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A BATTLE OF PURGATORY

By Kevin Featherly

Forty years later, four Minnesotans who had an inside view of the Democratic Convention remember the chaos

“Schism, bitterness, demands for violent solutions, disenchantment with the way things are, fear of what may be—these are the forces, some would say the demons, that are loose in the U.S. in 1968. The demons accompanied the Democrats to Chicago.”

— *Time* magazine, Sept. 6, 1968

As the Democrats prepared for their August 1968 national convention in Chicago, the party’s presidential candidates were Minnesota’s two leading political figures, Vice President Hubert Humphrey and his Jesuitical antiwar opponent, U.S. Sen. Eugene McCarthy.

The convention arrived at the midway point of one of the most difficult years in U.S. history. Americans had suffered a series of shocks—

the Tet Offensive, the abdication of President Lyndon Johnson, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, rioting in the cities. It was all prelude. Neither Humphrey nor McCarthy could have anticipated the intensity of the firestorm that awaited them in Chicago.

Mayor Richard J. Daley sensed it and converted his city into an armed encampment. Paranoid that 100,000 left-wing radicals were about to descend on Chicago, Daley ringed the conven-

tion hall with barbed wire and placed the city’s 12,000 police on 12-hour shifts. He also pulled in the Illinois National Guard troops, the U.S. Army, state and county law officers, Secret Service agents and private security contractors—between 25,000 and 30,000 defenders, a force larger than George Washington’s Continental Army.

“Never had so many feared so much from so few,” *Chicago Daily News* columnist Mike Royko observed in his classic Daley biography *Boss* in 1971. “At most, 5,000 war protesters had come to Chicago.”

Any mismatch was ignored by the authorities. Chicago’s blue-collar cops moved in and hit the college-aged hippies hard—along with many journalists and other onlookers. The clubbings started at 11 p.m. Sunday night, when police pushed 4,000 protesters out of Lincoln Park and into the streets, and they continued until conventioners finally left town Friday morning.

"By Monday night," Royko wrote, "it was irrelevant to the police whether the person they clubbed was young or old, male or female, a protester or a hapless neighborhood resident who happened to be on his way home from work."

At that very moment, Humphrey's nomination got under way at the Chicago amphitheater. McCarthy watched from a suite on the 23rd floor overlooking Grant Park as a violent clash unfolded, protesters on one side, police and National Guardsmen on the other. Authorities executed a precise pincer movement against demonstrators, reminding the professorial McCarthy of the ancient Battle of Cannae between Hannibal and the Romans. "A battle of purgatory," he murmured as he turned away in disgust.

Humphrey, too, watched the violence, aghast, from a 23rd-floor suite overlooking Grant Park. Not that the protesters were all innocents. Some hurled rocks and bricks at police, others threw golf balls spiked with nails. With all the tumult, Humphrey's doomed nomination arrived as a near-afterthought.

Forty years later, the images of the convention remain stamped on the American political psyche. Below, four who were there—Humphrey's top speechwriter Ted Van Dyk; former U.S. congressman Don Fraser; Ridder Publications Washington correspondent Al Eisele; and former St. Paul mayor George Latimer—share their insights on Minnesota politics' moment in the black-hole sun: Chicago '68.

GEORGE LATIMER: "WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR COUNTRY?"

In 1968, George Latimer was a 33-year-old labor attorney and precinct organizer who hadn't yet risen high in the political ranks. So he went to Chicago under false pretenses—a well-connected friend scored him a bogus press pass.

His press-box vantage point at the convention hall gave Latimer a bird's-eye view of the notorious, televised clash between Daley and Sen. Abraham Ribicoff, when the Connecticut senator took to the podium and denounced the mayor's repressive "Gestapo tactics." Latimer couldn't hear the string of vulgarities Daley allegedly spewed back from the floor, but remembers seeing Daley sweep his finger across his throat, motioning for Ribicoff to shut his mouth.

However, his most vivid memory occurred outside the hall, during a visit to McCarthy's headquarters suite on the 15th floor of the Conrad Hilton, when Latimer stepped to the window and gazed out at the fighting below.

"The lighting was eerie, it was almost like there were floodlights," he recalls. "Coming across the bridge were jeeps with mounted machine guns. The Guard was coming. ... I was reminded of a play, [Jean Genet's] *The Balcony*, I once saw, which has to do with a dictator. It reminded me of that in that it looked like the military was going to take over."

It was, he says, a moment of pure foreboding.

"It filled you not with the awe of admiration, but of being stunned by seeing something that you looked at in disbelief, something that couldn't be happening here in our country," he says. Chicago, indeed that entire star-crossed year, "shook us," Latimer says, "and it's not hyperbole to say that we have never been the same."

