

BOOKS

[Where Did the Party Go? William Jennings Bryan, Hubert Humphrey, and the Jeffersonian Legacy, Jeff Taylor, University of Missouri Press, 344 pages]

Disappearing Democrats

By Bill Kauffman

"I AM A POPULIST," declares political scientist Jeff Taylor in the preface to *Where Did the Party Go?*, wherein he traces the decline—disappearance, really—of Jeffersonian populism within the democracy by contrasting the careers of William Jennings Bryan and Hubert Horatio Humphrey. Midwestern tub-thumpers, White House also-rans, on the surface, Bryan and Humphrey might pass for hyper-voluble cousins. But scrape off the paint and they are as different as a family farm and IBM, 1776 and 1945, Christian peace and atomic war.

Taylor's book, rich in detail, forensically forceful, is no routine exercise in comparative politics. *Where Did the Party Go?* amounts to a populist reinterpretation of the 20th-century Democratic Party. The author is both an exhaustively thorough researcher and a pleasingly partisan writer: he is on the side of the old America of "puritans and populists, of anabaptists and anarchists," and laments its paving over by midcentury "Democratic and Republican leaders [who] agreed on the ends of American life: anticommunism and economic growth." The possibility that these might represent the end, and not the ends, of American life never bubbled up into the effervescent oratory of Hubert Humphrey. But it would have been gospel to William Jennings Bryan.

Taylor has devised a 12-tenet definition of the protean term "Jeffersonianism," which is really more a tendency

than an ideology and savors of a decentralist, libertarian populism. The party of Jefferson today may be as empty as the party of Hamilton is full, but Taylor ends the book with a rallying cry for "a coalition of the populist Left and populist Right" in opposition to "plutocracy and imperialism" and "a domineering state and a materialistic world view." It's the Nader-Buchanan alliance that never quite cohered between 1992 and 2004, though the crimes of the Bush Octennium may yet bring about this devoutly wished civil union. Ah, but we are getting ahead of our story.

William Jennings Bryan, the "eloquent voice of rural and small-town America," the Nebraskan "heir and enlarger of the agrarian revolt" against industrial capitalism who "carried no Eastern state in his three runs for the White House," comes down to us as the tired, pathetic biblical literalist of the smug, mendacious, middlebrow play "Inherit the Wind." On those rare occasions that he is hauled up from the memory hole he is mocked as "a clownish figure symbolizing the country bumpkins and religious zealots who tried to resist the coming of the modern world," with all its accoutrements: manhattans, the Manhattan Transfer, the Manhattan Project.

Bryan had an idealistic streak but we need not idealize him. He was a politician, after all, a "practical ideologue," a majoritarian Democrat who was partially deaf in his libertarian ear. Like Lincoln, his ambition was the little engine that knew no rest. A fundamentalist Christian imbued with a Jeffersonian faith and the commitment to uplift of a Social Gospelite, "he was a champion of small farmers, urban laborers, and small businessmen." He saw these people not as beggars at the banquet, not as noisy almsmen hollering for handouts, but as the true face of America. Restating the Jeffersonian motto "Equal rights for all; special privileges for none," he denounced "ship-subsidy grabbers," "trust magnates," and "the privilege-hunting and favor-seeking class." (Predictably, his campaigns were chronically underfunded.) It might seem odd that

Taylor calls a candidate who advocated nationalization of the railroads a believer in "a laissez-faire economy," but Bryan himself professed it: "The safety of our farmers and our laborers is not in special legislation, but in equal and just laws that bear alike on every man. The great masses of our people are interested, not in getting their hands into other people's pockets, but in keeping the hands of other people out of their pockets."

Bryan was also "a quasi pacifist and anti-imperialist" who made his 1900 campaign a referendum on imperialism and stood up against the jingoes in opposing U.S. entry into the First World War. He supported a national referendum upon a congressional declaration of war, one of the last full-throated shouts of the radical populists. (FDR, the *New York Times*, and Wall Street Republicans burked it for good in 1937.)

Bryan fought Morgan and Rockefeller on behalf of the Dakotas, and he made no apology for it. Among his supporters was a South Dakota druggist whose son, Hubert Horatio Humphrey, would become the grinning, garrulous U.S. senator from Minnesota, burbling fount of the "Politics of Joy," Lyndon B. Johnson's much abused vice president, and the 1968 Democratic presidential nominee.

Young Humphrey was a Willkie Republican in 1940, but during the postwar mop-up, when old American radicals were kicked out of a newly war-enamored Left, Humphrey busily extirpated Bryanism from the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party so that the populist FL might merge with the Trumanite hawks of the Democratic Party. "A Republican less than five years earlier," Taylor notes of HHH in 1947, "he was now reading life-long Farmer-Laborites out of the party." The Humphrey fusionists vanquished "the traditional agrarian populists within the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party." Thus was born the DFL, a party with all the sects appeal of Walter Mondale.

