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# The Vietnam Era in Iowa Politics

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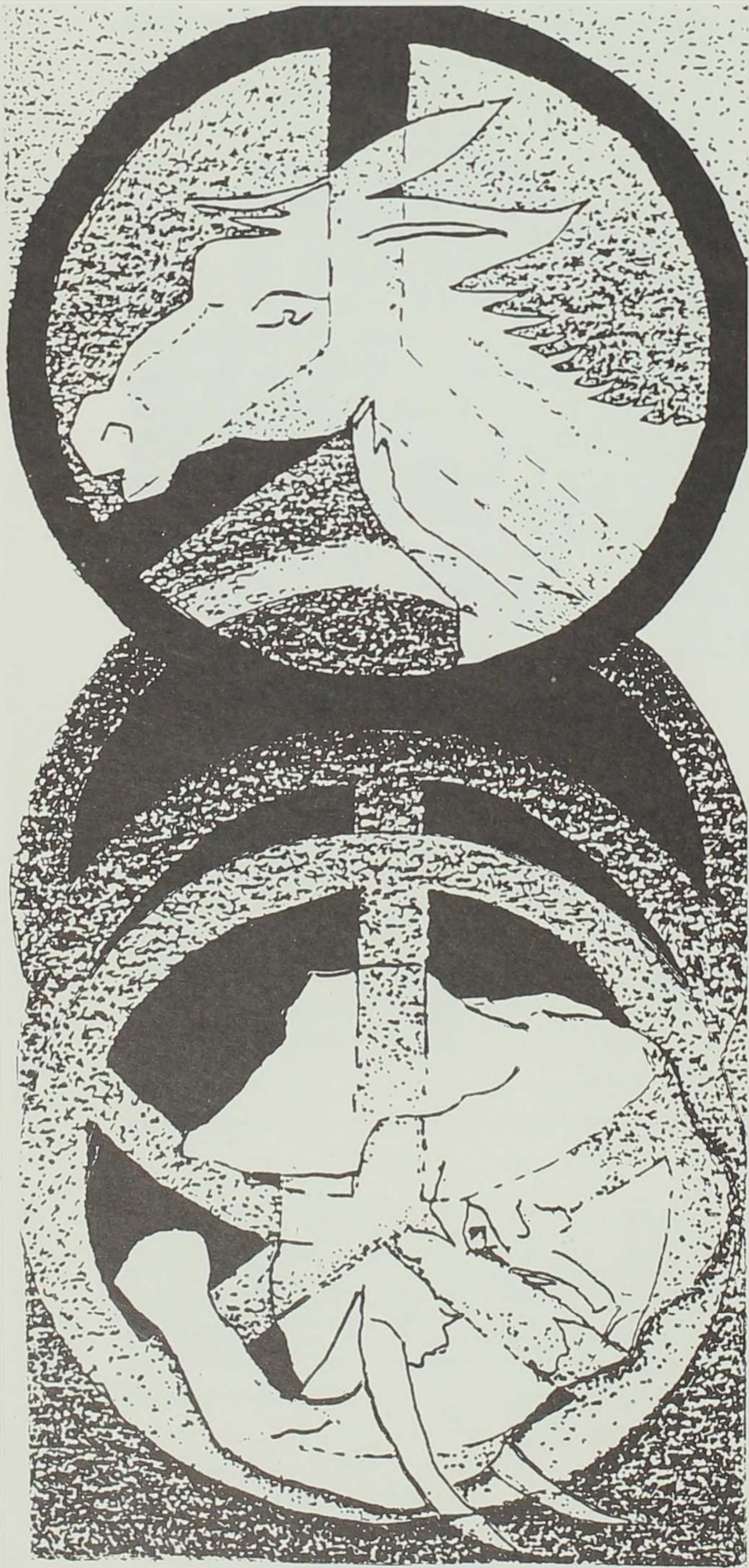
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BY THOMAS S. SMITH

IN IOWA POLITICS

THE VIETNAM ERA



Iowa's heritage of agrarian Republicanism underwent a surprisingly colorful, though brief, transformation during the late 1960s. The charismatic Harold Hughes and a host of other political figures led Iowa politics on an ideological merry-go-round that centered on the Vietnam War.