AL EISELE: "A TERRIFIC STORY"

One chapter title in Al Eisele's 1971 biography of Humphrey and McCarthy, *Almost to the Presidency*, says it all: "Catastrophe—Chicago 1968."

Chicago was the first of 10 presidential conventions that Minnesota native Eisele has covered in his career—he will cover his 11th in 2008. Recently retired as editor of Washington, D.C.'s *The Hill* newspaper, in 1968 Eisele was a Washington correspondent for Ridder Publications who covered the action inside and outside the convention hall. Chicago, he says, was one of the three most important stories he ever covered—the others being Watergate and the Clinton impeachment.

One incident in particular sticks out. On the final evening of the convention, he was in McCarthy's Hilton suite talking to the candidate. Outside yet another in the endless series of Grant Park clashes was raging—this one the worst of the week. Cops threw several demonstrators through the hotel's plate-glass windows while clubbing anyone who got in their way; tear gas seeped into the hotel's lobby. Someone rushed into McCarthy's suite and urged him to get downstairs and tell the cops to lay off his volunteers. Accompanied by two physicians—McCarthy's brother Austin and Dr. Bill Davidson—he went downstairs to try to stop the beatings and treat the injured. Eisele went down to observe, being careful not to get in the way of the swinging nightsticks.

"There were times when you were aware that you shouldn't be on the wrong side of the street," he says. "You could very well be in the middle of the *mélée* if you were over there, because cops didn't seem to discriminate."

Then, the incomprehensible. According to *Almost to the Presidency*, at 5 a.m. Friday morning, with the convention already ended, police stormed McCarthy's hotel suites, awakening, clubbing and herding campaign volunteers into elevators under the pretext that they had been throwing ashtrays at cops from their windows. McCarthy phoned the Humphrey campaign 10 flights up.

"I talked to [Humphrey's] people," Eisele remembers, "and they were urging him to go downstairs and do something. But he didn't, for whatever reason." For a disappointed McCarthy, it was the final straw. He later said that Humphrey's refusal to help was a key reason why he withheld his endorsement of Humphrey until the waning days of the

Did Johnson Want Humphrey to Lose?

President Johnson's relationship with Vice President Humphrey had always been rocky. In early 1965, after Humphrey let it slip at a security cabinet meeting that he opposed the bombing of Hanoi, Johnson retaliated by barring Humphrey from security-related meetings for years. It was one of a series of humiliations that led Humphrey to confide to top assistant Ted Van Dyk: "I've eaten so much of Johnson's shit in this job that I've grown to like the taste of it."

At no time was the iciness between them more evident than during Humphrey's run for the White House. At Chicago, Johnson intervened to ensure the Democrats would adopt no peace plank, and the problems didn't end there. Johnson, for example, would brief Humphrey on war developments only via teleconference, and only if his opponents, Republican Richard Nixon and third-party candidate George Wallace, were also present. In October, Johnson refused to release \$700,000 in campaign funds to Humphrey for the final push to Election Day.

Tellingly, Johnson bluntly refused in October to campaign for Humphrey in New Jersey, Texas and several crucial border states. In a passage in Al Eisele's book, *Almost to the Presidency*, Johnson curtly waves off the campaign's request, saying: "You know that Nixon is following my policies more closely than Humphrey."

Is it true, then? Did Johnson secretly favor the election of Nixon—the candidate he believed would protect his Vietnam policies, and thus his legacy—over his own vice president?

Years later, Humphrey confirmed his own suspicions, though with characteristic forgiveness. "[Johnson] was absolutely, totally involved [in Vietnam]," Humphrey told Eisele in 1971. "He had put so much into it and gone through so much pain and suffering for it that there was just no way that he could disengage himself from it. And any retreat from his position that he didn't make himself looked like it was sabotaging his efforts."

Van Dyk says that, at best, Johnson was conflicted about Humphrey's White House bid. In the infamous Chennault Affair, for instance, Johnson refused to expose Nixon after the Republican was caught—by way of secret intercepts—interfering in the peace process.

"I think toward the end, [Johnson] was ambivalent," Van Dyk tells *Law & Politics*. "He did show up for us at the Houston Astrodome rally on the Sunday before the election, but there were several key incidents—his meddling at the convention, his refusal to let Humphrey issue as vice president his own independent Vietnam statement, his refusal to unmask the Nixon chicanery. All those things indicate that, at one level at least, he really didn't want Humphrey to win."

— K.F.

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campaign. McCarthy's anger helped keep Democrats divided well after Chicago, badly hurting Humphrey's chances.

