

RICHARD NIXON AND ELVIS.

RICHARD NIXON AND SAMMY DAVIS JR.

HUBERT H. HUMPHREY AND JAMES

BROWN? Far from being a typical politician-celebrity “photo op,” this image of Vice-President Humphrey and soul singer James Brown also documents a forgotten friendship and the Godfather of Soul’s eminence in late-1960s American politics and culture. In 1967 Humphrey gave him an award for “helping quell riots with public statements.” Music writer Nelson George pinpointed Brown’s role in averting a riot in Boston the next year, after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, as an affirmation of Brown’s authority. Rather than cancel his performance at the Boston Garden that evening, the singer permitted it to be televised “as a way to keep angry blacks off the streets. . . . For Brown, never one lacking in self-esteem, this confirmed his power in black America.”*

Brown defined “Black Power” as constructive action, not necessarily revolution. He had personally delivered his semi-autobiographical single, “Don’t Be A Drop-Out,” to Humphrey (whom he called “my first politician”) in October 1967. “He said a stay-in-school campaign had come up before, but it never got off the ground,” Brown wrote. “He was glad to see someone do something besides talk about it, and he said he’d help all he could. . . . I became very good friends with Vice-President Humphrey. We met several times after that, for official ceremonies and things but behind the scenes we were doing a lot of serious talking.”*

Brown was photographed at the May 8, 1968, White House state dinner honoring Thanom Kittikachorn, the prime minister of Thailand. He recalled the evening in his autobiography: “My place card at the White House dinner said: ‘Thank you for what you are doing for your country—LBJ.’ I think that upset some people because they thought it was like a pat on the head for helping cool off the riots. I don’t think they understood everything I had been doing—the stay in school campaign, the lobbying with the Vice President about job programs, and things like that. And in less than a month . . . I was going to Viet Nam to entertain the troops.”

After the meal, a Secret Service man summoned Brown to meet with Humphrey at his table. Brown’s response astonished the agent: “James Brown is not his boy. I will not walk across the room to his table. . . . but . . . I’ll meet him halfway.” When the Secret Service man delivered the message, “Mr. Humphrey caught my eye and started laughing. We met halfway.” —*Patty Dean, MHS museum collections*



HUBERT H. HUMPHREY PAPERS, MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Sources: Nelson George, *Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 103; James Brown, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul, An Autobiography* (Berkeley: Publishers Group West, 1996), 170–171, 190, 199.



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