

# Humphrey vs. Mondale vs. Freeman

By Neal Karlen

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**The sons of Hubert, Fritz and Orville compete to be Minnesota's Governor, to shape the Democratic Party and to settle family scores.**

## Humphrey vs. Mondale vs. Freeman

( The Junior Tournament )

By Neal Karlen

**H**ubert Horatio (Skip) Humphrey 3d, Ted Mondale and Mike Freeman, three sons of once powerful fathers, ignore each other as they pump arms at a Democratic conclave in the Minneapolis Convention Center. It's brutal winter outside, but the three-way frost inside seems positively un-Minnesotan; the ballroom is near the spot that Mary Tyler Moore, patron saint of Minnesota Nice, gleefully winged her hat in the air each week of her television sitcom.

There wasn't always bad blood between Humphrey, the Minnesota Attorney General; Freeman, the Hennepin County Attorney in Minneapolis, and Mondale, a State Senator from a Twin Cities suburb. Their parents baby-sat for one another's children; their fathers were best friends and political partners who forged from the state's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party the most potent populist machine since William Jennings Bryan. But that was yesterday.

In the next 72 hours, all three sons will take the first steps toward declaring themselves candidates for the 1998 race for Governor. It will be a last chance, all three say, to inherit the D.F.L., a prairie coalition party that for half a century has defined the national liberal orthodoxy through the likes — and intramural fights — of Hubert Humphrey, Orville Free-

*Fathers and sons: Hubert with Skip (holding bat) and brother Bob in 1946; Fritz with Ted (quarterbacking) and a friend, mid-1960's; Orville with Mike, 1956.*

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man, Walter Mondale and Eugene McCarthy.

"I'm the only one of us without a child running for Governor of Minnesota," McCarthy, 81, ever the fraternity's apostate, cackles from his home in Virginia. "I believe in politics you ought to skip a generation."

Not here. Walter Mondale, 69, and Orville Freeman, 79, recently moved back to Minnesota in time to help their sons campaign; the specter of Hubert Humphrey, dead since 1978, has never left his son's side. With the sons' names have come their father's feuds — and new ones of their own.

"Skip, Ted and I all did a lot of personal appearances for Clinton-Gore this past election, but we were almost always scheduled for separate events," says Freeman, 49, whose father was a three-term Minnesota Governor, a member of John F. Kennedy's and Lyndon B. Johnson's Cabinets and the man J.F.K. wanted to be his Vice President. "Everybody knew there was a rivalry," he says, "so they were careful about putting us together."

Primogeniture is alive and well in this state, explains Hyman Berman, a professor of American history at the University of Minnesota. "Nowhere else in the country are there three presumptive heirs for a major office. What makes this race of more than local interest is that Minnesota has always been a cutting-edge laboratory for the nation's Democratic Party — and all three sons have different visions of what that party should look like in the 21st century."

Indeed, the D.F.L. and Minnesota have often been decades ahead of the curve. The New Deal was presaged by the social programs of Floyd B. Olson, the radical Farmer-Labor Governor and a key adviser to F.D.R. Sixteen years before Vice President Hubert Humphrey helped midwife the Civil Rights Act, Humphrey provided the emotional highlight of the 1948 National Democratic Convention when, as the Mayor of Minneapolis, he gave an impassioned civil rights sermon. Revolutionizing public health care has also long been on the state's progressive agenda: the phrases "health maintenance organization" and "chemical dependency" were invented here.

So, at a time when the national Democratic Party seems hopelessly splintered, each of Minnesota's three famous sons offers a model each says can lead their state, and eventually their party, into progressive harmony. Skip Humphrey offers a return to his father's Great Society, with government as a beneficent, big-stick solver of people's problems. Mike Freeman's answer lies

in the coalition of farmers, blue-collar unionists and liberal technocrats who propelled his father's career. And for Ted Mondale, the answer is to break the traditional liberal mold, while holding an auditor's eye on budgets, a blind spot that doomed his own father's career.

"My Three Sons" is what campaign wags call the contest; local television and radio reports about the race are often accompanied by the theme song from Fred MacMurray's TV show. In life, Humphrey, Mondale and Freeman are as different as Mike, Rob and Chip Douglas.

In the ballroom, each is chatting up a different constituency. Next to the stage, Ted Mondale, 39, the son who has most disowned his father's ideology, is being interviewed on tape for a group of young fiscal conservatives called "Democrats With Attitude." In 1995, Mondale voted for a bill to revamp workmen's compensation, which alienated him from one of his father's favorite partisans. "Mondale Betrays Labor!" read the headline of The Minneapolis Labor Review.

