



The Democrat Who Took Vermont: Victory Messages to Philip Hoff, 1962–1964

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By SAMUEL B. HAND AND STEPHEN C. TERRY

On November 6, 1962, Philip Henderson Hoff was elected governor of Vermont. The election results attracted extraordinary political attention that also elicited emotional responses. It was the first time since the birth of the modern Democratic Party (130 years) that a popular majority of Vermonters voted for that party's candidate for governor, and the first time since 1853 that a Democrat would preside over the state.

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Governor Philip H. Hoff at the annual meeting of the Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier, 1965.

Hoff garnered 3,839 fewer votes as a Democrat than his opponent, incumbent F. Ray Keyser Jr., received as a Republican. However, two splinter parties, the Vermont Independent Party (VIP) consisting largely of dissident Republicans, and the Independent Democrats added over 5,000 votes to Hoff's total.

Hoff's victory came as a surprise to most political pundits; the *Rutland Herald* was caught without any file photographs of the new governor. The owner of WCAX-TV, Stuart T. "Red" Martin, a lifelong Republican and ardent Hoff opponent, was said to have been so surprised and angered by the election results that through clenched teeth he bit off half of the ever-present cigar in his mouth.

But Hoff's victory was seen as possible by knowledgeable Vermont political junkies. Political insiders, including Governor Keyser himself, correctly predicted that if the total vote fell below 125,000, the Democrats could win. Democratic strategists also thought this possible and capitalized on the long-term trend of Republicans voting in far larger numbers in presidential election years than in off-years, while Democratic turnout remained relatively consistent. To further depress any probability of a large Republican turnout, the Democrats mounted their first primary contest for the U.S. Senate. The 1962 primary eliminated former one-term Democratic Congressman William Meyer of West Rupert, a spirited campaigner who hoped to oppose the immensely popular George D. Aiken. Aiken, whose popularity among Democrats and independents assured his reelection, was wont to pursue low key campaign efforts. Although Meyer was no threat to Aiken's reelection, he could possibly arouse the "sleeping giant" into motivating a larger core of his substantial Republican following to participate in the general election and thus increase Republican totals. With Meyer eliminated from the race after his primary defeat, Democrats implemented their "off year" strategy.

Even some Vermonters who anticipated a possible Hoff victory were ecstatic over the outcome. Rutland stalwart Dan Healy had been "working 44 years for the Democratic Party to see a Democrat elected governor of the state. The day is now." W. Robert Johnson of Brattleboro, who had defeated former Congressman William Meyer in the Democratic primary for the United States Senate, "was proud to have had a part in [Hoff's] success," but it is not clear if he fully understood what that part was. His only disappointment was the "brush off I was getting throughout and particularly the absence of any help from the State Committee" in his campaign against Aiken.

Middlebury's Peter J. Hincks, another longtime party stalwart who had run for state treasurer on the 1962 ticket with Hoff and had suffered six state-wide defeats before then, struck a common chord. After offering congratulations on "your wonderful victory," he exhorted the party not to let down. "We will have to keep our organization live and going for the next big battle. You must go back for another term, then to Congress." Hincks seems to have shared with the national press an acute awareness that the Democrats remained a minority party, and some correspondents, appalled that Hoff's election was labeled a Democratic victory, insisted it was a "Victory for Independents. Not a true Democratic victory."

Republicans, except for some Hoff had singled out for criticism during the campaign, wrote in good spirits. The most effusive message was

from former Governor and United States District Court Judge Ernest W. Gibson Jr., who thought “your election is a good thing for Vermont, and I think a breath of fresh air into the musty tombs of our state administration will re-invigorate and put life into our state—perhaps I should say cause a reincarnation.” As suggested, those whom Hoff singled out for criticism were less welcoming. J. Warren McClure, publisher of the *Burlington Free Press*, thanked Hoff “for calling me at 2:10 AM this morning to tell me of your election as governor. . . . Your statement that ‘I won’t take orders from you like Ray Keyser did’ reminded me that ‘flattery will get you everywhere.’” McClure also took the opportunity to pass on some unsolicited advice. He recalled “The Vermont story of the tourist who went into the country store and said ‘I want to order a dozen eggs.’ The Vermonter didn’t say anything. ‘Aren’t you going to give them to me’ the tourist asked. ‘Nope [replied the store owner,] because I ain’t takin’ orders from nobody!’”