As a good social democrat—today's neocon elders were almost all Humphrey men—HHH hated pacifists, isolationists, and radical American dissenters and purged them with the fervor

of Tailgunner Joe. And as a good liberal of the American Century, “Humphrey was an enthusiastic supporter of every U.S. war from 1938 to 1978.” For by 1950, liberalism meant tanks and conscription and a foreign policy designed by rootless products of elite prep schools, well-bred Mr. Joneses who had no idea what was happening to them when finally, in the 1960s, the fodder rose up against their fathers.

Humphrey, twisting the Jeffersonian slogan, desired “special privileges for all,” cracks Taylor. An “exponent of paternalistic statism,” he never met a welfare program he didn’t vote for—no matter if the beneficiary was Lockheed, Boeing, or a single mother. He stated confidently that “big corporations are a source of strength and economic vitality.” No hippie-dippy small-is-beautiful sap for the Triple H!

The Hump had his moments. His finest was his speech to the 1948 Democratic convention in which he dared delegates to “get out of the shadow of states’ rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights”—not a bad line, if a recipe, in another context, for never-ending war. Of course he was hardly braving obloquy and rotten fruit. Backed “by Americans for Democratic Action, by big city bosses, and by a majority of the delegates,” he stole the civil-rights issue from Henry Wallace and made himself a Young Man to be Considered. Throughout his career he raised piles of money on Wall Street; his 1968 campaign was “mostly engineered within corporate boardrooms, luxury suites, and White House offices.” (30 percent of Humphrey’s war chest was raised from contributions of \$500 or less, compared to 85 percent of George Wallace’s 1968 treasury.) By his career’s sputtering end, he was, as Hunter S. Thompson pegged him in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ‘72*, “a shallow, contemptible, and hopelessly dishonest old hack.”

Taylor quotes Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he

stands at times of challenge and controversy.” Bryan resigned from Woodrow Wilson’s cabinet when that sour Presbyterian began humming “Onward, American Soldiers.” Even after Wilson’s death, he “refused to serve on a committee to raise funds for a foundation to honor the late President” because the late president was not deserving of honor.

Humphrey hewed to LBJ, ignoring this sage advice from a Farmer-Labor friend back in Minnesota: “Don’t you cut, shuffle, or deal with that son of a bitch, he’s owned lock, stock and barrel by Texas oil and gas interests.” In one obscene paroxysm, HHH called Vietnam “our great adventure—and a wonderful one it is!” The “Politics of Joy” spiked with napalm. Humphrey never broke with a Democratic president, and even when other Cold War Democrats were expressing tentative doubts over the “imperial presidency,” he cautioned that the wise path “lies not in weakening the presidency, but in choosing individuals for that office who can be trusted with its vast powers.” That, in a rancid nutshell, remains the Democratic response to executive tyranny.

“Intellectually, Bryan was a boy who never left home,” sneered the court historian Richard Hofstadter, for whom home-leaving—home-rejection—was a sign of maturity. The Hump, by contrast, recalled that “when I was a young man in South Dakota, everything—everyone—even the state itself seemed so anonymous. I always felt—gosh, I’ll live and die out here and nobody’d ever know that I ever was.” There was nothing selfish about his flight to fame, he assured the interviewer. He went to Washington because “I just thought somebody should know what all those good people [the anonymous South Dakotans not on Rushmore] are all about. Who’s going to help them with their problems if no one knows they’re here?”

It’s the sort of self-revelation that a *Time* columnist would find humanizing but an American should find nauseating. Taylor observes, “Apparently it did not occur to Humphrey” that South Dakotans and Minnesotans “might have the ability and desire to help themselves.”

His life validated by the issuance of his Senate license plate, the Hump never quite got over the thrill of giving meaning to the lives of the little people. In 1958, he marveled, “Today, the federal government’s influence is everywhere, in the states, in the cities, in the towns, on the highways, in the airways, in the Main Street bank, in the country store, affecting [a citizen’s] life in a hundred different ways every hour of the day, every day of the year.” Taylor adds drily, “He viewed this as a positive development.”

Humphrey never was found on the populist side of an issue. Nor did he ever stand for principle in defense of an unpopular cause. He red-baited ferociously in the late ‘40s and sponsored legislation to outlaw the Communist Party USA. As Taylor writes, “he opposed the traditional Farmer-Labor Party in the mid-1940s, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in the mid-1960s, the New Left and Counterculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the right-to-life movement in the mid-1970s.” This quartet says as much about Taylor as it does about Humphrey. In each case the enemy of populism was the Democratic establishment in all its mottled ingloriousness: New Deal bureaucrats, racist Dixiecrats, Vietnam War technocrats, and urban feminist harpycrats.

Among Taylor’s virtues is his spirited refusal to inter persons and ideas in the coffins labeled “liberal” and “conservative.” He knows too much political history for that. Thus Taylor can lump together the Bonus March, the Scopes trial, Huey Long’s Share the Wealth program, the Nye Committee’s investigation into the “merchants of death,” and Fighting Bob LaFollette’s Progressive Party (he’s in favor of them all, I think) as “counterrevolutionary acts...waged on behalf of traditions, values, and beliefs” of middle Americans. He understands the New Left to have been a “Jeffersonian revival” that sought to recover “traditional liberalism’s rejection of capitalism, statism, militarism, and imperialism.”

