

Books

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State DFL's 1968 'civil war' recounted in Smaby book

Reviewed by Robert L. Spaeth

In calmer times, Alpha Smaby's brief career in the Minnesota House of Representatives — two terms — would have earned her a footnote in the history books at most.

But her time was far from calm. A Democratic Farmer-Laborite, Smaby was elected from a Minneapolis district in 1964, just before the war in Vietnam began to heat up. She lost her legislative seat four years later; between those two dates Minnesota, along with the rest of the nation, went through a political upheaval that drove a president from office, brought thousands of peace-loving citizens into the streets and transformed two prominent Minnesota politicians from agreeable colleagues into adversaries.

Smaby was an early protester against American military involvement in Vietnam. Her vehicle was an organization she helped found in 1967, Minnesota Concerned Democrats, which in 1968 gained great leverage in the DFL against steep odds.

Opposing the Vietnam war for Minnesotans meant opposing Hubert H. Humphrey, the DFL hero who had been elected vice president on Lyndon Johnson's ticket in 1964. Humphrey not only supported the Johnson military policy but became a veritable cheerleader for the war.

How could the Minnesota Concerned Democrats expect to succeed against the entrenched Humphrey forces? They did it with grass-roots politics. Although com-

Political Upheaval: Minnesota and the Vietnam War Protest

By Alpha Smaby

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480 pages (paperback), \$12

posed mostly of amateurs — Smaby was one of very few elected officials in the movement; a state senator named Rudy Perpich was another — the antiwar DFLers worked hard enough and organized well enough to score impressive victories in the DFL caucuses in March 1968.

Of course, by late 1967 the Concerned Democrats not only had a Minnesota adversary, they had a Minnesota antiwar candidate for president: Sen. Eugene McCarthy. So at stake in the DFL caucuses was more than a cause; antiwar Democrats thought they might elect a president. Three days after the DFL caucuses, McCarthy bruised Johnson in the New Hampshire primary and Johnson made plans to quit.

Caucus night turned out to be the high point for Smaby and the Concerned Democrats. Robert F. Kennedy's entry into the presidential race divided them; then his assassination cast a pall over the politics of that year. The riotous Democratic National Convention that nominated Humphrey deepened the bitterness. By November 1968 the election of Richard Nixon came as a vexing anticlimax.

In her retirement years Smaby has conducted a thorough-going review of those heady years of the Minnesota Concerned Democrats. She concocted a questionnaire about the antiwar movement in Minnesota and mailed it to 150 participants, of whom 122 responded. Those questionnaires and the more than 100 interviews Smaby taped have become the basis of "Political Upheaval," a valuable oral history.

The people prominent in this book were powerful people in 1968, but for the most part they are little known today, with exceptions such as McCarthy and Humphrey. But in Smaby's history the influence and commitment come alive once again: Cyrus Barnum, John Connolly, James Goff, Forrest Harris, Mary Heffernan, Howard Kaibel, Robert Metcalf, Kay Nee, Vance Opperman, Mulford Sibley, Maurice Visscher, Denis Wadley, Esther Wattenberg, John Wright — only those for whom 1968 was the peak political year will remember that they "made a difference."

"Political Upheaval" is long on reminiscence, short on analysis. For the most part, the book is raw data, the collected memories of Minnesota citizens moved to protest by a cataclysmic event in American foreign policy. Pro-war opinion, however, is allowed no voice.

Today, Smaby's narrative suggests, most of the Concerned Democrats are satisfied with their actions in 1968. Some differences do appear. Heffernan says, "I, for one, can never trust the government again," but Kaibel says, "We tore the country apart and we assured

the loss of the presidency."

Of all the interviews quoted here, the most thoughtful recollections come from Eugene and Abigail McCarthy. Although, as Smaby writes, "Neither McCarthy nor his wife, Abigail, spent much time in Minnesota during the campaign" — bigger action occurred in other states — both are acutely aware of the consequences of 1968. Abigail McCarthy makes a strong statement on a continuing controversy in the DFL: "I do want to defend (Gene) on a point where he will not defend himself — that if he had supported Hubert, the Democrats would have won in 1968. Hubert could not have won, and it would have made no difference if Gene had come out the day after the nomination." Eugene McCarthy explains his difference with Humphrey over the war: "Hubert and I really did have some good nights together. The '68 thing was too bad; it was like civil war, and the moral component was so high that, even if one did not make accusations, there was the implication that one side was supporting an immoral issue and the other side was exploiting the issue."

The Minnesota civil war of 1968 has faded from many memories. Smaby and Dillon Press deserve thanks for bringing it back in a readable and informative book.

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State Rep. Alpha Smaby, right, went door-to-door in the turbulent summer of 1968 in her unsuccessful campaign for reelection.