John D. Carbine, a Rutland attorney and the state’s most prominent lobbyist, wrote to congratulate Hoff and to ask “what are you and [Fred] Fayette and [Robert] Larrow going to do now that you can no longer refer to me as Governor Carbine?” By 1966 Hoff would learn that Carbine could have his way even against the opposition of the governor, most notably the rejection of a state plan to purchase Canadian hydropower.

Most Republicans were genuinely accepting of the new governor. Fred Smith, another prominent Vermont attorney and president of the Burlington Savings Bank, had apparently voted for Keyser. Although he professed to have roots in the Republican Party “too deep even when individual performances are disappointing,” he was “frankly pleased that you are the Democrat who has the first opportunity to show what he can do for Vermont.” Judge Gibson had offered help if requested and Richard Snelling, at that time a prominent Shelburne legislator, offered to help “unofficially.”

It was the impact that the election had upon individuals not commonly tuned into Vermont politics that was most fascinating. A Connecticut resident sent Hoff “congratulations on the most dramatic political victory of the 20th century,” and the Vermont election was a front-page story in a Seattle newspaper. The Turner Falls, Massachusetts, high school from which Hoff had graduated gave students a period off to celebrate. Former high school teammates and classmates sent their personal congratulations.

Hoff’s huge network of Williams College and Cornell University Law School associates also reconnected. One Cornell graduate wanted to know if his former classmate Philip Hoff was the same Philip Hoff elected governor of Vermont. After writing letters of inquiry to other

former classmates, he saw Hoff's picture in the newspaper. Hoff even received a congratulatory note from Pakistan.

The Protestant Hoff's nomination as the Democratic candidate for governor deviated from a party tradition of nominating only Catholics for that post. Whatever the strategic basis for not nominating a Catholic, it was facilitated by having a Catholic, John F. Kennedy, as president to reassure Catholics that they were not being excluded from party politics. This deviation from tradition was noted more by local than regional or national observers. A Catholic couple wrote that they had no ill feelings against Republicans, "however, felt that we should have a Democratic Governor [and] the Mrs. said many a Rosary for your success throughout your campaign. . . . [O]ne of my best friends is an Episcopalian and she was pleased."

The consensus was that the "remarkable victory" would not have been possible without Hoff's hard work. He was touted by *Life Magazine* as "the Democrat who took Vermont." Keyser had contributed to his own vulnerability by creating pockets of discontent among Republican leaders such as T. Garry Buckley of Bennington and W. Arthur Simpson, of Lyndon Center, and Democrats were able to capitalize on the fact that the incumbent was widely regarded as "a poor specimen for a governor." Nonetheless, it was hard work by Hoff that produced the ultimate victory. The executive director of the Vermont Republican state committee, Carroll Adams, confided to the governor-elect that he "shall never cease to marvel at the vigor and sincerity with which you campaigned. Unfortunately your effort paid off." The narrow victory converted campaign workers who had worked with the candidate on the campaign trail into believers that it was their participation that made the difference and they wrote to share that belief with him. Their exuberance was contagious. Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr., a former Hoff Williams College classmate and then chairman of the Department of Political Science at Brown University, wasn't sure Hoff would remember him very clearly from their days at Williams College, but was sure "you are hearing from a whole host of 'close friends' these days that you did not know existed."

Hoff received ceremonial congratulations from the White House: "Your victory was very welcome news for all of us here today," signed by Larry O'Brien, Special Assistant to the President. The more fulsome and certainly most partisan messages came from those who worked closest with Hoff. Two days after receiving the election results Ben Collins was "still floating 10 miles high. . . . Your success already has cheered thousands of persons in a way that will long serve the state's future. It has given Republicans as well as Democrats a new sense of independence from the inhibiting traditions of the past."

Not all correspondents offering advice did so directly. Robert Aiken, Vermont's Commissioner of Health, devoted his entire letter to the story of a bishop who visited a priest on a very busy day. Late in the afternoon they decided to go into the chapel and pray. As they were kneeling before the altar, the bishop saw the Lord before the altar. Figuring he was having an hallucination he nudged the priest and whispered, "do you see anything in front of the altar? The priest said "yes, the Lord is in front of the altar." The bishop asked "what do you think we should do?" And the priest replied "Look busy."