Carrying the story beyond Humphrey, Taylor pokes about in the Democratic carion and finds nothing but little Huberts

(without the original's kinetic appeal) scurrying about: Gore, Kerry, Hillary Clinton. The values associated with the Democracy B.E. (Before Empire)—“decentralization, frugality, pacifism, and isolationism”—are about as potent a force as Anti-Masonry in contemporary Democratic politics. (He holds out hope for Wisconsin Sen. Russell Feingold, who cast gutsy votes against the Iraq War and the Patriot Act and seems to have a LaFollette gene. We shall see.)

As for Bryan's legacy? Taylor nominates Sen. Robert Taft, California Gov. Jerry Brown, and maverick Wisconsin Sen. William Proxmire as “the most balanced, most fully realized Jeffersonian politicians of the post-New Deal era.” He rightly sees in the Brown, Perot, and Buchanan campaigns of 1992 the seeds of a new populism that is antiwar, antiglobalist, and anti-Wall Street, the avenging Jeffersonian ghost haunting the ruined castle along the Potomac.

Taylor, who has been active in the Green Party, seems to write off the Democrats when he says, “It may be that the only hope for a Jeffersonian reunification of the common people in the electoral arena is the creation of a broad-based, ideologically diverse populist party that encompasses everyone from the Green Party on the Left to the Constitution Party on the Right.” That dream always dissolves abruptly in the light of social issues, though coalition builders might try the federalist solution: let San Francisco be San Francisco, and let Utah be Utah. Mind your own damn place.

Referring to a hawkish column about Humphrey Democrat Henry Jackson written by Gore advisor Donna Brazile and titled “What Would Scoop Do?” Taylor answers, “Probably the opposite of what Jesus would do.”

What should the Democrats do? Read Jeff Taylor. Get over the Hump. Inherit not the wind but the wisdom of William Jennings Bryan and Thomas Jefferson. ■

Bill Kauffman's most recent book is Look Homeward, America (ISI Books).

[Performing Music in the Age of Recording, Robert Philip, Yale University Press, 304 pages]

Acoustic Feedback

By R.J. Stove

ANY HISTORY OF recorded sound that, like this one, ignores structuralism and quotes Wodehouse is manifestly on the right lines. Behold Jeeves's creator recollecting in antipathy his own voice, when its lugubrious timbre emerged from the dictaphone with the opening paragraphs of his latest novel:

It sounded too awful for human consumption. ... There was a kind of foggy dreariness about it that chilled the spirits. ... [It evoked] one of those dim tragedies of peasant life which we return to the library after a quick glance at page one. I sold the machine next day and felt like the Ancient Mariner when he got rid of the albatross.

This is but a variant of the emotions that several thousand musicians have felt about the whole recording process: they cannot live with it or without it. Intelligent surveys of the musician-recording symbiosis have been all too meager. Several glorified supermarket tabloids (of the “Who's Pavarotti Porking 2Nite?” genre) exist. So do impenetrable semiotic musings replete with tributes to Derrida. So does a narrowly discographic literature, wherein owlish trainspotters feud over the matrix numbers of Take 1 versus Take 2 for Alfred Cortot's 1928 version of Chopin's C sharp Minor Prelude.

But a serious, properly researched general history of recordings versus live performances and how each interacted with the other ... well, best of luck finding one. Till now, with this *tour de force*—masterwork is, in these circumstances, a perfectly legitimate term—by a lecturer at Britain's Open University. Robert Philip wrote impressive music

journalism for years in the long-defunct monthly *Records and Recording*, but not even his best insights there hinted at what he has achieved here.

Classical record buyers form a tiny minority of record buyers in general. Philip is consciously appealing to a tiny minority within a tiny minority: historic-recordings buffs, who are now rather well catered for through Naxos, Pearl, and other adventurous CD firms, but who previously had to cope with the whims of mail-order special-interest record societies. Of course, in suitably postmodern collegiate circles, the very definition of a historic recording becomes almost infinitely pliant. Some of us know music undergraduates who have never once seen an LP and whose idea of Dark Age conducting is not a Willem Mengelberg but a Neville Marriner. Philip operates at a much higher historiographical standard.

His main interest lies not in the very earliest discs but in those that came after the mid-1920s' establishment of electric recording. Orchestral pre-electrics resulted from so many then inevitable studio distortions as to be freakish even to read about, let alone to hear. A typical studio ensemble, we learn, would comprise only six first violins and a few violas, a clarinet, a cello, a bassoon, a contrabassoon and, rather than a double-bass, a tuba. Even with a respected conductor like Arthur Nikisch at the helm, the sound quality suggested a short-wave broadcast from Mogadishu. Cuts to scores were legion and shameless: the first “complete” recordings of Schubert song-cycles had items missing. Almost always the performer remained under pressure to fit his musical conceptions within 78 rpm side-lengths' procrustean bounds, although sometimes Toscanini and Stokowski would reduce this handicap by having two recording-machines going alternately.

To counterbalance its vices, 78 rpm technology possessed certain virtues that the tape recorder's 1940s advent ended: “There was no safety net,” Philip reminds us, “in the days before tape-editing. What you hear on the disc is what was actually achieved.” Yet even the tape