

# H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 566

22 May 2024

James Traub. *True Believer: Hubert Humphrey's Quest for a More Just America*. New York: Basic Books, 2024. ISBN 978-0-7618-7372-3 (paperback, \$24.99)

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E566>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Daniel R. Hart | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Review by Jennifer Delton, Skidmore College

---

In the past year and a half, there have been five new books on Minnesota Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, all of which seek to rehabilitate the liberal Democrat's progressive *bona-fides*.<sup>1</sup> In this era of polarization and Trumpism, there is clearly a market for books about principled politicians who were able to “reach across the aisle” to pass historic bills that made the US a fairer, more democratic country. Baby boomers are notoriously nostalgic for the moderate, can-do liberalism of the mid-twentieth century and no one practiced that liberalism better than Hubert Humphrey.

Consensus builder, cheerful compromiser, and President Lyndon B. Johnson's hapless vice president, Humphrey believed that government could be a beneficent force for social progress, economic harmony, and racial justice in both the US and the world at large. In countless speeches, Humphrey told voters that *they* were the government, that strong government was not socialism but democracy in action, that democratically crafted policy, laws, and regulations, when honed through debate and compromise, could make capitalism work for all people, not just the rich and not just whites. A key part of Cold War liberalism, this idea helped build a bipartisan political consensus based on Cold War militarism, labor unions, and highly regulated capitalism, while marginalizing the political extremes.

The latest of the new Humphrey works is James Traub's *True Believer: Hubert Humphrey's Quest for a More Just America*, an immensely readable biography that manages to move beyond nostalgia to remind us of the complex personal and psychological tensions such a politics imparted to its “true believers.” Indeed, this book offers a post-mortem on post-World War II liberalism—its achievements and costs—while also revisiting enduring questions of how ambition, idealism, commitment, and compromise played out in progressive politics.

An accomplished journalist with a background in foreign policy, James Traub tells a good story, expertly establishing characters, setting scenes, and doling out well-chosen quips and anecdotes.<sup>2</sup> He is a master at explaining the political and psychological maneuvering of congressional leaders like then Senator Lyndon Johnson as well as Humphrey himself, who lined up votes, meted out deals, and offered last-minute compromises to get the Civil Rights Act of 1964 signed into law (251-263). Humphrey was a reliable advocate for labor unions and government checks on corporate power. Traub is especially attentive to the

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, Samuel G. Freedman, *Into the Bright Sunshine: Young Hubert Humphrey and the Fight for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Stuart H. Brody, *Humphrey and Me* (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Press, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Traub is a Distinguished Fellow at New York University's Center on International Cooperation and the author of *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), *The Freedom Agenda* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), and *The Best Intentions* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006).

development of Humphrey's painful relationship with Johnson, who combined exquisite flatteries and wily grooming with numerous humiliations of Humphrey. *True Believer* serves as a reminder of how much Humphrey might have done had he not gotten caught up in Johnson's cruel games.

Senator Humphrey was a cold warrior with an avid interest in foreign policy. Committed to containing Communism, he sought to do so in ways that deemphasized military engagements. Traub covers Humphrey's efforts on behalf of nuclear disarmament, a test ban treaty, foreign aid programs, and Israel (which was then a progressive cause), as well as his ill-advised support for Johnson's Vietnam policies.<sup>3</sup> There is a nice recounting of Humphrey's 1958 meeting with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow ("I liked him like nobody's business") and other tidbits (204). But once Humphrey became vice president, Johnson sidelined him from all foreign policy responsibilities and discussions. Overall, there is nothing new here for historians of US diplomacy and foreign policy. The central drama is domestic.

What happened to Hubert? That was *the* question among American liberals and progressives in the 1960s, who remembered a firebrand mayor calling out the white supremacist Dixiecrats at the 1948 Democratic Convention. No one had done that before. The affronted southerners harrumphed out of the convention to the ribald cheering and hooting of liberal Democrats. This marked the beginning of the historic transformation of the Democratic Party from white supremacy to civil rights and affirmative action (6, 108-116).<sup>4</sup> It was instigated by a brave, if talky, true believer who refused to play the political game and kowtow to racists. Most of Traub's generation knows the rest of the story—how Humphrey's political ambitions and willingness to compromise made him a sellout, how Johnson played him like a cheap piano, holding out the vice-presidency and making him dance and fall in line on Vietnam to get the prize, which came with further humiliations as Johnson had only contempt for a man who could be bought so easily.<sup>5</sup> A new generation of true believers "dumped the Hump" in 1968, thereby giving the presidency to the great foe of liberals, Republican presidential nominee Richard Nixon (344-345).<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of the retelling of this sad tale is not clear. The title suggests that Traub has new information or a new spin that will move us beyond the standard narrative. Clearly, Traub works to remind readers of just how genuine, principled, and progressive Humphrey was, and how he inspired people, woke them up, got them on board; and not just progressives. He could convince businesspeople, clubwomen, farmers, and hardened newspapermen of the power of political activism and participation in the fight for justice. Television never quite conveyed his rhetorical power, but just about everyone who interacted with him remembered the fire. In the 1980s, I hawked Humphrey memorial plates at the Minnesota State Fair and every person who wanted one had a story about how inspiring Humphrey was and what he had meant to them. And he worked hard for his causes, studying reports, cajoling naysayers, making hard compromises. The man had energy. But he was only human and Traub dutifully tells the whole story, adding damning details to the compromises that Hubert accrued and the Black allies he alienated as he sought higher office. Of course, compromises had to be made—that is democracy. Of course, liberal politicians need to cozy up to the heads of multinational corporations; that too is democracy. And of course, Humphrey had to play the

<sup>3</sup> See Andrew L. Johns, *The Price of Loyalty: Hubert Humphrey's Vietnam Conflict* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Arnold A. Offner, *Hubert Humphrey: The Conscience of the Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See also Walter LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> See Luke Nichter, *The Year That Broke Politics: Collusion and Chaos in the Presidential Election of 1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023.); Heather Hendershot, *When the News Broke: Chicago 1968 and the Polarizing of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); Michael Schumacher, *The Contest: The 1968 Election and the War for America's Soul* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Lawrence O'Donnell, *Playing with Fire: The 1968 Election and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017); Aram Goudsouzian, *The Men and the Moment: The Election of 1968 and the Rise of Partisan Politics in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Michael Cohen, *American Maelstrom: The 1968 Election and Politics of Division* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

game, especially since he truly believed in the American political system. But it is hard to read all of this and come away thinking we need more of *that* in these polarized times.

While it is unclear if readers will be inspired by the tale recounted here, this boomer got a bit teary reading the last lines of this book, which are from Humphrey about how he wanted history to remember him: “as an effective man in government: that I was a decent man, that I knew my job, that I knew how to get things done and that I did important things in government” (458).

*I did important things in government.* This line is so humbly and powerfully at odds with today’s loudmouth anti-government politics that it just breaks my heart.

**Jennifer Delton** is Professor of History at Skidmore College. She is the author of four books, including, most recently, *The Industrialists: How the National Association of Manufacturers Shaped American Capitalism* (Princeton University Press, 2020).