

# Kerry vs. Bush: A Humphrey-Nixon Redux?

By Stephen Zunes | October 12, 2004

No wonder it feels so damn frustrating. It's like 1968 all over again.

The United States is bogged down in a bloody counter-insurgency war on the other side of the globe, a war that the majority of the American people believe we should have never entered. Polls consistently show it is the number one issue on the minds of American voters in the weeks leading up to a close presidential election. The majority of Democrats and independents and a growing minority of Republicans believe that the war is unwinnable and we should get out.

Despite that, both Republicans and Democrats have nominated presidential and vice-presidential candidates who have supported the war from the beginning and have pledged to continue fighting it for years to come.

Both Hubert Humphrey and John Kerry were once considered leading liberals in the Democratic Party. They took great political risks early by taking highly principled positions (Humphrey in his support for civil rights and Kerry in his opposition to the Vietnam War), only to estrange their supporters by backing an unnecessary, illegal, immoral and disastrous U.S. military intervention in the Third World.

Humphrey was a decent and intelligent man with a long and distinguished career in public service. He really deserved to be president, but he so angered and alienated his liberal base through his defense of the Vietnam War that he lost a close election he should have otherwise won handily. It is looking increasingly possible that Kerry may suffer the same fate.

Despite his public support for the Vietnam War, Humphrey appeared personally torn and troubled by his position; within a year of his defeat, he finally came out against it. Kerry may very likely be harboring similar doubts about the war in Iraq, particularly given his Vietnam experience. Perhaps that's why I—along with many others I think—feel the same kind of bitterness and anger toward Kerry that I did as a young teenager toward Humphrey, thinking: *“Why the hell doesn't he just admit he was wrong and come out against the war?”*

As in 1968, the idea of Republican victory is really scary. Still, anger at the betrayal by this erstwhile liberal—who, like Humphrey, successfully fought back popular anti-war challengers in the primaries—for supporting the war has led large numbers of rank-and-file Democrats to declare their refusal to back their party's nominee.

There are some important differences between 2004 and 1968 presidential election campaigns, however:

The Democrats were then the incumbent party responsible for getting us into Vietnam and were largely blamed for the quagmire. Despite the fact that, once again, the two major parties lack any significant differences regarding the ongoing conflict, Republicans are more likely to suffer the consequences. In 1968, Nixon offered a (now known to be fabricated) “secret plan” to end the war, siphoning off some anti-war votes from the Democrats. Despite Kerry's pro-war position, Bush will not get the votes of many anti-war liberals, though anti-war conservatives—who might have been willing to vote Democratic if the Democrats had opted for an anti-war nominee—will likely stick with Bush.

There is no equivalent to George Wallace, the rightwing populist governor of Alabama who ran as an independent that year and won five southern states. (Today's Republican Party has fully integrated that far right faction of American politics into their ranks, including the party's Congressional leadership.) This time, the strongest challenge to the two major parties comes from the left in Ralph Nader's independent bid, which—while not nearly as strong as Wallace's challenge on the right thirty-four years ago—could still make a difference in the election's outcome.

Vocal and visible anti-war demonstrators dogged Humphrey and his running mate Edmund Muskie at virtually every campaign appearance, reminding voters across the country of the Democratic nominees' unpopular pro-war stance. By contrast, anti-war protestors have been much less visible at events featuring Kerry and his running mate John Edwards.

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In many ways, though, it is even harder for anti-war activists to support Kerry in 2004 than it was to support Humphrey in 1968:

Under Humphrey's leadership, the 1968 Democratic Party convention allowed for a platform challenge by anti-war elements of the party, including a vigorous nationally-televised debate on the Vietnam War. Under Kerry's leadership this year, however, no such public debate was allowed, raising concerns as to whether Kerry as president would be willing to listen to anyone outside of the pro-war wing of the party in formulating his foreign policy.

Humphrey was a strong believer in the United Nations and international law. While his support for the Vietnam War forced him to stretch the notion of collective security to an almost unrecognizable form, it is hard to imagine that he would have ever supported—as did Kerry—such a flagrant violation of the UN Charter as the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In terms of other U.S. Middle East policy issues: Humphrey was a passionate supporter of Israel, but this was at a time when the moderate Labor Alignment was in power and the PLO and Arab states were still on record calling for Israel's destruction. He supported the then-prevailing consensus that, in return for security guarantees from its Arab neighbors, Israel should withdraw from territories seized in the 1967 war. Kerry, on the other hand, is an outspoken supporter of the rightist Likud Bloc and has defended their rejection of Arab peace overtures as well as their expansionist agenda of colonizing and annexing much of the occupied territories.

Still, the stakes this election year are a lot higher:

In terms of his knowledge, intelligence, experience, aptitude, and more, Kerry is probably more qualified to become president of the United States than any major party nominee in decades. By contrast, despite nearly four years of on-the-job experience, George W. Bush may be the least qualified major party presidential nominee in modern history.

In terms of the politics, Bush and Dick Cheney make Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew look like flaming liberals (and I'm not convinced that they are any less corrupt, either).

And, perhaps most importantly, the consequences of a failed U.S. policy in the Middle East are much greater. While U.S. policy in Southeast Asia was responsible for enormous human suffering, the costs of that failed policy to the United States—despite the loss of over 50,000 soldiers, the drain on the economy, and the enormous divisions in the body politic that are yet to heal—were relatively small by comparison. The costs of a failed U.S. policy in the Middle East, however, are much greater.

Indeed, it is important to remember that, despite all the heinous crimes the United States committed against the people of Vietnam, the Vietnamese never flew airplanes into buildings.

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**p. 2**