"Long gone are the days when Democrats could count on youth's support by throwing a rally with free pizza, beer and Joan Baez singing," Mondale says into the camera. His father was stolid on the stump; Ted Mondale is animated, with just a sheen of slickness, a remnant, perhaps, of his adolescent bad-boy days. To put it mildly, young Ted Mondale inhaled. "I had my midlife crisis as a teen-ager," he says. "I'm now a father of three young children who owns a mini-van and lives in the suburbs."

Nearby, Skip Humphrey, 55, is exchanging greetings with state officials in power suits. He is wired into the White House; he ran Clinton's last Minnesota Presidential campaign. He also has strong back-channel contacts from 25 years of state leadership and a high public profile for the lead he took in suing the tobacco industry.

Farther out on the floor is Mike Freeman, the city's lead prosecutor, looking like an F.B.I. agent in wing tips and an off-the-rack suit. He is talking to people in colored jackets from unions, his father's traditional base. Tonight, Freeman has successfully avoided running into the other two sons, but Mondale's and Humphrey's circles finally intersect. Even small talk seems tense. "Hi, Skip," says Mondale softly. "Hi, Ted," says Humphrey. They shake hands and move on.

In the coming days, Humphrey announces he will not appear jointly with Freeman and Mondale if the theme has anything to do with "My Three Sons." And besides, there are others who could win the race to replace Gov. Arne Carlson, a popular moderate Republican retiring in 1998 after eight years. Among them are another Democrat, Mark Dayton, 50, scion

of a department-store fortune, and the Republican Mayor of St. Paul, Norm Coleman, 47.

Coleman, who counted Skip Humphrey as his mentor during years working in the Attorney General's office, suddenly switched parties last December, which was seen as a detour around the celebrity-son gridlock of the Democratic primary. The move seemed quixotic, but in mid-June Coleman lured a National Hockey League team to St. Paul, filling a statewide psychic void since the Minnesota North Stars left in 1993.

More than a year before the election, Humphrey seems unconcerned with his opponents. The most recent poll, conducted in early June by The St. Paul Pioneer Press, showed Humphrey leading the pack in name recognition and approval: 49 percent of voters polled viewed Skip favorably; only 14 percent, negatively.

"Of course, Skip is going to be ahead in a name-recognition poll," Freeman says. "His father was the most beloved politician in Minnesota history. But there's a long way to go."

SKIP HUMPHREY, SEATED BEHIND HIS DESK AT the Capitol, looks cursorily at an autographed Senate pass his father gave me in 1970, when I was 11. Thousands of Minnesotans have mementos like this, kept from school trips to Washington where the elder Humphrey made a religion out of greeting children. But his son doesn't want to talk about it. "I'd like to get past this and discuss the issues of today," he says, a warm man tired of questions about his father, whose 52-cent stamp is still often placed on correspondence out of the Attorney General's office.

Even so, the specter of H.H.H. won't go away. Last year, Mike Freeman was being baited to blast Humphrey on a conservative talk radio show in Minneapolis.

"One more question," the host asked. "Skip Humphrey, mental midget, couldn't crack an egg with a hammer, right?"

"That's simply not true," said Freeman.

"Well, not compared to his father," shot back the host.

"That's not fair, either," Freeman went on. "Skip Humphrey is a good, decent man and a competent Attorney General."

In fact, he is better than competent; he is an earnest advocate who has put the state in the fore of consumer protection and the anti-smoking crusade. Yet it has always seemed that Minnesota never forgave Hubert Humphrey 3d for not being Hubert Humphrey 2d. In Willy and Biff Loman terms, Skip is liked, even well liked. But he has never been loved here, not like H.H.H.,

*The no-longer-so-friendly rivals: Skip Humphrey, Mike Freeman and Ted Mondale.*

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19

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# **Their parents baby-sat for one another's children; their fathers had once been best friends, political partners who had forged the most potent populist machine since William Jennings Bryan. But that was yesterday.**

his political inspiration and historical burden.

It is now May, and Humphrey is speaking about his tobacco crusade at a luncheon at a St. Paul church. In 1994, he became the second Attorney General to file a class-action suit against the cigarette companies, being beat out for first by Michael Moore of Mississippi.