Hoff sought election to a second two-year term in 1964. Unlike past instances when state and presidential elections coincided, 1964 did not provide Republicans an advantage. The party was badly divided by the presidential nomination of Barry Goldwater and from the campaign's outset it seemed apparent that Lyndon Johnson would be the first Democratic presidential candidate ever to carry the state. Since Hoff would run without splinter party support, political observers outside the state still did not assume that his reelection was a certainty, as under normal circumstances a traditionally overwhelming Republican turnout would assure a Democratic defeat in a presidential election year. Nineteen sixty-four, however, presented new elements. These included a popular Democratic governor with all the advantages of incumbency and a fragmented Republican Party, split over its presidential nominee, that led experienced prominent party members, such as former House speaker Franklin Billings, to defect to Hoff's cause.

The results were beyond the most buoyant Democratic expectations. The Lyndon Johnson-Hubert Humphrey ticket won in Vermont by over 53,000 votes, and Hoff won by 50,000 over his opponent, sweeping the entire Democratic state ticket into office.

Hoff's political stature had risen during his first two years as governor; but he was propelled into the ranks of national political celebrities by the 1964 election results. The latter best accounts for the dissimilarities in the 1962 and 1964 congratulatory messages. In light of the presidential results a preponderance of communication was from out of state. Furthermore, rather than a perfunctory letter from a presidential aide, in 1964 Hoff received telegrams from both the president and vice president. Lyndon Johnson thought it "an important night for America and the free world. Your election victory is a source of great comfort to me." Hubert Humphrey "rejoiced" in Hoff's victory, adding that, "Vermont has helped inspire the nation." Hoff's mail now included recognition from cabinet secretaries and other administration officials as well as governors and senators from other states.

An almost universal theme in these communications was the sugges-

tion that Hoff was bound for higher political office, presumably the U.S. Senate. To an extent their character can be attributed to the widely held belief that by voting against Goldwater Vermont had helped continue Lyndon Johnson in office and saved the world from a candidate likely to involve the United States in military conflict. Hoff was credited with transforming Vermont from a nineteenth-century political backwater to a state attuned to contemporary political realities.

In contrast with this heightened national image was the relative lack of spontaneity or reference to a personal association with the candidate after the 1964 election as compared with responses to his victory in 1962. This is apparent in the lack of undated handwritten notes obviously written in the euphoria of victory. An exception is a letter from a Granville couple “very glad to be among many who can say we voted for Hoff,” who thought the governor “would be interested to know that a Democrat has never been considered a candidate in Granville. On Tuesday we had 89 voters, 40 for Mr. Foote and 47 for you. Until the past two years most of the people here didn’t know there was a Democratic Party.”

The months following the November 1964 election were in some respects the high point in Hoff’s career. He would gain reelection to a third term in 1966 and figure prominently in national party councils, but his impatience with the slow pace of government and his passion for civil rights led him to take initiatives such as the Vermont-New York project that moved him beyond limits acceptable to much of his Vermont constituency, while his opposition to the Vietnam War led to a split with Lyndon Johnson and the further decline in party support. (Hoff later labeled his decision in 1968 to endorse the presidential candidacy of Robert Kennedy and oppose the renomination of Lyndon Johnson as the worst political decision of his career.) In 1969 he left the governor’s office to return to private practice, and the following year campaigned for a seat in the U.S. Senate. He was soundly thrashed by Republican incumbent Winston Prouty and returned to his Burlington law practice. He subsequently served as state chairman of the Democratic Party. In 1976 he served for a short time as manager of North Carolina’s Terry Sanford’s abortive presidential nomination campaign. In 1982 he was elected to the Vermont Senate, where he served three terms as a resourceful and effective member. June 22, 1988, reports in the *Burlington Free Press* and *Rutland Herald* that Hoff would not seek reelection described him as having emerged as “a leading defender of human-services initiatives and . . . a forceful proponent of property tax reform” who had become “his party’s spiritual leader in the Senate.” He may be gone from the political scene, the *Newport Daily Express* editorialized, but “we expect he will not soon be forgotten.”

SOURCES

The letters and telegrams cited are from the Hoff memorabilia collection preserved by Mrs. Joan Hoff. They are to be deposited along with the other Hoff papers at the University of Vermont archives. The correspondents are identified although their signatures are occasionally undecipherable and their correspondence often undated but obviously within a week after the elections. The dates of newspaper references, almost invariably from either the *Rutland Herald* or the *Burlington Free Press*, are included within the text. The “Phil Hoff will be missed, but not forgotten” quote is from a June 23 *Newport Daily Express* editorial. “The Democrat who took Vermont” is the title of an article by Raul Tunley in *Life Magazine*, November 23, 1963.