Eisele doesn't recall fearing for America in Chicago, the way Latimer did. "I didn't look at it in apocalyptic terms," he says. "But clearly it was not something that helped the image of America around the world or helped the Democratic Party, or helped the democratic process, or helped Humphrey's hopes."

What Eisele, a lifelong journalist, remembers is that it was a hell of a story. "I looked at it as a tremendous story. A great story," he says. "You knew that history was being made there and you were covering that. On top of that, the two [politicians] that I had covered for years were the principal actors there, which made it an even better story. ... The political tumult and the street violence, all that was part of the political story."

DON FRASER: "THE 800-POUND GORILLA"

Don Fraser was a near-anomaly among '68 convention delegates: he was an outspoken war critic who supported Hubert Humphrey. "He wasn't particularly happy about that," Fraser says of the vice president, "although he never made it an issue between us."

Fraser, who left Congress in 1979 and served as Minneapolis mayor from 1980 to 1993, spent much of his time in Chicago tending to convention business. He did not witness street violence firsthand, though like all delegates at the convention, he was well aware of it.

He remains baffled by Daley's show of force. "I have never seen a good account of what his reasoning was," Fraser says. "The impression I've been left with is that he was just determined to show that he was in charge."

Fraser was not among Humphrey's inner campaign circle, but he recalls private conversations with the vice president that indicated Humphrey had personal misgivings about Vietnam, and wanted out. "He supported

Johnson," Fraser says, "but it was because he was vice president—not because he felt necessarily that this was the cause for which the United States should be sending so many people over to fight."

However, for reasons known only to himself, Humphrey was unable, or unwilling, to break from the president on the war during that critical week in Chicago. "Whether he had fears of how Johnson might respond, denouncing Humphrey publicly or whatever, I don't know," Fraser says. "I have the impression that Johnson was the 800-pound gorilla in the arena in which Humphrey would have to operate."

TED VAN DYK: "HE COULD HAVE"

Few people were closer to Humphrey than Ted Van Dyk, the vice president's senior assistant and top speechwriter. Van Dyk, who later became vice president at Columbia University and worked as a senior adviser to the McGovern and Carter presidential campaigns, recently published a memoir, *Heroes, Hacks and Fools*, in which Chicago '68 features prominently.

With violence reaching a peak in Grant Park, Van Dyk went into the lobby of the Hilton to witness the mêlée. He remembers seeing glassware being dropped onto cops' heads from the upper floors—by McCarthy volunteers, he believes. He watched police beating people and "indiscriminately arresting everyone."

He almost got pulled into the maelstrom. "I took about two steps off the sidewalk and was grabbed by a policeman. I had to break his grip and go back inside. There was tear gas wafting into the lobby, and that characterized the chaos, it seemed to me."

If it didn't, another scene he witnessed in that lobby certainly would have. Van Dyk watched in horror as a man in plain clothes threw a defenseless woman, head first, down a flight of stairs.

Van Dyk says that, contrary to popular belief, Humphrey did try to break with



Johnson before the convention, but was rebuked when he sought Johnson's blessing. "We prepared an independent position for Humphrey on Vietnam and a white paper," he says. The document proposed no unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam—the goal of peace activists—but it did offer to reduce American military presence and suggested that with a show of good faith by the North Vietnamese in negotiations, the bombing of Hanoi might be suspended. It was an accommodating step toward McCarthy's position.

"Humphrey showed it to Johnson," Van Dyk says. "Johnson said that if Humphrey issued it, he would denounce him as playing politics with peace. [The president] kept the

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When Gov. Tim Pawlenty tabbed appellate attorney Eric Magnuson as the next chief justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, he may have been naming one of the most influential state court jurists in the country. *By Max Heerman, Briggs and Morgan*

