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Columns-**Looking** Around Jul-18-2005 (590 words) xxxc

Neat and clean for Gene

By Father William J. Byron, SJ Catholic News Service

This column is part of the CNS columns package.

"Parting Shots From My Brittle Bow" is former Minnesota Sen. Eugene McCarthy's latest and probably last book. I had it with me when I visited him recently in an assisted-living facility in Washington, hoping to have him sign it, but he was bedridden at that time and the effort would have been a bit much.

He will be 90 next March. As a member of the House, the Senate, a candidate for the Democratic nomination for president in 1968, a professor, poet, social commentator over the years and an independent presidential candidate in 1976, McCarthy's place in history is secure. Although it is difficult for a visitor to hear his words now, there is still a sparkle in the eye and a smile of remembrance at the mention of names and stories past.

Those who emerged from the ranks of the anti-war movement as "neat and clean for Gene" to pour their energies into the campaign that ended in disappointment at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago might now want to drop him a card at the Georgetown Retirement Residence, 2512 Q Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

"The bow is pretty brittle now," he remarked when I mentioned the book. But the shots, I have to say, are still very much on the mark.

An admirer, Sam Scinta, edited the book (Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, Colo.). He recalls reading an interview with the senator early in 2004 in the New Yorker where McCarthy said that The New York Times and Washington Post were no longer interested in his views on politics. "I was shocked," writes Scinta, in the introduction to "Parting Shots," "that a figure of such intellect and insight was being 'put out to pasture' by the major news organizations."

Scinta immediately wrote to the man he had long admired, offering his services as an editor ready to gather up past speeches, interviews and previously unpublished material for a new book. The subject was willing, and the eight-chapter result bears the simple subtitle "Reflections on American Politics and Life."

McCarthy's "basic premises" are:

--Our nation is shaped by a democratic principle that requires involvement on the part of both public officials and those who elect them.

--Many of the institutions we need for a well-functioning democracy are in a state of disrepair.

--Nonetheless, hope prevails.

--The two-party system is obsolete.

--America has a unique role to play in world affairs.

The McCarthy humor is there. "You really have to be careful of politicians who have no further ambitions: They may run for the presidency." "If a man was drowning 20-feet from shore, a Republican would throw him a 15-foot rope and say, 'Well, I went more than half way.'"

And there is McCarthy wisdom as well: "There is no place in the world today and no person in the world for which we do not have some degree of obligation and responsibility." "It is the inequality of a burden, not its weight, which usually provokes resistance." "Knowledge and reason, limited though they may be, are the only defenses of civilization against ignorance and false fear. Together or apart, they give stability and direction to civilization."

In a poem titled "Gene," Samuel Hazo said: "Almost unannounced, you landed/ in New Hampshire, spoke/ to smallish but determined crowds/ and entered history."

And in his 1998 "Lament of an Aging Politician," McCarthy wrote: "I have left Act I, for involution/ and Act II. There mired in/ complexity/ I cannot write Act III."

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END

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