Squabbling among the states continues; Humphrey later boycotted the settlement talks that recently concluded with the cigarette industry. Meanwhile, preparations are ongoing for the start of Minnesota's tobacco trial in January. Decrying "the settlement train," he only mentions his father once, when he glances at his watch and notices he has gone overtime. "You know how Humphreys like to talk," he says.

Here on the stump, Skip looks and talks enough like his father to make superficial comparisons painful. Watching him, one is less reminded of his charismatic dad than of a David Frye impersonation, circa 1968, of a Vice President who liked to say, "I'm pleased as punch." Skip's own idiom sounds like something out of the movie "Fargo." "I learned over the years that my doggone place is here at home in Minnesota — not Washington," he says. It is charming; he often says "you betcha," "heckuva," "sonuvagun" and "yer darn tootin'."

Skip ran for national office in 1988; he was drubbed by the then-incumbent Republican United States Senator, David Durenburger. "The Republicans ran [Skip] against his father," recalls Eugene McCarthy, "by pointing out that he didn't have the same style as Hubert, and that's what defeated him." Indeed, Skip sometimes fumbles for words where his father was eloquent. Yet he is organized where his father was chaotic, a politician as much in love with detailed strategy and building a big campaign fund as his father enjoyed flying, broke, by the seat of his pants.

"I know I disappointed people when I came into the Senate in 1972," Skip says. "Everyone thought I was going to get up there on the first day, pound on my desk and say, 'I'm Hubert Humphrey, get out of my way!'"

For Skip's first race, family friends say, his father wanted the son to file for the ballot as "Hubert H. Humphrey 3d," advising: "If you run as Hubert Humphrey, you win. If you run as Skip Humphrey, you lose." Skip has denied the story, but he appeared on the voting lists as "Hubert H. (Skip) Humphrey 3d."

"He was a great father, but he wasn't around all that much," says Humphrey. Even when he was, there was something frightening about his power. One day in third grade, Skip was ordered to the principal's office. "I was sure something terrible had happened to someone in my family," he recalls. "The principal told me that my father

said I was to go to the Washington Senators game that afternoon with him and Supreme Court Justice William Douglas."

It didn't help that H.H.H.'s heir sometimes seemed to be Fritz Mondale, not his own son Skip. Today, Walter Mondale recalls how as a young man at Macalester College in St. Paul he had been inspired by a hyperkinetic political-science instructor who was about to run for Mayor of Minneapolis. "Hubert became a father to me, because my own dad died right at that time," Mondale remembers. "I was in his 'diaper brigade' of young revolutionaries, and I remember hitchhiking to southern Minnesota to set up the office for his Senate run in 1948."

When Humphrey was elected Vice President in 1964, state Attorney General Mondale was given his Senate seat; they would forever after be linked as the "Minnesota Twins." And when H.H.H. died in 1978, it was Vice President Mondale, not Skip, who gave the final eulogy.

Even when leading the most righteous fights, Skip can lack that common touch that distinguished his father. Last summer, he left a political gathering at the Roy Wilkins Auditorium in St. Paul and ran into a circle of Democratic smokers who had gone outside to light up. He approached the group, who reacted as if they had just been busted. Butts were furtively put out as Humphrey began talking about the deviousness of the cigarette companies. "I don't blame you," Humphrey said. "I blame them."

"Didn't your father used to smoke?" asked one in the group.

"Lucky Strikes, unfiltered, four packs a day all through the 50's," he said. "God, I hated that smell."

"SOMEONE'S GOTTA BE WHITER THAN NIXON," says the James Carville-based character in the novel "Primary Colors." "Ahhh, whatabout Mondale? Walter Mondale is a [expletive] albino get the human spirit. Y'knowwhattamean? Can't get much whiter than Norwegian." Growing up, Ted Mondale favored darker colors. His motorcycle was black; his room at home was purple. But that was a long time ago.

Now, Mondale and Mike Freeman are standing in the green room of the Twin Cities public-TV station waiting to discuss the 1998 gubernatorial race, sans Skip Humphrey. Finally they are delivered to the set. "You know, Theodore," Freeman whispers to Mondale, looking the County Attorney in his starched white shirt, "in the old days we'd have settled this in a more interesting way than sitting on a couch talking."

"I know," whispers back Mondale, tieless in a black blazer and tasseled loafers. "Look at us. We're dressed for lawn bowling or cribbage."

There was never great camaraderie among the sons. "Skip is five years older than me, and I'm a decade older than Ted," says Freeman. "When you're a kid, that's like different generations."

