

MINNPOST

The sad story of Humphrey's role at 1964 Democratic convention

By [Eric Black](#) | 05/27/11



Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey making his acceptance speech at the convention.

Part 2 of [Eric Nathanson's](#) excellent series tied to the 100th anniversary of Hubert Humphrey's birth dealt with President Lyndon B. Johnson's choice of Humphrey as his running-mate in 1964.

The saga of the Humphrey vice presidency is not a happy one. Humphrey, one of the greatest senators in history, sold great chunks of his political soul for the honor of serving under LBJ, a man who liked to say of those whom he similarly dominated: **"I've got his pecker in my pocket."**



With the benefit of hindsight, it's hard not to believe that HHH would have been better off — and would have been more likely to achieve his dream of the presidency — if he had stayed in the Senate and held onto his freedom of conscience, of expression and of political movement rather than plighting his troth to such a demanding groom.

LBJ's astonishing legislative accomplishments as president entitle him to a place in the liberal pantheon. But where his political ambitions were concerned, he was a force of nature, and I don't

mean a rainbow.

Nathanson mentioned that while Humphrey was angling for veep gig, LBJ assigned him to take care of the potential disruption of the 1964 Dem convention over two competing delegations from Mississippi.

Humphrey, with the help of his protégé, Walter Mondale, got it done, thus leaping over the last hurdle LBJ had established before Humphrey could be placed on the ticket. As Humphrey would later write about his attitude toward LBJ's demands: "Whatever Lyndon Johnson wanted, Johnson would get."



As Nathanson wrote: "And so, at Humphrey's behest, Mondale was able to arrange at least a tenuous settlement of the dispute that gave the [Mississippi] Freedom Democrats some symbolic seats at the convention."

All true. But that paragraph brought to my mind a fuller, much uglier, version of the incident that I learned in 2000, when Mondale launched an interesting and unusually honest series of public historical forums, based on the key episodes of his long and distinguished public life.

Sad, sorry but ultimately inspiring?

The very first forum, which I covered in my days as the Strib's history guy, delved into the sad/sorry/but perhaps ultimately inspiring tale of the Mississippi Freedom Democrats. Humphrey was assigned by LBJ to fix the problem. Mondale was the lieutenant Humphrey dispatched to the front lines. But the story is dominated from offstage by LBJ's ruthlessness and his ability to make men violate their own natures to do his bidding.

The real story is a reminder that the version of events presented to the public and the true behind-the-scenes version are often day and night.

Here are the high/lowlights of what I heard that day at the forum, which included breathtaking testimony from some of the actual surviving Mississippi Freedom Democrats:

In 1964, Mississippi's "regular" Democrats had sent their usual all-white delegation to the convention. A biracial group of civil-rights activists, calling themselves the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, came to the convention claiming to be the legal delegates, since the regular Democrats had used classic racist tactics, up to and including violence, to preclude any blacks from becoming delegates.

According to secret tape recordings of Johnson's phone conversations, LBJ — who had no real rivals for the Dem nomination but who was deeply paranoid where the Kennedys were concerned — believed that Bobby Kennedy might try to wrest the nomination from him. And LBJ believed a floor fight over the Mississippi delegations might become the pretext for Kennedy to ride to the rescue.

LBJ would, of course, win an uncontested first-ballot nomination and go on to a landslide election victory. On the other hand, when Bobby Kennedy took the stage on the convention's last day to introduce a film tribute to his assassinated brother, the assembled Democrats broke into 22 minutes of heart-pounding applause. Come to think of it, LBJ's heart must have been pounding, too, but not in a good way. Anyway, although his Bobby fears were absurd, LBJ wanted to avoid any scenes during the march to "his" nomination.

'We didn't come all this way for no two seats'

So he assigned Humphrey to use his influence as the Senate's leading advocate for civil rights to get the Freedom Dems to accept a fairly humiliating and unjust deal:

- The "regular" Dems would be seated as Mississippi's delegates (in exchange for which they were expected to pledge to support the Johnson ticket in the fall; LBJ was worried about his chances in Mississippi).
- The national Democratic Party would agree that after 1964, no delegations chosen through race-biased procedures would be seated.
- But, for 1964, just two members of the Freedom Dem delegation would be given special at-large delegate positions.
- *And* Johnson had arrogated to himself the right to pick which two. *And* Johnson had chosen one white and one black from the MFD.
- *And* he had not chosen Fannie Lou Hamer, the black woman who had become an instant national celebrity after testifying to the convention's Credentials Committee **about the humiliations and beatings** she had endured because she had tried to register to vote.

Mondale, who was then Minnesota's attorney general and a convention delegate, was appointed to chair that committee. A lifelong civil-rights champion, Mondale was surely sympathetic to the Freedom Democrats. He was also an enthusiastic Humphrey man. At the 2000 forum, he would say: "The excitement I felt about helping Humphrey become vice president was central to everything I did at the convention."