WALKING IN THE SUNSHINE

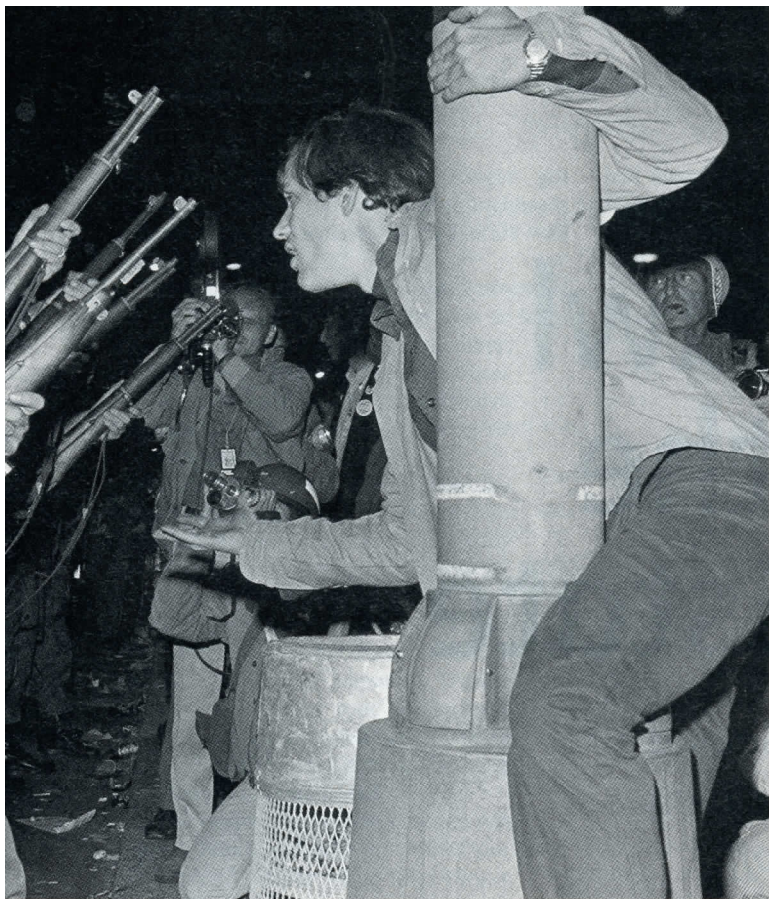
Sixty years ago Hubert Humphrey set the stage for Barack Obama

Sixty years ago Hubert Humphrey told the 1948 Democratic National Convention, "The time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights," both splitting the Democratic Party and helping pave the way to an African-American presidential candidate in 2008. Read the full text of his speech on our Web site.

WHEN LOCAL BECAME THE NEW ORGANIC

How the local food movement came of age

David Morris of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance explains the dawning of a new way of thinking about food.



AP PHOTO/IRHS

pressure on to keep Humphrey from dissenting on the war.”

Humphrey could have refused to yield to that pressure and Van Dyk personally advised Humphrey to do so. On the other hand, he says, Johnson’s threats hardly rang hollow. “He had the incumbency and he controlled, among other things, all of the southern and border state politics,” Van Dyk says. “Imagine if a president were to go on national television and denounce his own vice president for harming the peace process? What do you think that would do to him?”

Nonetheless, Van Dyk says he wanted to roll the dice, call Johnson’s bluff and issue the independent statement, regardless of the risks. “It was an ongoing dispute inside our own group,” he recalls. “I would have gone ahead. Humphrey felt unable to do so.”

Van Dyk believes that, had Humphrey taken that step, he likely would have averted many of the street clashes. Adopting even the outlines of McCarthy’s peace plank would have left the antiwar crowd with little to protest. That would, in turn, have spared traditional, blue-collar “lunch bucket liberals” the scenes of disorder and chaos on their TV screens, images that helped sour them against the

Democrats. Had Humphrey taken from Nixon only the blue-collar precincts of Ohio and Northern New Jersey, Van Dyk says, he would have won the election.

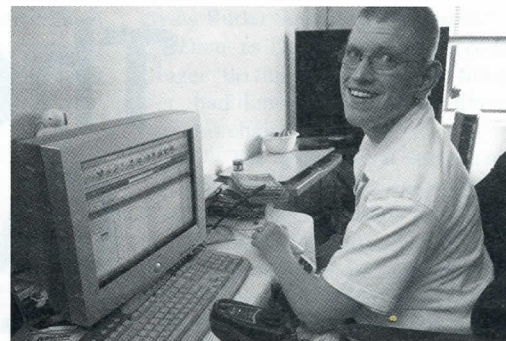
Humphrey ultimately did break from the president, on a nationally televised address from Salt Lake City on Sept. 30. The effect was dramatic, as Humphrey began to unite his party and to erase Nixon’s 15-point Labor Day lead in the polls. But the Salt Lake City speech was too little, too late.

Why did Humphrey not move earlier? Was he intimidated by Johnson? Was he too loyal to the president? Neither, says Van Dyk.

“He was not fatally weak, he was good-hearted,” Van Dyk says. “He lacked a jugular instinct, let’s put it that way. It was not in him. He never tried to get even with people; he would often not take the decisive and ruthless action, which would have been in his own interest. He was just too humane. He was almost too good to be true.”

Perhaps too good for the good of the country? Van Dyk wouldn’t go that far. But Humphrey’s insistent good nature exacted a critical price at Chicago, he acknowledges. “All of that led to a lack of decisiveness,” he says, “at a moment when it was really needed.” **L&P**

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