

Why Hubert Humphrey delayed breaking with Johnson and thus lost the 1968 election

By Hans Binnendijk

My first boss when I worked in the Senate was Hubert Humphrey (he came back to the Senate after running for President). I once talked with him on the Senate Floor in 1977 about why he did not end his support for the war earlier. Humphrey told me that right after Johnson's March 1968 announcement that he would not run for re-election, Johnson talked with him. According to Humphrey, Johnson told Humphrey that he (Johnson) decided not to run for re-election because he was secretly negotiating with North Vietnam to end the war. Johnson told Humphrey that he knew Humphrey would run for President and that if Humphrey broke with him over the war, it would undercut his negotiations with the North Vietnamese. As a result, Humphrey delayed so as not to undercut the chances for peace, which of course never came in 1968. The result was the Chicago riots and Humphrey's defeat in November 1968. Knowing a bit about Johnson and Humphrey, Humphrey's story rang true to me.

Humphrey was a pleasure to work for. I was his staffer for the Foreign Aid bill. He was a master of compromise and was able to defuse dangerous amendments by giving in just a little while retaining what he really needed. He was universally respected.

Humphrey was a domestic liberal, but he was strong on defense. He sent me to Korea in 1977 after Jimmy Carter announced that he would withdraw troops from South Korea in 5 years. Humphrey and I both concluded after my oversight trip that Carter's plan to withdraw US troops would start a war in Korea. We were able to get that policy reversed.

I was on the Senate Floor in 1978 for Humphrey's farewell speech - he was dying of cancer, and everyone knew it. The Senate chamber was packed. There was not a dry eye anywhere.