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Home of the Politics of Joy: Hubert H. Humphrey in South Dakota

CHARLES L. GARRETTSON III

The front cover of *Time* magazine's 17 January 1949 issue carried a picture of a young Hubert Humphrey with a midwestern twister behind him. The magazine singled him out as the most articulate radical of his entire freshman Senate class, having the "cyclonic attack of an advertising salesman." It summed him up as a "hard-working, fast-talking fireball from the Midwest."[1] In those early days, Senator Humphrey was indeed regarded as a whirlwind—as a radical born out of the populist-progressive tradition of William Jennings Bryan. It is ironic, therefore, that twenty years later, rather than being the *champion* of the more radical wing of the Democratic party, Hubert Humphrey was the *target* of it. Responsible in both cases was the sense of value that had been instilled in him by his midwestern upbringing—a sense of value based, finally, on a mix of small-town, all-American religious and political virtues. In many ways, Hubert Humphrey was a Norman Rockwell portrait in real life.

Hubert Horatio Humphrey, Jr., was born in Wallace, South Dakota, in 1911. Four years later, his family moved to Doland, a town of about six hundred people in the northeastern part of the state. For the next fifteen years, Humphrey attended school, worked in his father's drugstore, and participated in the life of this small American town. The family moved to Huron in 1931, but by then Humphrey was a grown man. In later years, he often referred to his upbringing in Doland as the period of time that made him what he was. Probably

1. "Education of a Senator," *Time*, 12 Jan. 1949, p. 13.

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the most profound experience to give shape to young Humphrey's life there was one that he himself referred to time and again. "The first time I ever saw my father weep," he recalled, "I was sixteen years old and he was forty-five. It is something I have never forgotten not just because it moved me deeply, but because what followed was so typical of my father's approach to life."[2]

In the 1920s, the Great Depression was already affecting the Doland economy, forcing the Humphreys to sell their home, which had been "a warm nest for all the excitement and love of growing up." Humphrey recalled a day in 1927 when he came home from high school: "My mother was standing next to Dad and a stranger, under a big cottonwood on the front lawn. She was crying. Both men looked solemn, and I wondered what was wrong. Mother said, 'Dad has to sell the house to pay our bills.' My father talked to the man for a short time, signed a paper, and then the man went away. Afterward, Dad wept." Humphrey's father was a big man, almost six feet tall, and his tears shook his son. "At that moment," Humphrey said, "I began to have an adult's awareness of the possibilities for pain and tragedy in life." Other townspeople sustained similar losses, and a close family friend, banker Fred Gross, committed suicide.[3]

Despite their own loss, the Humphreys remained undaunted, drying their tears and moving to a smaller, rented house. "Distress in a small town like Doland had no protection of anonymity," Humphrey remembered. "It seemed then such total and public humiliation, but my father never looked back. He showed not a discernible ounce of acrimony, apology, or defeatism, and I don't think he felt any. . . . Some people who enjoy the sunshine of living are unprepared for the storms. When they are shocked or hurt, they withdraw and cover up. Not my father. Right up to the time he died, in November 1949, he had an undiminished appetite for life, accepting the bitter, enjoying the sweet."[4] His father's example was the one that Humphrey himself tried to follow through all the storms of his own life.

Beyond this deeply personal lesson, however, Humphrey also gained a political lesson from this event that would be equally instrumental in shaping his outlook. "No matter how competent my father may have been," Humphrey remarked, "or how good my

2. Hubert H. Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics*, ed. Norman Sherman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1976), p. 33.
3. Ibid., pp. 33-34.
4. Ibid., p. 34.

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mother, or how fine my community, . . . it could be wrecked by forces over which we had no control. . . . this little secure world of my hometown just wasn't strong enough to fight off the powerful forces that seemed to be crowding in on us."[5] During the depression, William Jennings Bryan's insistence that East Coast money manipulators controlled and would ruin the lives of the rest of the country had been driven home with a new and indelible force on a family in which the Cross of Gold speech was recited twice a year. Hence, the grown Humphrey said later, "when I see tight money, and when I see the Federal Reserve Bank raising that discount rate, and the prime rate, . . . I remember my daddy telling me what happened in 1922, and I remember 1926, and I remember 1928, and I am rightly suspicious of the manipulators of money."[6]

As Woodrow Wilson had been the political hero of Hubert H. Humphrey, Sr., in the teens, so Franklin Delano Roosevelt was to become the political hero for the next Humphrey generation in the thirties. "I thought," said the younger Humphrey, "he was the first president in my lifetime to challenge the power of these moneychangers," [7] and, perhaps more important, "he was the man who saved our homes."[8] For the young man from Doland, FDR was a hero because he acted on the basis of principles embedded in America's foundation to challenge the pernicious materialist evil that the eastern financial establishment represented—an evil that violated those very principles. Lionizing such efforts—and believing in the possibility of their eventual success—was easy for someone like Humphrey, coming, as he did, out of the midwestern prairie populist tradition of that time.