In June 1965 Representative John Schmidhauser, a freshman Democrat, heralded the first sign of Iowa disenchantment with President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policies. He joined twenty-seven other congressmen in signing a petition that called for public hearings on American involvement in Vietnam.

Opposition to the Vietnam War became a campaign issue in the 1966 congressional elections when E. B. Smith, the Democratic senatorial candidate, faced GOP incumbent Jack Miller. Smith, who had previously served in the U.S. State Department, was a history professor at Iowa State University. Although he did not carry out a full-scale attack on administration policy, Smith made an appeal to anti-war voters to oppose increased aerial bombing of North Vietnam. He argued that his position on Vietnam was "not too far" from that of Iowa independent peace candidate Robert Day. Iowa voters were also exposed to national anti-war politics when Senator Robert Kennedy campaigned for the state Democratic ticket, criticizing Johnson's escalation of the war. The huge crowds that greeted Kennedy throughout the state responded favorably to his speeches, though it is uncertain whether they shared his anti-war views.

Nevertheless, Vietnam did not emerge as the significant issue of the 1966 elections. Smith's campaign stressed Senator Miller's votes against Medicare, feed grain programs, and minimum wage legislation. Smith's foreign policy statements were not forceful enough to draw substantial supporters away from Robert Day's campaign. Day, in fact, denounced Smith's attempts to capitalize on Day's own anti-war stance. Smith was overwhelmed by

Miller in the general election, and in the same election year Representative Schmidhauser — who had been praised by his Iowa constituents for his opposition to the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee during his first term in office — was also defeated.

By 1967, however, national anti-war sentiment rose as President Johnson's war efforts met with increasing disapproval. Governor Hughes, who had previously been a supporter of administration policies, boldly declared his opposition to the war. The conjunction of Hughes' anti-war posture with the political excitement generated by the presidential candidacies of Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy catapulted Vietnam out of the sphere of campus demonstrations. The war became an issue hotly debated by Iowa politicians.

Governor Hughes, a well-known friend and ally of Kennedy, stunned the state on August 22, 1968, when he endorsed McCarthy for president. He cited Vietnam as the primary reason for his decision. "It is now clear," he said, "that we do not have the resources to provide guns and butter — or even guns and margarine — in terms of our domestic needs. Vietnam is not the only issue, but it is the key issue." Hughes' endorsement of McCarthy was quickly echoed by a number of other prominent Democrats, including Lieutenant Governor Robert Fulton and former Representative Schmidhauser.

Those who argue that Hughes made this move for reasons of political expediency ignore the results of the *Des Moines Register* polls taken during this period. One poll indicated that Richard Nixon would defeat McCarthy for the presidency by a 50 to 34 percent margin in Iowa. The same poll also revealed that Iowa voters, on the question of who "could best handle the war," preferred Nixon to McCarthy

by a margin of 49 percent to 26 percent. Other Iowa newspapers adopted a more intrusive approach in commenting on Hughes' decision. The *Waterloo Courier* accused Hughes of moving "to the far left of American politics" for his endorsement of McCarthy. Such attacks did not intimidate Hughes, who chose to deliver the nominating speech for McCarthy at the tumultuous Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

The Iowa electorate seemed fragmented by Hughes' anti-war stance. An Iowa poll revealed that 29 percent of the electorate believed that Hughes' endorsement of McCarthy hurt his Senate candidacy, 20 percent believed it helped, 31 percent said it made no difference, and 20 percent had no opinion.