The deal was adopted by the Credentials Committee and announced at a televised news conference before the Freedom Dems could discuss the plan, which Mondale later acknowledged was a mistake. When the Freedom Dems heard about it, Hamer publicly and famously responded:

"We didn't come all this way for no two seats."

At the 2000 Mondale forum, Ed King, a white minister, a Freedom Democrat and one of those whom LBJ had approved for one of the two delegate seats, recalled a tense meeting during which Humphrey and a roomful of civil-rights heavyweights — including Roy Wilkins, Andrew

Young, United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther and, yes, even the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. himself — did Johnson's bidding by pressuring the Freedom Dems to take the deal.

King said that the final bitter pill that the Freedom Dems couldn't swallow was that they wouldn't even be allowed to choose which two of their members would get the token delegate positions. King wanted to give up his spot and allow the group to choose a substitute, knowing that Hamer would be chosen.

Three low moments

That led to one of the three lowest moments in the tale, as Ed King related it that day. King quoted Humphrey as saying that Johnson had ordered him to make sure that "that illiterate woman" would never be a delegate.

Here's the second of those low moments, again as recalled that day by Ed King:

When the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. seemed about to side with the Freedom Dems on part of the discussion, he was told by Reuther, a close Johnson ally, to shut up unless he wanted to see his financial support from white northern liberals dry up. Ed King said Martin Luther King Jr. complied and continued to publicly side with Johnson and Humphrey.

Finally, King recalled another meeting, in which Humphrey told the Freedom Democrats of the good things that would happen if he, a strong civil-rights advocate, could be positioned high in the administration as vice president.

According to Ed King, Hamer told Humphrey that all he was worried about was whether he was going to get a big job. But many of her colleagues in Mississippi had lost their jobs (Hamer herself had lost hers, for her activism) and risked losing more by standing up for freedom. While tears welled up in Humphrey's eyes, Hamer warned him that if he sold his soul in order to get the job he wanted, he would never be able to use it do the good things he was promising.

Wow.

Ultimately inspiring?

In the end, no one was happy. Most of the regular Mississippi Dems walked out of the convention. Although the Johnson-Humphrey ticket won a landslide victory, Mississippi was one of the six states Barry Goldwater carried by the breathtaking margin of (hold your breath) 87-13 percent. Humphrey endured four years of condescension and exclusion from LBJ. Yes, the vice presidency did put him in a position to gain the Dem nomination in 1968, but his obligation to maintain LBJ's Vietnam policy — enforced by direct threats from Johnson of what would happen to him if he strayed — cost him the election to Richard Nixon.

So how can I say, as I did far above, that this sad, sorry tale may have been ultimately inspiring?

Because the team of Humphrey and Johnson did put through the civil-rights bills of 1964 and 1965, which are — symbolically and substantively — a big part of the reason that the treatment accorded to Fannie Lou Hamer would be unimaginable today. Because the Democratic Party did indeed adopt rules that would make it impossible for Mississippi to send an all-white delegation to any future convention. Because Humphrey's elevation to the ticket got Mondale into the Senate, where he did a lot of good and important work and eventually into the vice presidency (Humphrey advised him to take Jimmy Carter's offer), which changed the nature of that office into something much bigger than it was when Humphrey suffered through it.

And maybe even because it's true, as all of the practicing politicians in this sad, sorry tale would say, that you can't do any good if you don't get elected, which is in some sense one of the larger lessons that we are celebrating this month when we celebrate the life and accomplishments of Hubert H. Humphrey.

And then there's one last nice coda, of which I was unaware until I read [Eric Nathanson's final installment](#). In case you missed it, it picks up after Humphrey has gone back to the Senate:

“At a meeting of a national Democratic Party policy group, he was in the chair as the group approved a resolution condemning the Nixon administration's Vietnam policy and calling for an immediate withdrawal of all American troops by the end of 1971. When the vote was taken on the resolution, Humphrey took that as a sign that Johnson's hold on him had finally been broken. ‘My God. It finally happened!’ he was heard to exclaim.”

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SUBMITTED BY PETER NICKITAS ON MAY 27, 2011 - 10:34AM.

That is a sad story without a happy ending.

HHH sold his soul time and time again to LBJ because of HHH's own ambitions. LBJ took HHH's measure, and found him wanting, but useful.

LBJ feared the Kennedys because they fought to win, and usually won. Do not forget that LBJ was a big beneficiary of JFK's assassination.

Fannie Lou Hamer was right then, and she's right now. That's why HHH cried when she scolded him.