"During the 'twenties," wrote Julian Hartt, son of Doland's Methodist minister and Humphrey's high-school chum, "Doland claimed a population of 600-plus; the old wheeze had it that the census must have been taken on a Saturday night in mid-July. There was nothing of singular charm in its appearance or memorable in its history, nothing whatever to set it apart from scores and scores of towns on the plains, almost all of them created by the railroads." Doland, Hartt continued, "had one schoolhouse. The primary grades occupied the first floor, the high school the second floor. The gym-

5. Quoted in Albert Eisele, *Almost to the Presidency: A Biography of Two American Politicians* (Blue Earth, Minn.: Piper Co., 1972), p. 20.

6. Quoted ibid., p. 22.

7. Ibid.

8. Quoted in *Into the Bright Sunshine*, a film documentary directed by William Connell, produced by Concept Associates, Bethesda, Md., 1982.

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Both primary and secondary students occupied the Doland School of the 1910s and 1920s.

nasium was in the basement." The low ceiling of the basketball court put the school's team "at a nearly irremediable disadvantage when they played in gyms where you could arch the ball."[9] Yet, as one of Humphrey's biographers said: "At almost any place in town one can stand on a front porch and in the sharp and brilliant light scan with perfect clarity the open country. The horizon lies around the town, very close and very far. . . . The big questions seem very close in this small place."[10]

In the 1920s, "the big questions" *were* unavoidably close but not just because the horizon surrounded the town. Banks had begun to close there as early as 1926, the year in which the Humphreys

9. Julian N. Hartt, "Hubert Humphrey and the Pieties of the Prairie," *Dialog* 23 (Summer 1984): 174. In a 1962 memorandum to Winthrop Griffith, a Humphrey biographer, Humphrey described Hartt as the closest friend from his youth, someone who continued to be a friend as an adult. Humphrey to Griffith, 16 May 1962, Hubert H. Humphrey Collection, St. Paul, Minn. Hartt received his Ph.D. from Yale and went on to teach there for nearly thirty years. He then left Yale to become William F. Kenan Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, retiring as professor emeritus.

10. Michael Amrine, *This Is Humphrey: The Story of the Senator* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1960), p. 24.

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lost their home. The drought, the dust, and the locusts had followed in about that order. Humphrey recalled the apocalyptic pall of those times, stating that after watching the grasshoppers eat the paint off the houses, he sometimes "thought it was the end of the world."[11] Despite the calamities of that period and place, Humphrey in later years proudly asserted, "The kind of public man I am has been overwhelmingly shaped by two influences: the land of South Dakota and an extraordinary relationship with an extraordinary man, my father."[12]

Hubert H. Humphrey, Sr., was known as the druggist who "never sells you a pill without selling you an idea."[13] In this, as in other things, he was something of an eccentric. He claimed that after he heard William Jennings Bryan speak for the first time he became a Democrat—and that was eccentric enough in a town that had only about five such curiosities. Yet he proved sufficiently personable and able to gain a seat on the town's city council. In fact, he eventually became the town's mayor. His tenure as town councilman is most vividly remembered in terms of his ardent (though ultimately unsuccessful) opposition to the takeover of the town's power plant by a private company, a sell-out that the town would later regret for reasons the elder Humphrey had predicted, namely, higher rates and poorer service, even though the opposite had been promised.[14]

Both the Humphrey store and the Humphrey home were powerhouses in their own right—they each produced scenes of intellectual probing and cultural richness that were striking for the rural locale. Hubert Humphrey, Sr., used to say that his closest friends were first "my children, and then my books."[15] His library consisted of such disparate texts as James Bryce's *American Commonwealth*, Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Joseph Tumulty's *Woodrow Wilson As I Know Him*, Wilson's own *New Freedom*, Henry Raymond's *Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln*, Moncure Conway's *Life of Thomas Paine*, Emil Lud-

11. Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, p. 56.
12. Ibid., p. 19.
13. Ibid., p. 26.
14. Ibid., pp. 26-29; Eisele, *Almost to the Presidency*, pp. 15, 18; Amrine, *This Is Humphrey*, pp. 31-32. The older Humphrey would continue in political life, becoming South Dakota delegate to a number of Democratic national conventions, including the 1948 convention in Philadelphia where his son first made a national name for himself. Hubert Humphrey, Sr., declined to run for governor only when the younger Humphrey's return to the University of Minnesota forced the elder Humphrey to remain in the drugstore.
15. Humphrey, "My Father," *Atlantic Monthly* 218 (Nov. 1966): 83.