Following a massive primary victory over token opposition, Governor Hughes was confronted with the political struggle of his career in his 1968 Senate race. His opponent, David Stanley, a forty-year-old state senator from Muscatine, was reputedly a moderate Republican. During the campaign, however, Stanley's statements on Vietnam foreshadowed the policy statements of Richard Nixon during the "Vietnamization" period. Declaring that "we must build peace through strength," Stanley attacked Hughes' call for an unconditional bombing halt. Stanley's campaign utilized much of the traditional rhetoric employed by anti-Communist partisans of the 1950s. For example, one campaign ad featured Stanley gazing at the Berlin Wall. The caption quoted Stanley's assertion that "this ugly Wall is Com-

munist tyranny's attempt to block human freedom."

Stanley also tried to encourage voter backlash against anti-war activity. He attacked Governor Hughes' policies of leniency towards college disturbances in Iowa City in 1967. "Forty highway patrolmen who were sitting in a bus watching that riot wanted to help, but couldn't, because of an order from Des Moines to stay put." When these remarks are viewed in the context of his attacks on the Great Society social welfare policies, Stanley's conservative "law and order" stance becomes clearer.

Stanley's rhetoric did not cause Governor Hughes to moderate his criticism of the war. Hughes' campaign may be seen as a classic example of a politician who sought to educate rather than inflame voters. Hughes responded to Stanley's strident rhetoric with a serene optimism:

*We can find the strength to overcome these forces that threaten our way of life. But military might alone will not assure peace among nations. . . . We must also unite our people and bind the wounds of our society. As the most powerful nation on earth, America can afford to take the initiative for peace, and we have a moral obligation to take that initiative.*

Hughes' campaign speeches presented audiences with graphic descriptions of nuclear, germ, and gas warfare in a determined attempt to dramatize the danger of militarism. In response to Stanley's criticism of his call for a bombing halt, Hughes simply asked, "Do we want to end war by making more war?"

#### Note on Sources

This article is based on information found in Iowa newspapers of the 1960s, including the *Des Moines Register*, the *Waterloo Courier*, the *Burlington Hawkeye*, and the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*. Also useful were the election statistics printed in the biennial editions of the *Iowa Official Register* and the analysis of Democratic party politics presented in James C. Larew, *A Party Reborn: The Democrats of Iowa, 1950-1974* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1980).

In November Hughes defeated Stanley by 6,000 votes. Nixon's landslide in Iowa and Stanley's heavily financed campaign blunted Hughes' reputation as one of the most powerful vote-getters in Iowa history. The final results indicated a rather dramatic urban-rural split in the state, with Des Moines and Cedar



Governor Harold Hughes (SHSI)

Rapids as major Hughes strongholds.

What impact did Vietnam have on the election? Hughes' educational campaign succeeded to a certain extent: one month before the election a *Register* poll revealed that Hughes was thought to be best equipped to handle the war by a 43 to 32 percent margin over Stanley, with 25 percent undecided. On the other hand, the depth of strong anti-war sentiment reflected in the poll is questionable, since the same poll showed the voters' strong faith in Nixon's ability to find a solution to Vietnam. Hughes' great advantage was his enormous personal stature: when asked which candidate would make the best "impression for the State of Iowa" in the national spotlight, Hughes was chosen over Stanley by a margin of 56 to 30 percent, with 14 percent undecided. Clearly, the force of Hughes' personality managed to draw voters who were either ambivalent about or even supportive of the war. Voting for Hughes, however, did not prevent Iowans from voting against other anti-war can-

didates; John Schmidhauser was defeated in his 1968 comeback campaign in the First District, and the Republican state senator Tom Riley, who ran on an anti-war platform against Representative John Culver, was also defeated in the Second District race.

Vestiges of the late 1960s anti-war sentiment resurfaced in Iowa politics in the election campaigns of the early 1970s. George McGovern made a relatively impressive showing in 1972, and liberal Democrats John Culver and Dick Clark won their respective races for the U.S. Senate in 1972 and 1974. Eventually, the Nixon administration responded to the growing national consensus that the Vietnam conflict should be terminated. Unfortunately perhaps, gradual withdrawal of troops and the ambiguous implementation of Nixon's "peace with honor" plan foreclosed the continuing heated ideological debates that had stamped Iowa politics in the decade of the 1960s. □