessing blatant Southern racism "also opened my eyes to the prejudice of the North," he later wrote, and classes with Rudolf Heberle, a refugee who had fled Germany after Nazi bureaucrats discovered his Jewish ancestry, led Humphrey to conclude that "minority persecution is the first sign of social disintegration." Yet the centerpiece of what Freedman rightly calls "his pivotal year at LSU" was the writing of Humphrey's master's thesis. "The Political Philosophy of the New Deal" was such a fanboy paean to President Franklin Roosevelt that the author "found not a single fault with FDR and the New Deal, not even the president's catastrophic attempt to pack the Supreme Court."

Humphrey wanted to pursue a Ph.D. and was accepted by Princeton, yet his family's strained finances forced him to return to Minneapolis and take up a series of Works Progress Administration posts, in which he excelled. A local politician suggested the novice 32 year old challenge the city's do-nothing mayor, and although Humphrey declared his candidacy only three weeks before the 1943 election, he lost by just 6,000 votes. Establishing himself as a vibrant local voice, two years later Humphrey defeated the incumbent by over 30,000.

Freedman's impressively original work includes detailed portrayals of how two significant figures in Minneapolis's black and Jewish communities—newspaper publisher Cecil Newman and underemployed attorney Sam Scheiner—taught Humphrey about the pervasiveness of the city's racist and anti-Semitic practices. In 1946, one year into Humphrey's mayoralty, prominent journalist Carey McWilliams named Minneapolis "the capital of anti-Semitism in the United States," and early in 1947 a local neo-Nazi tried to assassinate Humphrey—an attempt the mayor amazingly refused to publicize!

That same year Humphrey became one of the founding figures in the newly revamped Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), a liberal effort to counteract the communist sympathizers (and worse) clustered around former vice president Henry Wallace, who would mount a left-wing challenge to Roosevelt's White House successor, Harry S. Truman. Testifying before Congress in June 1947, Humphrey proclaimed that "we profess a belief in justice and equality of opportunity, but we practice injustice and discrimination against the members of minority racial, religious, and nationality groups in every one of these United States. ... This is a problem of national morality."

Four months later, a Truman-appointed commission published a powerful indictment of American racism entitled, "To Secure These Rights." But with public opinion polling showing that 82 percent of respondents opposed the commission's recommendations, and only 9 percent in support, Truman distanced himself from its handiwork, leaving it to the young ADA to champion its provisions. Matters came to a head at the July 1948 DNC, where some 1,200 delegates—only 10 of them black—would renominate Truman for the presidency. Thirty-seven-year-old mayor Humphrey was the ADA's spokesman for a platform plank that would embrace the commission's conclusions in the face of Southern segregationist—and presidential—opposition. The Democratic party, Humphrey proclaimed, needed "to get out of the shadows of states' rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights." The ADA prevailed by a vote of 651 to 582.

Traub calls Humphrey's oration "a ten-minute address that changed the world," for, as Freedman explains, "what he said on that day set into motion the partisan realignment that defines American politics right up through the present." Humphrey himself knew as much at that time, and a few months later he wrote in the *New York Times* that the convention had highlighted "the inevitable split over civil rights that exists in the Democratic party."

By then, the president had been reelected, with black voters supplying the margins by which Truman carried the electorally decisive states of California, Illinois, and Ohio. That same

evening, Humphrey defeated Republican Joseph Ball to become the first Democrat ever elected to the U.S. Senate from Minnesota.

Humphrey was unprepared for life in a new setting and new city where neither he nor his wife Muriel—who "was raising four children almost entirely on her own," Traub notes—knew hardly anyone. Humphrey "plunged into Senate life without making an effort to understand the institution's culture" and found himself rejected by most of his new colleagues. "Never in my life have I felt so unwanted as I did during those first few months in Washington," Humphrey later wrote. "I was unhappy in the Senate, uncomfortable, awkward, unable to find a place."

Salvation came in the form of one of his fellow Democratic freshmen, Texas moderate Lyndon Johnson, who went about making Humphrey his pet liberal. "Johnson did more to bring me into those more social relationships with the conservative members of the Democratic Party than any other person," Humphrey explained in a late-life interview. By the time of his 1954 reelection, Humphrey was a "less adversarial" senator, Traub writes, thanks to "a change of temperament" that would make him "a creature of the institution in which he worked."

Johnson led the Senate to pass a very modest Civil Rights Act in 1957, with Humphrey full well understanding how segregationist Democrats' dominance of the chamber severely delimited the hopes of liberals like himself. Yet Humphrey ranged far afield as a senator, including a remarkable eight-and-a-half-hour conversation in the Kremlin with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in November 1958, "the most thrilling and the most important event in Humphrey's life" since the DNC a decade earlier, Traub notes.