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wig's *Napoleon*, Jose Ortega y Gasset's *Revolt of the Masses*, Robert Ingersoll's *Why I Am an Agnostic*, and the Bible. There were volumes on nearly all the American presidents and founding fathers, alongside works by Immanuel Kant, the mystic Henry Drummond, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Elbert Hubbard, Henry W. Longfellow, the Romantics (Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley), and Edgar Guest.[16]

Books, and the ideas held within them, were avidly discussed both within the Humphrey home and from behind the Humphrey counter. Senator Humphrey told the story of how his mother would break in on late-night sessions when his father had all the children arrayed about him listening as he read. She would protest about the late hour, Humphrey recalled, but his father "would give her an affectionate squeeze and urge her to 'sleep for all of us.' "[17] Frances Humphrey Howard, Humphrey's sister, remembered that their father divided his books carefully among his four children as if the volumes "were a portfolio stock."[18] Senator Humphrey carried his father's legacy throughout his life, remarking in 1970 that he had been brought up on the political literature of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson, and others.[19]

The senior Humphrey's eager and receptive mind also led him to subscribe to the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *Minneapolis Journal*, and the *St. Paul Dispatch*, as well as such local productions as the *Watertown Public Opinion*. When he found something new to interest him, he pursued it with enthusiasm. After discovering classical music, for example, he drove to Minneapolis to hear its symphony orchestra and bought a Victrola along with piles of RCA Victor Red Seal records. "He got out of bed once in the middle of the night," his son remembered, "so that he could drive to New York and arrive at the proper time to attend a performance at the Metropolitan."[20] When traveling theatrical companies came through town, he not only sold tickets, he offered the family furniture as props. The fact that the family received their tickets free was small consolation to his wife as the family home was half-emptied of its earthly possessions. After discovering poetry, the drugstore owner went so far as to read it on local radio to what must have been a somewhat bemused audience.[21]

16. Ibid., p. 84; Amrine, *This Is Humphrey*, p. 31.
17. Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, p. 27.
18. Interview with Frances Humphrey Howard, Bethesda, Md., 27 Oct. 1983.
19. Humphrey letter (no addressee), 18 Mar. 1970, Humphrey Collection.
20. Humphrey, "My Father," p. 84.
21. Ibid.; Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, pp. 27-28.

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His active interest in reading and literature was also involved in yet another of the older Humphrey's eccentricities, his agnosticism. For a time, the druggist provided Doland with its own "village atheist." Frances Humphrey Howard recalled that whenever more strait-laced members of the family came to visit, her father told her to run and hide his copies of Voltaire, Ingersoll, and Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* under the sofa.[22] Eventually, however, he discovered religion, plunging into it just as he had into everything else that caught his interest. He and the Methodist minister, Albert Hartt, Julian Hartt's father, became close friends soon after the Hartts moved to Doland from Groton. With his usual energy, the elder Humphrey "was soon on the church board and taught Sunday school, drawing the biggest, most enthusiastic adult classes in the county."[23] The class related the Bible to modern American society with an emphasis on social action, his son recalled.[24] In fact, his father's "own good works did not end when his class was over. In an evangelical spirit, he would bring home three or four or more people for Sunday dinner and more talk."[25] Of these same classes, Julian Hartt amusingly stated that the druggist's "evangelical spirit" could lead "somewhat to my father's annoyance on occasion, because with Humphrey leading the men's Bible class, it was pretty hard for anybody else to get a word in."[26]

Beyond even his religious zeal, however, the drugstore owner's real passion was for politics, and Humphrey Drug became his podium. "Just think of it, boys," Senator Humphrey recalled his father saying, "here we are in the middle of this great big continent, here in South Dakota, with the land stretching out for hundreds of miles, with people who can vote and govern their own lives, with riches enough for all if we will take care to do justice."[27] With the vision of a true democrat and a true patriot, the older Humphrey saw a potentially forlorn and isolated existence as a remarkable and wonderful opportunity. This view was propounded as steadily as it was vigorously from the platform of the drugstore counter, where young Hubert Humphrey, Jr., from the age of ten, was imbued with that same outlook as he washed dishes and made sodas.

22. Interview with Howard.
23. Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, p. 29.
24. Interview of Humphrey, by journalist/author Theodore ("Ted") White, transcript in Humphrey Collection.
25. Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, p. 29.
26. Interview with Julian Hartt, 23 Mar. 1983, Charlottesville, Va.
27. Quoted in Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, p. 23.

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"In that ice-cream parlor atmosphere," the senator remembered, "I heard things that further shaped my life and attitudes toward people and ideas. . . . In his store, there was eager talk about politics, town affairs, and religion—just as there was around our dinner table. . . . I've attended several good universities, listened to some of the great parliamentary debates of our time, but have seldom heard better discussions of basic issues than I did as a boy standing on a wooden platform behind a soda fountain." The senator claimed that his penchant for discussing things endlessly was simply something that had been ingrained in him from these early days. "I was infected then," he said, "with the excitement of good discussions. Dialogue and conversation, as I listened and learned, meant having something to say but [also] drawing out others; being passionately concerned with the people and the issues but tempering that passion with respect for those who thought differently."[28]

