



A Time for Grace

Andrew Tully

"I JUST THOUGHT he might be lonely," Hubert Humphrey told his wife, in explaining why he telephoned Richard Nixon on the latter's birthday recently.

The eulogies delivered in the Capitol rotunda were splendid. But it was those few words to Muriel Humphrey that captured the spirit, the humanity, and the flavor of the man from Minnesota. Humphrey and Nixon were lifetime political enemies. Indeed, Humphrey came close to hating the former President.

But he only came close. In fact, Hubert Humphrey was incapable of hating any human being.

The Rev. Edward R. Elson, chaplain of the Senate, quoted St. Francis of Assisi in his prayer over the coffin: "It is in pardoning that we are pardoned." He might have attributed that quotation to Hubert Humphrey who was always ready to forgive anyone.

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I ASKED a former aide to John Kennedy what he thought of Nixon's appearance at the Humphrey services. "Damn the man," he said. "My first inclination is to denounce him for bad taste. But I have to say Hubie would have welcomed Nixon. Hubie was tough, but he only kicked people when they were up."

Thus, without defending Nixon's sins, I am constrained to deplore the Pecksniffery of those who condemned him for grandstanding where he wasn't wanted. I refer them to Muriel Humphrey.

Frank Hoffman, the Senate's sergeant-at-arms, reported that his office received a phone call from Jack Brennan, a Nixon aide, who said Nixon wanted to come to Washington for the services, "and they wanted our reaction. The only reaction that mattered was that of Mrs. Humphrey, who said it would be 'such an honor' to receive Nixon."

Mrs. Humphrey's reaction, of course, was predictable. She was a worthy mate to a man who preached love for mankind, and always practiced what he preached.

In rebuke to the sanctimonious and the haters, Mrs. Humphrey reminded us all that no human being should be denied the right to forgiveness.

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ONE WONDERS if some of the Humphreys' goodness rubbed off on other distinguished mourners. Nixon was escorted to the office of Senator Howard Baker, (Rep-Tenn.), the Senate Minority Leader. Eventually, Nixon joined a group that included President Carter, former President Ford, Henry Kissinger and former Vice President Nelson Rockefeller.

Some described the meeting as awkward. But there was handshaking, and everybody addressed Nixon as "Mr. President." There is, it seems, still a time for grace. Nixon was driven from office for his misdeeds, but in that room there was courtesy for a lonely man.

It would have warmed the hearts of both St. Francis of Assisi and Hubert Horatio Humphrey.