Still, there are memories of one another growing up, almost always attached to a much stronger image of the other sons' fathers. Skip Humphrey recalls a night in 1962 when he called on Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman in Washington. Humphrey, president of his American University fraternity, was in search of a Cabinet member's autograph for a fraternity scavenger hunt. "Orville invited me in and we spent two hours talking politics," Skip says.

Freeman and Humphrey's personal antipathy dates to 1978, when Mike and Skip competed against each other for a seat in Congress. That year, Mike drove his father to see Hubert Humphrey, who was near death. "I didn't go into the house, but waited out in the car for my dad because they were old friends and there were now tensions between the sons," Mike remembers. "Still, I'll never forget how Hubert came outside to greet me. I'd once been his page in the Senate, and I'd always idolized him." Freeman also recalls the time in 1972 when he escorted a 13-year-old Ted Mondale to the Minnesota State Fair while stumping for Fritz.

Until a few years ago, not many would have predicted that Ted Mondale would be on a public-affairs TV show explaining why he's the best man for Governor. "Growing up in Washington in the late 1960's, I was on a track to ruin my life," he says. "I was with the bad boys who cut class, smoked pot, drank beer and wised off."

Walter Mondale can now laugh recalling those times. "I certainly didn't see any spark in him in the direction toward politics," he says.

Instead of college, the teen-ager raced motorcycles. At 21, his bike locked handlebars with another at 50 miles per hour and Mondale was thrown. "I saw my bike coming right down on me, and I said, 'Please, God, if you let me live I'll walk away from this.' The bike missed me, and I said I'm done."

He left Washington and enrolled at the University of Minnesota. He got a law degree at the William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, married and went into the family business. In 1990, he ran for the State Senate, unseating a Republican incumbent. With the help of his father's Rolodex, he raised \$200,000 for the campaign.

Once in office, he was disillusioned by the realities of legislative gridlock. "I knew I wasn't going to sit around for 10 years and wait for the powers that be to give me something," he says. "I decided to vote my conscience and let the chips fall." He became the Mondale who voted against labor. And now, after stepping down in January

to run his gubernatorial campaign, he carries the confident sheen of a comer. He is an active member in the Democratic Leadership Council, a centrist think tank formed after his father was destroyed by Ronald Reagan in 1984. At last year's Democratic convention, he presented a seminar with the pollster Stan Greenberg on their study of how best to lure Generation X voters.

To catch up to his opponents' long-entrenched organizations, Ted is counting on the support of his father, whose old-party attitudes he is abandoning. "I can see why my generation's politics look old," Walter Mondale says, "but I

wasn't hurt when at the Democratic convention last summer my son was telling people, 'We're not your father's Democratic party anymore.'"

It is late spring, and a crowd is shoe-horned into Ted Mondale's suburban Minneapolis living room for a fund-raiser. They are the Twin Cities' yuppie elite, a liberal crowd made up mostly of 30-to-40-year-olds with money and young children. Walter and Joan Mondale, just returned home from his stint as Ambassador to Japan, mingle for hours. "I'm still not sure what Ted wants me to do for him," Walter says with a laugh, "but I'm sure he'll tell me."

"TED MONDALE IS PERSONA NON GRATA, HE'S a traitor to everything his father stood for, and Mike Freeman's our man!" spits out a member of the Minneapolis police union attending a Freeman fund-raiser at Nye's Polonaise Room, a blue-collar Polish restaurant in northeast Minneapolis. The man is wearing a T-shirt he got at last summer's Democratic convention. "Chicago Police," the shirt reads, above the slogan "We Kicked Your Father's [Expletive] in 1968 — Now It's Your Turn!" Mike Freeman was at that wrenching event, serving as his parents' bodyguard. "It doesn't matter if we're running against Skip Humphrey or Ted Mondale or Elmer Fudd," he tells the union members, "we're here to win!"

But Freeman's battle is more than a campaign. It's a war to vindicate his family's name from the anonymity that came with his father's failure to attain the high offices of his brethren, Humphrey and Mondale. In 1960, Dan Cohen wrote in "Undeclared: The Life of Hubert H. Humphrey," Orville Freeman was one of J.F.K.'s leading choices to be Vice President. Kennedy hoped that Freeman, Minnesota's Governor, could help insure that the influential Minnesota delegation voted for Kennedy on the first ballot.