Talk in the Humphrey household was not simply a matter of passing the time. "Before the fact is the dream," Hubert Humphrey, Sr., would regularly expostulate.[29] Conversation for all the Humphreys became a way of building their dreams, for it made all the world a possibility. The younger Humphrey later remarked that for his father, "a druggist in a tiny town in the middle of the continent, American history and world affairs were as real . . . as they were in Washington, D.C., 1342 miles away" (as a sign on Doland's main street had indicated throughout Humphrey's youth).[30] In 1964, Michael Amrine described Doland as a town where all you were likely to see besides "a man, just loading a sack of feed onto a pickup truck," is "a dog, asleep—and a few dragonflies that are only pretending to be busy."[31] While that may or may not be a fair depiction of Doland in the 1960s, the life lived in it during the 1920s, at least, was grander than that. The Humphreys, without question, played a key role in the social and intellectual milieu of Doland. Here it was that Hubert Humphrey, Jr., envisioned the dream that would later become the fact of his own life.

For boyhood friend Julian Hartt, "the atmosphere clearly was egalitarian," both in Doland in particular and in the prairie region at large, and it was an egalitarianism that was "all but universal." Though pervasive, that was not to say therefore "that it was inclusive and coherent." There was no racial prejudice against blacks "for

28. Ibid., p. 26.
29. Quoted ibid., p. 23.
30. Ibid., p. 27.
31. Amrine, *This Is Humphrey*, p. 24.

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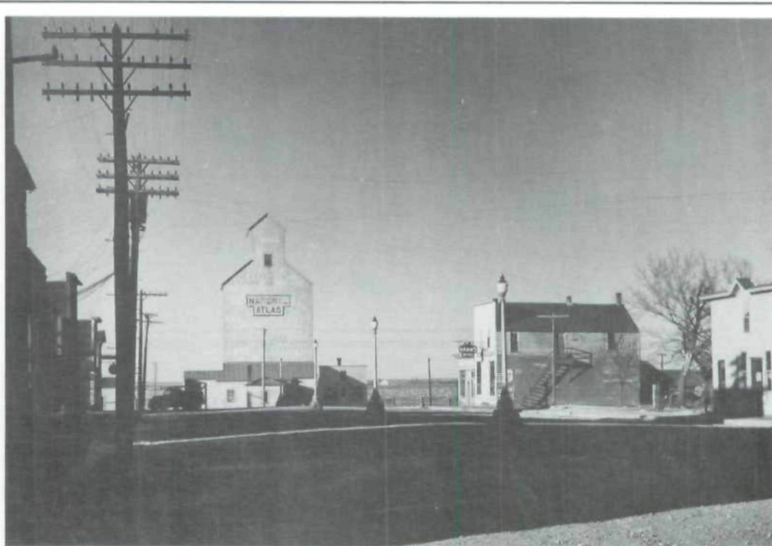
the simple reason that there were none—but now you raise the question about the *Indians*," Hartt continued, "and almost all the cliches entertained about the black were entertained about the Indian—even among liberal people, . . . [i.e.,] they are shiftless, immoral, and lazy and they are riddled with alcoholism and venereal disease, etc., etc., etc. You see, it is exactly the same pattern."[32]

Though incomplete, the egalitarianism of the prairie was nonetheless still an important part of the frontier mentality. "In our home," the senior Humphrey once wrote, "high-hatting anyone was strictly taboo; if anything, the children were taught to go out of their way in treating less fortunately situated children in the community with kindness and respect."[33] The father's stress on egalitarian virtue made enough of an imprint on his son that years later he joked about his high school years in terms of equality. "That class of '28 walloped everybody in football," he told a class reunion, "and then we [the class of '29] had to take a beating from the teams next year

32. Interview with Hartt.
33. Quoted in Humphrey, "My Father," p. 84.



Hubert Humphrey, Sr., saw opportunity in the small town of Doland, situated in the center of the continent where the land stretched for hundreds of miles.

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just to get even. We were the sacrificial lamb. We had to be sacrificed on the altar of equality of treatment."[34]

The key concept in the Humphrey philosophy was the idea that "a person was what a person made himself to be." Initiative and self-reliance counted for nearly everything. The prestige (or lack thereof) of one's origins counted for little. As Hartt drolly quipped, "Once in a while someone who had gone to school in the East would show up out there, but he was always regarded as a freak—his parents had more money than they were entitled to, or . . . he had taken the wrong train somewhere and hadn't realized it until it was too late." At the outset, everyone was treated as an equal, at least until they showed themselves unworthy of being treated in such manner. Thus, "self-reliance, independence, doing an honest day's work for an honest day's dollar, taking care of yourself, provision for the future"—these were the ingredients that constituted the mix of religious-political values that flavored the prairie piety of that time.[35] Coupled with that was a concept of the *deserving poor*—those upon whom economic hardship had been imposed by forces over which the individual or family had no control. That concept would be considerably liberalized in the prairie of the twenties and thirties. Throughout the depression, drifters looking for some lunch would become as much a fixture of the American Great Plains as the dust; yet, as Hartt insisted: "To be poor was not in itself a disgrace. We were given every encouragement to believe that among the poor there were many admirable people, victims of circumstance rather than of defects of character."[36]

