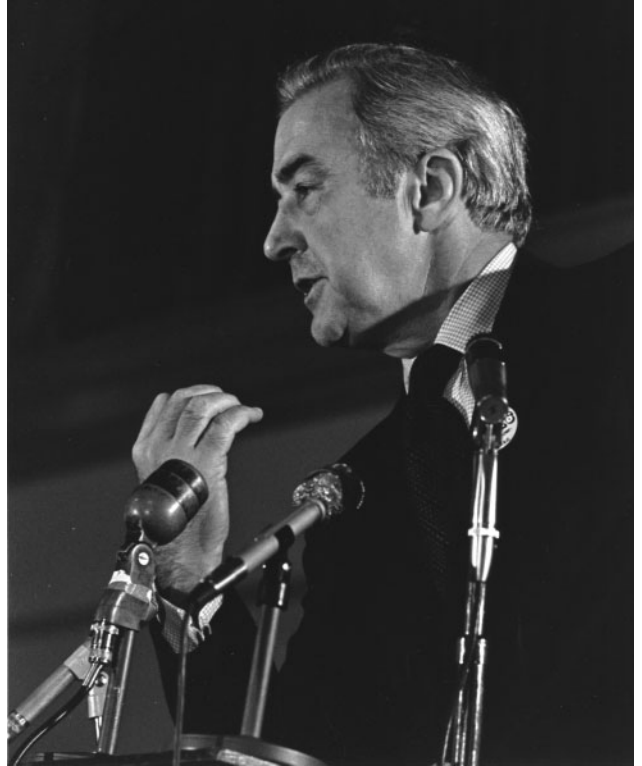


GENE LEAVES US ALL BEHIND

*The man who helped run Minnesota's
McCarthy-for-President campaign
remembers the senator*

By Vance Opperman



When a draft-weary generation needed a political leader, Gene was our Man from U.N.C.L.E. To take us on our anti-war trek, Gene was the real Roddenberry. He was the mama and the papa of our anti-war period. He became the personifying icon of our society-changing alphabetic expressions – SDS, YPSL, SNCC, SPU. In a Washington political culture that rewarded talking big while keeping your head down and going with the flow, he swirled out of the mists of the Senate like a Catholic mystic. More ancient than that, perhaps – like Jeremiah, and while the prophet might have had a red beard, you knew his eyes sparkled with intellectual wit.

Gene McCarthy was not a man of his time or even in his time. Like the existential, dimensionless point before the Big Bang, he was the time that defined that which came after.

But apparently not for many of the people walking around Washington with the blinders necessary to continue the war in Vietnam. Dean Rusk, secretary of state from 1960 to 1969, in his book *As I Saw It*, has no mention of Gene McCarthy and no indexed mention of McCarthy other than a mention of Joe McCarthy. Wrong guy, and I'm sure Secretary of State Rusk knew it. Robert S. McNamara, secretary of defense and famous for seeing the light at the ends of tunnels, included in his book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* no index mention of Gene McCarthy (again, as with Rusk, a mention of Joe McCarthy). But many of us saw the lessons of Vietnam, even if McNamara and Rusk cannot. Those who are driven to positions of power in Washington start to believe that they can force their will on peoples and culture of which they are ignorant. They cloak themselves in national security and the United States flag while perpetrating these crimes. In most countries and at most times, these people are never held to account. Gene McCarthy stood alone but showed us that ordinary citizens in this country can affect international relations and can possess a

more common sense about these relations than our frequent flag-raving, chest-pounding leaders.

Contemporaneous cultural icons of Gene McCarthy often lived in a parallel universe that negated politics and political involvement. Another Minnesotan, Bob Dylan, never mentions Vietnam or Gene McCarthy in any song, poem, interview, or in his retrospective, *Chronicles Volume 1*. Much of the counterculture of the time cascaded into the psychedelic fur of the late '60s zeitgeist. And so it would have been for an entire generation if it had not been for that one voice of moral clarity, Gene McCarthy. For he stood against the counterculture of his time and stood for mainstream political involvement to better the collective America.

This taught us yet another lesson, one which would be repeated by McCarthy over the ages, and it is this: In the absence of a citizen draft-regulated army, political elites can reign war and project force through a junker class. In the absence of a draft, and in the later words of General Wesley Clark, the American military will become conservative, religious and unreflective of the general population. Citizens lose their interest and influence in the most important decision a country collectively can make. Senator McCarthy continued to warn of these consequences. The elections of 2004 would have turned out differently if we had a draft. We need one now.

1968 changed everything. Baseball, Gene McCarthy's other great passion, was last played as a solely American sport that year. Before 1968, McCarthy's books were on policy; afterwards, they are almost all poetry. And finally, the year changed me. There are thousands of men and women who have held or currently hold political office in this country

who would not, if they had not gone through 1968. The deeply subversive view that an individual citizen can make a difference in important political decisions, but only through mainline political involvement, has its genesis in the McCarthy movement. Or, as the Senator has said, there are policies so morally questionable that even the poets are restless.

McCarthy believed in an afterlife. He has been in my thoughts and the thoughts of thousands of others who remain politically active to this very day. I like to think that in an after life, Gene McCarthy has dinner with Steve Allen, St. Augustine, Shelley and Ted Williams. If the political part of all of us that followed Gene McCarthy could return to 1968, we would never, ever come back. Restless in poetry (R.I.P.), Gene McCarthy. **L&P**

Editor's Note: It has been our great pleasure to have published 19 Gene McCarthy essays, with the first one appearing in 1995. His essays would arrive in the mail typewritten and smudged, with awkward spacings and occasional typos, but always filled with his trenchant observations, good humor and poetic phrasings. Please go to our Web site to read three of our favorites: "The Governor of the United States," "The Olfactory Test" and "Ambassador to Microsoft."