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Distilling a Vice President

Richard Meryman, who, as he describes it, "distilled" this week's lead article from seven hours of conversations with Vice President Hubert Humphrey, is a master of the tape-recorded interview. He doesn't know, he says, whether to call his technique writing, editing or interviewing, but he uses it with great success to present a total personality, self-portrayed, "without any writer between the subject and the reader." The method itself is arduous; it requires long hours of preparation before each interview, careful questioning during the talk and weeks of studying the tapes to create a fair and rounded distillation. His subjects have different talking tastes. Where Hubert Humphrey liked to talk for about two hours at a time, Elizabeth Taylor ran for three hours and Charlie Chaplin could go for six. When he interviewed Andrew Wyeth, Meryman found the artist liked to talk as he walked over the Pennsylvania hills. And Louis Armstrong, at the time performing at Las Vegas, could never start until after 3 a.m.

Dick did not approach the Vice President from a political point of view; instead, he says, "I wanted to ask him the simple, rather personal questions that any man in the street might want to ask of a presidential candidate. It was by definition a nonpolitical thing, and Humphrey is such a straightforward man, he seemed a natural.

"He was so busy that it took me two months to get three interviews—two in Minnesota, one in Washington—and during these there was nothing you could describe as a personal relationship. Everything was extremely businesslike. He would largely ignore me while he finished up his work. Then we'd start, and ZOOM—for two hours he'd give me all his energies, every bit of his concentration. I had him 150%. He never ducked a question—I couldn't ask one that he refused to answer. He never went off on a tangent. He never said 'I'm glad you asked that question' and then answered some other question. To me there was a very engaging courage in his just saying, 'Here I am. I'm not afraid to be myself.' At the end, CLICK. The interview ended and I was nicely but quickly out the door.

"One thing everyone asks me is, why does he talk so much? He's criticized for windbagging, but while I was analyzing the transcript I realized that what seems to be overelaborating is an effort to refine an idea. He'd restate a sentence two or three times to make it more precise, and over and over all I had to do was cut out the first two and use the third. One thing I've learned from using this technique is that most people aren't attentive enough to pick up the subtle changes in meaning that go on in spontaneous talk.

"Another reason he seems verbose is that he is a teacher at heart—he feels very strongly that politicians are teachers. So he tends, as teachers do, to tell you first what he's going to say. Then he says it; then tells you what he's said."

When the article was finished, Humphrey read it and asked for some changes. Dick made them and asked him to autograph the manuscript. The Vice President did so, adding with a flourish, "To a man who kept his word."



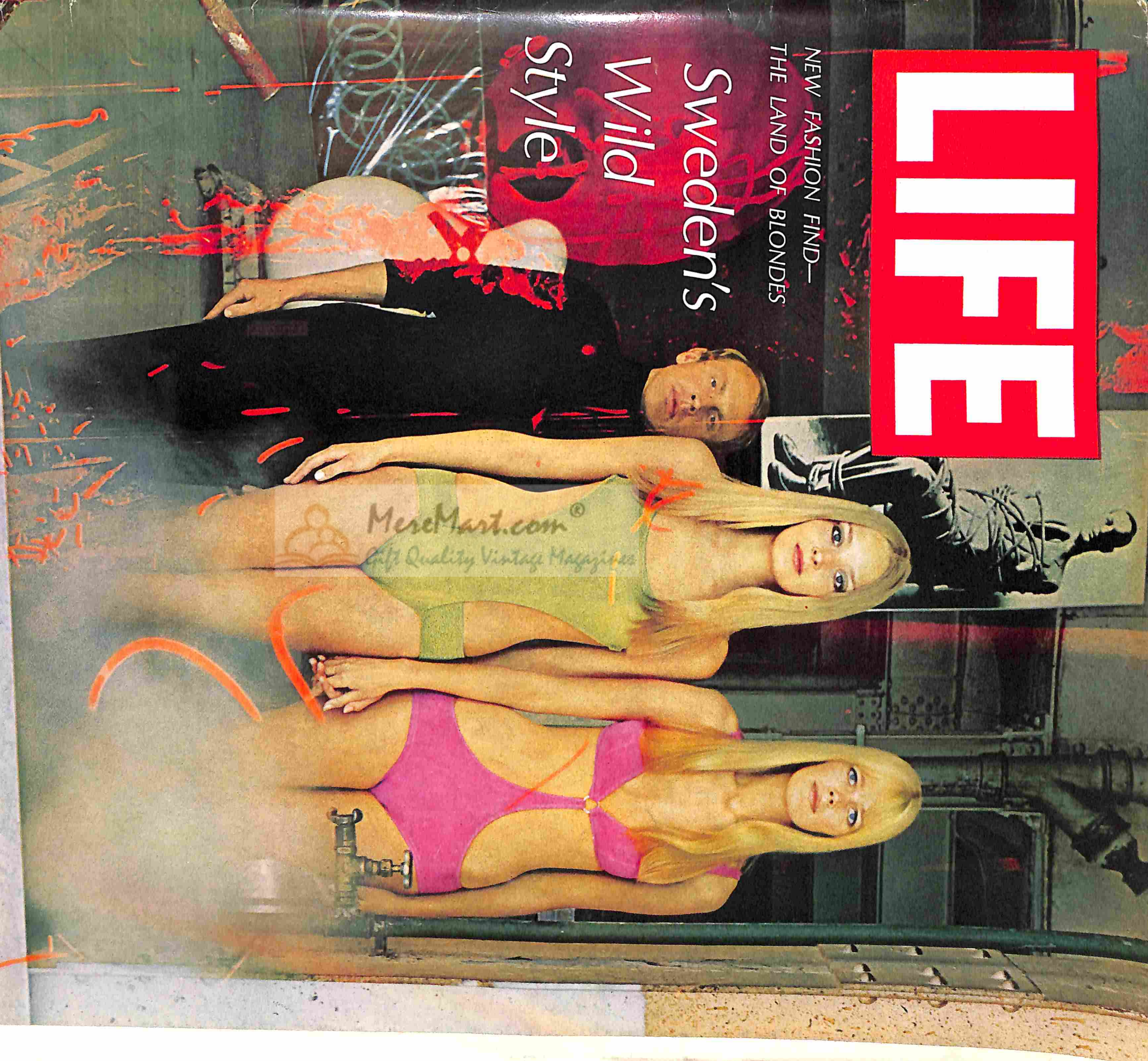
HUMPHREY AND MERYMAN

George P. Hunt
 GEORGE P. HUNT,
 Managing Editor

LIFE

NEW FASHION FIND—
THE LAND OF BLONDES

Sweden's Wild Style



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