The persistence of so charitable a view of people was not due simply to the fact that so many were forced to suffer through the economic hard times of the Dust Bowl period. It was also attributable to another civic virtue, related to egalitarianism and equally ingrained into the religious-political fabric of that place and time, namely, a sense of fair play. Senator Humphrey told a story that illustrates how the dual sense of equality and fair play operated in the Humphrey family. "One day," he recalled, "a friend of mine and I went into the drugstore. I said, 'Dad, Jonathan here doesn't have any shoes, and his feet are so cold, they're blue.' My father took one look, pushed the NO SALE key on the cash register, took out some money, and walked Jonathan down the street to buy him wool-

34. Hubert Humphrey, transcript of speech, all-class reunion, Doland High School, 12 June 1976, Doland, S.Dak., author's collection.
35. Interview with Hartt.
36. Hartt, "Hubert Humphrey," p. 180.

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en socks and a pair of sturdy boots." Humphrey concluded that his father "did that kind of thing in a way that was not an act of charity—simply a matter of elemental justice and fairness."[37]

Julian Hartt remembered how Doland's Boy Scout troop, of which both he and Humphrey were members, had the sense of fair play instilled into them. Leaders insisted that when "we were playing games—everybody had to play, see—even the fat kid who can't run. . . . Everybody has to play, no one is left out."[38] In the prairie communities of the twenties, he said on another occasion, "fair play was an ideal of transcendent importance. It ordained sympathy and help to any deserving underdog. It commanded one to detest and if possible actively oppose any kind of bullying. So it was a great thing to take on a bully and thrash him. Success in that was a vindication of the moral order."[39]

A third civic concept woven into the religious-political outlook of that era in the prairie Midwest, and related to the previous two, was "doing one's part." During that time, Hartt recalled, "to do one's part was a clear and weighty imperative of the piety of the nation. True, there was a degree of tension between the vestigial spirit of the frontier, which urged us to be self-creators, and the doctrine of the covenanted nation which required everybody to contribute to the common good." Hartt suggested that the tension was not keenly felt in Doland, however. "We understood that the ideal required us to be hard workers; the immediate community which needed our concern for the common good was of course the family." By the teenage years, each family member had a responsibility, for example, to earn the money to buy his or her own clothes. "For young Humphrey," Hartt said, "that meant long hours in the drugstore; for me it meant farm work during the summer months, and doing the janitor work in the church the rest of the time."[40] This view of life provided the basis for the tremendous emphasis on work that existed in Doland at that time. Humphrey himself once told a journalist that failure to work was the gravest sin a person could commit in Doland, and Frances Humphrey Howard similarly spoke of how "everybody had to do his part . . . everybody had a task to do."[41]

Egalitarianism, fair play, and doing one's part were thus predominant features of the moral landscape within which Humphrey grew

37. Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, p. 26.
38. Interview with Hartt.
39. Hartt, "Hubert Humphrey," p. 177.
40. Ibid.
41. Interview of Humphrey by White; interview with Howard.

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up. In a sense, they formed a kind of moral trinity of which egalitarianism was the "father," generating the consequent mutual responsibilities of guaranteeing an equal chance for all to participate and of requiring all to contribute. Together, they formed the moral kernel out of which the Doland community grew.

Hubert Humphrey, Jr., right, posed with boyhood friend Julian Hartt next to an airplane that disrupted church services in Doland on a Sunday in 1928.

An additional characteristic of Doland life that formed an important part of Humphrey's character was the sense of community that existed there. In an interview with Theodore White, Humphrey remarked that Doland had taught him about community spirit. When he added that he had never owned a house key until he became mayor of Minneapolis, he was referring to the sense of in-

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terrelatedness (not to mention trust) that existed among the entire population of Doland—and of the prairie Midwest in general.[42] People lived with the understanding that they lived *together,* and a genuine sense of familial closeness existed. You had, for instance, neighbors like the Wilkins whose "house was real close—you just walked in one door and out the other when you wanted to save steps . . . that's the kind of folks they were to us."[43] Forty-six years after leaving Doland, Humphrey was still able to recall on one of his many returns to town the location of various families. "Oh yes," he said, "that used to be Mrs. Gordon's, and that's where she used to live, and there was the Labrie family, that's where they used to live, and there was the Garthwaites, and there was the Skogmos and the Riskes, and so on down the line, and over there was the Jones family, and . . . there was the Schoof family, and my goodness, I could go on and on."[44]