The problem was that Hubert Humphrey had run and lost against Kennedy in two primaries that year, in campaigns co-managed by Freeman. "Humphrey was really hurting," remembers Orville Freeman today, "and he didn't want to endorse anybody at the convention." Freeman pleaded with his best friend, who he had known



*Humphrey, the front-runner, campaigning in Minneapolis.*

since they were undefeated Big Ten debating partners at the University of Minnesota in the 1930's. "I did everything you wanted," Freeman begged. "Now it's my turn."

But Humphrey could not do it. Despite Freeman's failure to deliver, Kennedy had him give his nominating speech and was leaning toward giving him the Vice-Presidential nod just as soon as Lyndon Johnson would, as expected, turn down the courtesy offer. But Johnson said yes, and ultimately, Kennedy gave Freeman the consolation prize of Secretary of Agriculture.

Mike Freeman attended the 1960 Los Angeles convention as the worshipful 12-year-old son of the Minnesota Governor. It was Orville Freeman's finest hour, and in May he fondly recalled in public those hours when he believed he might be the next Vice President. Freeman, speaking at the Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, talked wistfully, and humorously, of "what was not to be."

Mike Freeman whisked in for the speech moments before his father began and headed out as soon as he was done, not having the time to receive an award for his efforts in fighting domestic abuse in Hennepin County. These were grueling days for the County Attorney; the author Michael Dorris had killed himself shortly before he was to be charged for child abuse. Now Minneapolis was swarming with reporters eager to dish dirt, while Louise Erdrich, Dorris's widow, asked a court to seal the records of the investigation. But Freeman had found the time to dash in to hear his father speak about old times and to jump to his feet in a standing ovation. "Orv was always my role model, my hero, my teacher," he said.

Mike Freeman was always the dutiful son, imitating his father right down to the slight speech impediment Orville had after he was shot in the jaw on the Solomon Islands during World War II. But as with Skip Humphrey, his father's life was impossible for him to live up to. His dad had played for the 1939 National Champion Minnesota Gophers football team, while Mike was cut as a lineman for Rutgers. His father had been a war hero; Mike was head of his campus R.O.T.C. The result were decades of self-doubt. "I was a very tense young man,"

he says. "It's only now that I no longer feel the need to hold public office for my own self-worth."

Tall, taut and aggressive, he spent eight years in the Minnesota Senate before being elected Hennepin County Attorney in 1990. An old-style Democrat, he ran for Governor in 1994, narrowly losing the nomination in an upset during the state convention.

"I went through a lot of personal anguish," he says, "and I knew I wasn't going to fall on my sword for the party again." Instead, he began organizing immediately for the 1998 campaign, already sewing up more delegates to the

next state convention than either Humphrey or Mondale. And he is not concerned that a June poll showed him to be far less recognized than Humphrey or Mondale. His approval-disapproval rating was a mere 11 percent and 2 percent.

Meantime, Ted Mondale (whose rating was 35 percent favorable, 10 percent unfavorable) is counting on fund-raising to overcome his opponents' decades-long lead in politicking. When the campaign's first financial statements were released in February, Mondale had raised \$92,838 to Humphrey's \$72,280 and Freeman's \$66,188. The money was raised in the few weeks between the November 1996 election and the end of December; for a race so far in the future, the only sure bet in this election is that it will be the most expensive in Minnesota history.

All that, and the D.F.L. might not even win the general election. With the Mayor of St. Paul, Norm Coleman, unofficially in the fray, there is a chance that heavily Scandinavian Minnesota, for generations the country's most progressively liberal state, will be led into the next century by a Jewish Republican from Brooklyn.

But for the next few months, all attention here will be on fathers, sons and ghosts. In Minneapolis recently, Orville Freeman and his wife, Jane, lead a tour through some framed pictures of long-ago political battles. "There's me and Hubert and John Kennedy," Orville says, pointing to a picture showing himself whispering into Humphrey's ear. "This is a favorite," adds Jane. "It's Orv telling Humphrey what to do."

A day later in St. Paul, Skip Humphrey is leading a similar tour. He stops at a picture of J.F.K., H.H.H. and Orville Freeman at a campaign stop. In it, Freeman is directly behind Kennedy while H.H.H. lingers back. "See how close Orv is to Kennedy here?" says Skip. "He was running for re-election for Governor and he's a little more anxious about where he's going to be."

The next picture is of Walter Mondale announcing his 1984 Presidential run. "That's a great picture of Fritz," says Skip. "He was one of my first and best mentors. My first job was in his Senate office, right after he was appointed to take my dad's seat. I'd answer the phone and say 'Senator Mondale's office, can I help you?'" ■