HHH drove real radicals out of the DFL between 1946 and 1948. These radicals, and not capitalist-liberal Democrats, in my opinion, were the real heirs of Farmer-Labor Governors Floyd B. Olso and Elmer Benson, as well as John Bernard, the Iron Range Farmer-Labor Congressman who was the only Congressman to vote against the 1936 Neutrality Act, on account of his anti-Fascist values.

And it is sad that MLK backed LBJ's play in 1964. He lost limousine liberals' money anyway after his 4 April 1964 Cedar Riverside Baptist Church speech condemning the Vietnam War and denouncing the racism, militarism, and poverty creation of the American regime.

And Mr. Black, please check your history. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed during the same summer as the 1964 Dem. Convention. Its passage did not depend upon the 1964 election. Its passage was a response to fundamental changes erupting in the South and the entire nation. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed in the next Congress. Even without the MFDP calamity, the Voting Rights Act would have passed anyway, in my opinion.

You say that LBJ feared losing MS in the next election? Is that really a strong point? MS had 8 electoral votes in the 1960's. It would have hardly made a difference in the national election. The real issue was the suppression of popular forces of which MFDP was one manifestation. I argue that this suppression continues in an unbroken chain to this day, and that it started at the 1944 Democratic Convention, when FDR dumped Henry Wallace in favor of Harry Truman.

Oh, yes. Once LBJ neutralizes the threat on "his" left flank, he launches his own Operation Reichstag Fire -- in the Gulf of Tonkin in August, 1964. And the Vietnam War rages on and on thereafter. Yes, as the "LBJ voiceover" in "JFK" says, they "got their damned war." And as the character in "Nixon" stated to Anthony Hopkins portraying Pres. Nixon, "You really CAN'T stop it."

As Malcolm X said after JFK's assassination, the chickens had come home to roost. After Nixon's election over HHH, more chickens came home to roost. Not only have these chickens never left, they've been joined by flocks of buzzards and vultures from Wall Street, Langley, and the Pentagon.

SUBMITTED BY WIN BORDEN ON MAY 27, 2011 - 11:33AM.

The sad story? Not the conventions of 1964 or '68, troubling though they were. Rather the sad story, the election results in November of '68. It ages me more than a bit, but in '64 I was a college student and DFL staffer in Atlantic City. In '68 I was a delegate to the DNC in Chicago. Troubling times those years were with the assassinations of two Kennedys, MLK, the riots in Grant Park, the Viet Nam War, but we survived it all. Through it HHH maintained his optimism as well as his sense that progress, while not perfect, is better than defeat. Oh if the political leaders of today would come again to believe that compromise is an essential component of democracy.

SUBMITTED BY PAUL BRANDON ON MAY 28, 2011 - 7:48AM.

Win--

Actually, there is still at least one politician today who does still believe in compromise, and has a strong community background. Oh, and was elected by being optimistic; even hopeful. It's the Republicans who are playing the LBJ card.

SUBMITTED BY PETER NICKITAS ON MAY 29, 2011 - 11:30PM.

Win:

Your analysis lack depth and demonstrates a refusal to address the objective reality of the times and events set forth in the article and my critique.

Paul:

Who is this official of whom you speak? You hold up compromise as a prime value? I disagree.

The MONEY POWER tolerates no compromise over control. Democrats appease the MONEY POWER time and time again. The present day shows Democrats as beholden to the MONEY POWER, in its various corporate, financial, and military-industrial manifestations, as Republicans. In my opinion, the Democratic Party is worse than worthless, by pretending to be for the people when it depends on money as much as Republicans, who are clear about their mission and motives. If this were not so, would AFL-CIO Pres. Trumka declared the need to organize without regard to the Democratic Party?

The present reality validates observations from George Wallace and Barry Goldwater. Wallace observed that there was not a dime's worth of difference between Democrats and Republicans. He rightly criticized Gov. Levander for racism in Minnesota that was dishonestly concealed then, and is dishonestly denied now. Barry Goldwater observed that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, and moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue. People who put life ahead of profits should act in accordance with Goldwater's maxims, because banksters, Democrats, liberals, Republicans, and Tea Party loyalists have no love for people or the values of the Declaration of Independence.

SUBMITTED BY PETER NICKITAS ON MAY 29, 2011 - 11:32PM.

I erred. MLK's Riverside Baptist Church speech took place on 4 April 1967, not 1964.

We have just read a Democratic narrative

SUBMITTED BY MICHAEL O'CONNOR ON FEBRUARY 12, 2014 - 10:04PM.

Voting Rights Act would have passed anyway and in the end was a bi-partisan effort. Republicans, in fact, and not the Democrats had been supporting Civil Rights legislation for decades. It was the Republicans who

had been supporting the 1964 Civil Rights Act much more than the Democrats. Contrary to Democratic myth, Everett Dirksen (R-IL), the Senate Minority Leader was the person most responsible for its passage.

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