Reflecting on the community spirit that characterized Doland, Humphrey argued on the same occasion that all people needed a sense of community in order "to feel that they are a part of a society, or, to put it another way, when you feel that you are a part of society there is a sense of community." He continued: "Now one of the great tragedies of the great urban centers today is that there people don't feel they belong. They live there, but they're not really involved. It isn't their life. It's their residence." Doland, in contrast, had been "like one big family" even though it often had plenty of problems. "But don't we have that in families?" he queried. "Sometimes bitter arguments, but we've had that in families. People very different, but isn't that true in families? But there was a sense of being, and a sense of belonging, and a sense of caring. Everybody knew everybody. There was really no place to hide. There was always a place to be. And you had the feeling that you were *wanted.*"[45] Humphrey desired America as a whole to be that kind of place, and that vision is the inspiration for so many domestic programs—ranging from the school-lunch program to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the National Endowment for the Humanities—that he championed in his thirty years of political life. When he said that his fifteen years in Doland "were very important, and they taught me things that I have never forgotten," he meant every word.[46]

42. Interview of Humphrey by White.
43. Quoted in Amrine, *This Is Humphrey,* p. 22.
44. Humphrey, Doland speech.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.

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Humphrey's vision did not spring from the idea that life in Doland was easy. On the contrary, as Frances Humphrey Howard said, life was "financially and physically very hard." The point was that, *despite* the hardships, life was emotionally "very warm and very generous." There was, as Howard continued, "no deprivation of the spirit or deprivation of affection. . . . no one thought he was poor . . . in Doland because there was much more egalitarianism [there than in the world today]. . . . most people worked for a living and most people knew each other." Everyone had a place. Everyone was made to feel important. The *Times Record* was the town newspaper, and its editor saw to it that "everything that was done in the school, or in the churches or in the community or in the farm community was reported in that paper—*everything*." This kind of community gave every individual a sense of belonging, of "having the right of assertion, of his own sense of righteousness—of what he thinks is right for him." Howard suggested that this communal regard even fostered a sense of ecumenism when, for instance, the children of a nearby Russian Mennonite church came to sing in a four-part choral performance hosted by other churches in Doland.[47] As Humphrey himself recalled, Doland had "a brightness of spirit that was rare."[48]

Humphrey once defined a Christian as someone who is trying to live a good life in order to create an earthly paradise.[49] Attempting somehow to arrive at heaven on earth was, of course, the clarion call of the Social Gospel, the great religious-political movement that began after the Civil War and continued until the 1920s. This "call" was consistently heard in the Humphrey household. "My father," the senator remarked, "brought me up to believe that there was worth in every person. My religion tells me that there is worth in every person. That's what it is all about."[50] On another occasion, he mentioned that the emphasis "was on the social imperatives of religion. A heavenly city, according to Dad, could be created on earth through good works."[51]

In the Humphrey home, then, the gospel that was heard was decidedly social. If one's Christianity did not directly—and effectively—involve one in righting social wrongs, then it was not a Chris-

47. Interview with Howard.

48. Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, p. 25.

49. Humphrey, transcript of speech, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minn., 9 Nov. 1945, Humphrey Collection.

50. Quoted in Caspar Nannes, "Humphrey of Minnesota," *The Link* (Nov. 1974): 30.

51. Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, p. 29.

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While the town of Doland was small, its generous community spirit played a large part in the formation of young Humphrey's character.

tianity worthy of the name. This viewpoint was not indigenous to the Humphreys alone—it was also the message they received regularly at church, where Humphrey learned that religious experience meant more than Sunday church attendance. Minister Albert Hartt urged compassion and justice as the standards toward which the youth of Doland should aspire. Humphrey recalled that a belief in social justice motivated Reverend Hartt, a sense of right that came from his thorough understanding of the underpinnings of Christianity. His teaching embraced an understanding of the requirements for social responsibility, community leadership, human decency, and forgiveness, as well as a stern morality.[52]

While requirements were strict, Christianity in Doland was not simply a sober and rigid discipline. The senator, giving his reasons for his early church-going, remarked, "I attended church as a boy, primarily at Mother's insistence, but also because I liked it and because Julian Hartt, the minister's son, was a close friend."[53] The religion that young Hubert grew up in was a full, rich, and joyful experience based on a life well-lived, not the doleful sternness of some early American models.[54] It provided, in other words, the kind

52. Humphrey to Winthrop Griffith, 16 May 1962, Humphrey Collection.
53. Humphrey, *Education of a Public Man*, p. 29.
54. Humphrey to Griffith.

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of religious soil out of which the politics of joy could easily (and eagerly) grow. In Humphrey's world view, true understanding of Christianity—real spiritual insight—consisted in understanding one's social responsibility and meeting it.

Always coupled with understanding the responsibility was the task of doing something about it. The focus of life in the Humphrey home, in the Doland community, and in the entire prairie Midwest of the 1920s was on work—on *doing*. Talking was certainly (and constantly) important. Yet *action* was predominant. Michael Amrine records that Humphrey's maternal grandfather "preached a doctrine in which work was about the equal of life and life meant work."[55] Frances Humphrey Howard similarly talked of "this tremendous emphasis on the work ethic," in which "everybody had to do his part . . . 'work for the night is coming'—the work ethic—that was our religion."[56] It was also a part of the Social Gospel, as indicated by one of its leading figures, Walter Rauschenbusch: "In the long run the only true way to gain moral insight, self-discipline, humility, love, and a consciousness of coherence and dependence, is to take our place among those who serve one another by useful labor. Parasitism blinds; work reveals."[57]

In terms of religious obligation, this stance meant that social justice was the primary feature of one's religion. While there certainly was an evangelical cast to the prairie religion of that period, Humphrey was taught to express his religious convictions mostly in deeds and not in words. Journalist Hays Gorey recalls Humphrey as saying: "I had been taught that the way you treat people is the way you treat God. . . . I was taught that religion should have something to do with your daily life—not just with Sunday."[58] Similarly, Humphrey told a constituent that among the first Bible verses he learned from his parents was one that urged, "Let your light shine so that men may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven."[59] In the Humphrey home, the epistle of James was hardly "an epistle of straw," as Luther had called it. Its 1:22 injunction to *do* the word and not hear it only can be found in Humphrey materials covering the course of his entire career. The idea was ingrained in him from early on. It should come as no surprise to learn

55. Amrine, *This Is Humphrey*, p. 25.
56. Interview with Howard.
57. Quoted in David Little, "Francis Greenwood Peabody," *Harvard Library Bulletin* 15 (July 1967): 297n.32.
58. Quoted in Hays Gorey, " 'I'm a Born Optimist': The Era of Hubert H. Humphrey," *American Heritage* 29 (Dec. 1977): 65.
59. Humphrey to Claudia Bailey, 7 July 1967, Humphrey Collection.

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that idle moments in Humphrey's childhood were abruptly ended by his father's tapping young Hubert's shoulder and saying, "Activity!"[60]

Even though the Social Gospel emphasis on social justice was the predominant religious theme in Humphrey's upbringing, evangelism, too, played its part. Though a product of the First and Second Great Awakenings in an earlier American era, evangelism's mark was still clearly stamped on Humphrey's own religious experience. Doland was the stopping place, for example, of various revivalist entourages. Julian Hartt provided a description of a revival in which Humphrey took part as the whole family came forward to confess sin and signal their readiness to be received into the church. "Now I don't know what sins he [Humphrey] confessed," Hartt said, "but you see public confession of sin wasn't required, that is, in particular. It was just assumed that you [were] 'under conviction,'—the phrase was that—'came under conviction'—and then you accepted Jesus as your savior, often with tears both of remorse and of joy, etc., etc., and it was quite emotional. . . . It was really emotionally very, very exciting. The whole group would get caught up in these feelings, and then, you know, people would gather around you and extend the right hand of fellowship and all this. . . . It was sort of like . . . like a pep meeting."[61]

Hartt's story reveals something of the religious piety of the time, as does another he told involving an evangelist from Cincinnati. The preacher's official name was Rev. Joseph Knapp, but the people of Doland knew him as "Cryin' Joe." "He was not a hell-fire and damnation preacher," Hartt remembered, "but he would tell these sad, sad stories—children on their death beds, pleading for Momma and Poppa to accept Jesus. Momma and Poppa accept Jesus and the child dies and goes to heaven, of course, radiant. And Joe used to cry telling his own stories. He would cry gracefully—wipe his eyes and so on." Cryin' Joe, like a lot of evangelists of the time, had his own musical accompanist, who had "what [in] later years we would have identified as a hot trumpet." When he "cut loose" on the horn, Hartt recalled, "that of course went over great—quite apart from the fact that it was the only show in town—that's why a lot of people came to it." The young Humphrey "was converted—that is to say, he trotted off to the altar when the altar [call] came," Hartt concluded.[62]

60. Winthrop Griffith, *Humphrey: A Candid Biography* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1965), p. 9.
61. Interview with Hartt.
62. Ibid.

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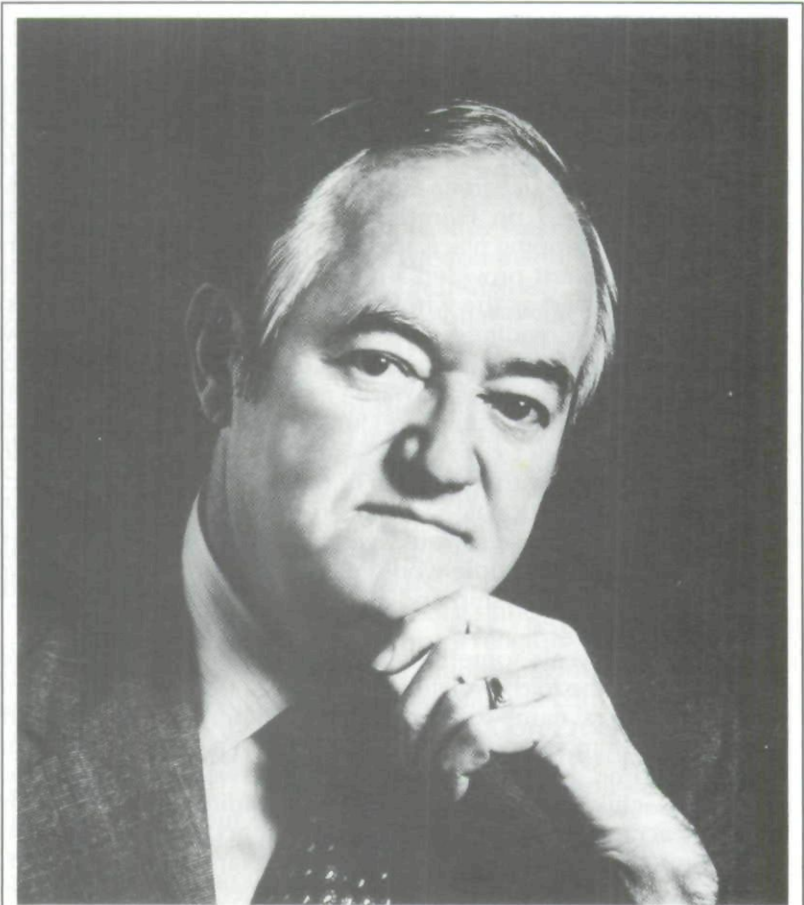

From the values learned in his hometown of Doland emerged Humphrey's sense of social mission and the optimistic outlook that found expression in the Politics of Joy.

Hartt, however, discounts the idea that Humphrey was therefore an evangelical. Humphrey's pastor, Albert Hartt "had severe reservations" about such evangelical fervor, his son recalled. Instead, he followed the lead set by Jonathan Edwards, who "found things that were profoundly spiritual about the Great Awakening" but who was suspicious about the ephemeral nature of its ministry, which would, often enough, quite literally pack up and leave town once the revival

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was over, "and nothing ever happened thereafter."[63] Julian Hartt described the moralistic essence of Doland's piety as "the will to press a relentless attack on the social evils which deprive multitudes of their rightful inheritance as children of God and Americans." He continued: "Such a faith is sublimely optimistic: what God demands is something that can and must be done. To delay is bad faith; to lose hope is to sell out to false gods."[64] Such a faith may indeed have been optimistic, but it was nonetheless the faith of Doland and of "Hubert the Exuberant," the "Happy Warrior."

When Humphrey talked of how "we liberal Americans tend to show deep concern for the welfare of *all* our fellow human beings," he was articulating a religious view as well as proposing a political program. Liberals wince, he said, "when any man—of any race, color or creed in any land—suffers hunger, poverty, fear or injustice. We look beyond our immediate, familiar surroundings and sympathize with those less fortunate. We seek to find solutions not just to the broad problems of administration but to the basic problems of human need."[65] This political and religious philosophy came, as Frances Humphrey Howard said, from hearing "Dad . . . continually [teaching] the idea of democratic government—justice—all the truths as exemplified in the French Revolution."[66]

For both Hubert Humphrey, Sr., and Hubert Humphrey, Jr., the Democratic party was the bearer of the ideals of progressivism. Howard recalled that in Doland there were "only one or two Democratic families—the Reilly's—they were one of the few Catholic families there. And so we formed the first coalition—Protestant and Catholic—of the Democratic Party . . . the party of William Jennings Bryan and Woodrow Wilson . . . [to whom he, Dad Humphrey] adhered . . . [as] fervently as he did to believing in the Social Gospel and the social mission of the New Testament."[67] As the direct political expression of the Social Gospel, the Democratic party was also seen as the primary agent of fulfillment for the social mission of the New Testament. As such, it led the younger Humphrey to a kind of fervency that caused *Time* to depict him as a midwestern whirlwind. By the same token, it also provided the optimism that resulted in the selection of "the Politics of Joy" as his 1968 presidential campaign theme. The choice was unfortunate at that time, given not

63. Ibid.
64. Hartt, "Hubert Humphrey," p. 176.
65. Humphrey, "What Is a Liberal?," *Think* 26, no. 10 (Oct. 1960): 7.
66. Interview with Howard.
67. Ibid.

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only the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, but the severe social and political turmoil caused by the Vietnam War as well, and Humphrey paid a heavy price for it.

In retrospect, however, there was reason for Humphrey's choice. The Politics of Joy did not, for him, represent some blithe attempt to depict politics as a mere frolic through America's political garden—or jungle. There was as much misfortune and struggle in Humphrey's life story as there might be in any American's. The Politics of Joy represented a belief in the inherent goodness of the American system—a belief sorely tested by Vietnam and Watergate, to name just a few such "trials." Yet, the question remains: Can any nation—certainly any *great* nation—go on *as* a great nation without a strong belief in its own goodness, however much it needs to be tempered simultaneously by a more sober awareness of its own finitude? Hubert H. Humphrey from Doland, South Dakota, would answer no, offering again, as he did then, his own peculiar mix of small-town religious and political values as the path the country should follow.

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