Humphrey's increasing prominence drew him into the 1960 presidential primaries, where he was trounced by his Massachusetts colleague John F. Kennedy, who "was a better candidate and ran a better campaign," Traub observes. But Humphrey's reward, as Johnson left the Senate to become vice president, was the chamber's number two post, Democratic whip, an especially influential role given how in Montana's dyspeptic Mike Mansfield, Johnson's successor as majority leader, "Humphrey had a boss who didn't believe in his own job," Traub memorably writes. But only in the wake of Kennedy's November 1963 assassination and Johnson's ascension to the presidency would Humphrey tackle what would become "the supreme achievement of his legislative career."

Kennedy finally had proposed a muscular civil rights bill five months before his murder, but Johnson immediately embraced that measure as his signature desire, with Humphrey assigned to shepherd it past the Senate's daunting two-thirds filibuster threshold. Several superb books, including Clay Risen's [*The Bill of the Century*](#) (2014), narrate that legislative struggle, but on June 9 cloture was invoked with a remarkable 71 votes in the affirmative. Four weeks later the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law. Capitol Hill's leading weekly heralded Humphrey's "masterful, day-in and day-out perseverance," and Traub reports the whip lost 20 pounds during the three months the bill spent on the Senate floor.

Come the Democrats' August convention, Johnson unsurprisingly named Humphrey as his vice-presidential running mate. A landslide November victory followed, but Humphrey's ensuing

four years were an endless travail of "humiliation and pathos" at the hands of a deeply insecure and often sadistic president. Humphrey was "thoroughly shut out of national security issues," and Johnson "routinely belittled and ridiculed Humphrey" to multiple aides and officials, Traub reports. While "Humphrey was powerless to affect policy in Vietnam" as Johnson repeatedly intensified American military intervention from 1965 into 1967, Humphrey nonetheless "never flinched from his job of justifying the war" to audiences at home.

On March 31, 1968, Johnson astonished first Humphrey and then, a few hours later, the entire nation by announcing that he would not run for reelection that fall. Humphrey's Minnesota colleague Eugene McCarthy and fellow New York senator Robert F. Kennedy had already mounted presidential challenges, and now Johnson was handing Humphrey what Traub rightly calls "a poisoned chalice" as the Democratic candidate tasked with defending the war.

Humphrey formally announced his candidacy on April 27, touting what he called "the politics of joy," but the phrase sounded coldly archaic in a country that had just witnessed the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. and widespread ensuing riots. Kennedy caustically responded, "If you see a small black child starving to death in the Mississippi Delta, as I have, it is not the politics of joy," and come June Robert Kennedy's own assassination deepened the atmosphere of national disaster.

Humphrey won the Democratic nomination despite even his old ADA friends now viewing him "as a hapless Johnson puppet," yet Johnson seemed ambivalent about whether he favored Humphrey or Republican nominee Richard Nixon. Humphrey was so "beaten down after four years as Johnson's valet," Traub writes, that "he was not the man he had been not only in 1948 but in 1964." Indeed, he quotes a Humphrey aide recalling how the vice president bitterly remarked, "I've eaten so much of Johnson's shit in this job that I've gotten to like the taste of it."

In November, Nixon bested Humphrey in multiple crucial states—California, Illinois, Ohio, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania—as "the working class white voters who had constituted the core of FDR's coalition" abandoned Humphrey for either Nixon or third-party racial conservative George Wallace. Two years later, Humphrey returned to the Senate for a final term, and in 1976 he surprisingly encouraged his Minnesota colleague Walter Mondale to join presidential nominee Jimmy Carter's ticket: "Being vice president was the best thing that ever happened to me, regardless of how I was treated."

Yet the stain of Vietnam was indelible, and shortly before his death Humphrey acknowledged that his greatest regret was indeed "the misjudgment of Vietnam. At the time I did what I thought was right. It was not because Johnson was forcing me," but "working in the White House atmosphere, I became convinced that we were doing the right thing."

Nonetheless, Hubert Humphrey indisputably changed first Minneapolis and then the United States for the better. Yet progress is not irreversible. In 2017, two years before Minneapolis would go back to its past by sending Ilhan Omar to Congress, Sam Scheiner's daughter Susan Druskin quoted to Freedman her late father's prescient warning about the enduring evil of anti-

Semitism: "It will all be back. It never goes away. It goes below the surface of society and is dormant. The minute somebody permits it, it reemerges." Oy vey.

True Believer: Hubert Humphrey's Quest for a More Just America

by James Traub

Basic Books, 518 pp., \$35

Into the Bright Sunshine: Young Hubert Humphrey and the Fight for Civil Rights

by Samuel G. Freedman

Oxford University Press, 488 pp., \$34.95

David J. Garrow's books include the Pulitzer Prize-winning Martin Luther King Jr. biography Bearing the Cross and Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama.