

Eugene McCarthy, dead at 89, played pivotal role in 1968 political crisis

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The death December 10 of former senator and US presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy provides an occasion for reviewing one of the most important chapters in recent American history—the political crisis that erupted in 1967-1968, shattering the administration of President Lyndon Johnson and giving a powerful impetus to the long-term decline and political decay of the Democratic Party.

In November 1967, appealing to opponents of the Vietnam War, McCarthy launched a campaign to challenge Johnson for the Democratic presidential nomination. From then until June 5, 1968, when he lost the California presidential primary to Robert F. Kennedy—who was assassinated the same night—McCarthy played a central role in American politics during a period of unprecedented political turmoil.

Thousands of young people opposed to the Vietnam War flocked to his campaign: some of them too young to vote, many of them born after McCarthy began his political career with his election to Congress in 1948. Most of these youth had never heard of McCarthy before he announced he would mount a challenge to Johnson's conduct of the war in Vietnam. They trekked to primary states like New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, not as camp followers of a particular political candidate, but seeking to use the electoral process as a means to bring an end to the war.

This ultimately proved to be a futile hope—some 28,000 Americans died in Vietnam after 1968, nearly as many as the 30,000 killed up until that year, to say nothing of the countless Vietnamese who lost their lives to US bombs, napalm, “search-and-destroy” missions and mass-assassination campaigns like Operation Phoenix. Why this effort failed and what this historical experience reveals about the nature of the Democratic Party are vital subjects for young people and working people to consider today.

A two-term senator from Minnesota when he decided to challenge Johnson's renomination, McCarthy had been largely overshadowed by his mentor, the postwar leader of the Minnesota Democratic Party and the liberal wing of the national Democratic Party, Senator Hubert Humphrey, who had become Johnson's vice president.

Approached by Allard Lowenstein, organizer of the “Dump Johnson” movement among Democratic Party liberals, McCarthy decided to enter the race with little or no support from fellow senators or congressmen. The party establishment frowned on this effort to challenge an incumbent president by appealing to rank-and-file Democratic voters in the primaries. Only one member of the House of Representatives, Congressman Don Edwards of California, supported McCarthy in the first months of the campaign.

The initial influx of young people into the McCarthy campaign, in the early months of 1968, culminated in a far better than expected showing in the March 12 New Hampshire primary, the first contest of the year. New Hampshire was then a largely rural, conservative and Republican state. But McCarthy polled 42 percent of the vote to Johnson's 49 percent, a result that shocked the political establishment.

Four days later, Senator Robert F. Kennedy entered the race for the Democratic presidential nomination. Two weeks after that, Johnson

announced, in a nationally televised speech, that he was withdrawing from the campaign and would not be a candidate for reelection.

McCarthy went on to win primaries in Wisconsin, Oregon, Pennsylvania and other states, only to be overtaken by Kennedy in the pivotal California primary. After Kennedy's assassination, the Johnson administration and congressional and state Democratic Party leaders swung the presidential nomination to Vice President Humphrey at a raucous and violence-filled convention in Chicago. Humphrey then lost narrowly to Republican Richard Nixon in the general election.

This bare outline of the course of the 1968 presidential campaign hardly does justice to what was the greatest social and political crisis in America in the half century that followed the Second World War. This crisis represented the confluence of three powerful streams of opposition to the status quo of American capitalism: the mass movement among youth and students against the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggles and series of urban rebellions in the black ghettos, and a powerful wages offensive by the industrial working class.

All three factors were on the ascendancy when McCarthy declared his candidacy for president late in 1967. His announcement came barely a month after what was up to then the largest antiwar demonstration in US history, the October 1967 march on the Pentagon. It followed the “long, hot summer” in which riots swept dozens of US cities, most notably Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit. In the latter city, Johnson was compelled to send in the 82nd Airborne Division, fresh from Vietnam, to shoot down black working class youth.

Major struggles of the labor movement had erupted throughout the previous two years, including the January 1966 transit workers' strike in New York City, an aircraft mechanics strike that forced the Johnson administration to scrap its proposed “guideposts” for wage restraint, and, in the fall of 1967, strikes by 55,000 New York City public school teachers, 140,000 Ford workers and 60,000 copper miners.

The Johnson administration had become the focus of popular hatred, particularly among young people. It was impossible for the president of the United States to make a public appearance anywhere in the country without thousands of antiwar demonstrators turning out to denounce the mass slaughter of the Vietnamese and the continuing heavy losses among American troops.

The war had also provoked deep divisions within the US ruling class, particularly over its escalating financial cost, which Johnson had refused to cover either by significantly slashing other government expenditures or sharply raising taxes, fearing such measures would fuel popular opposition to his administration. The result was mounting inflationary pressures and a ballooning balance of payments deficit, producing structural imbalances that threatened the world financial system. In November 1967 came the first major international financial shock of that period, when the British government devalued the pound.

In assessing the significance of the McCarthy campaign, it is necessary to grasp the full extent of the crisis that broke over the heads of the US

ruling class in March 1968, perhaps the most event-filled and extraordinary month in the entire post-World War II period.

The driving force of these events was the increasingly evident failure of the American intervention in Vietnam. On January 31, 1968, Vietnamese liberation forces launched the Tet offensive, seizing control of dozens of cities and shattering the puppet troops of the South Vietnamese government, even storming the US Embassy in Saigon. Heavy fighting in the urban centers continued for a month, culminating in the American retaking of the citadel of Hue, the ancient Vietnamese capital, in a bloody house-to-house conflict that cost the lives of thousands of US Marines and Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF) fighters. Before February 1968 had ended, US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had stepped down, a beaten man, replaced by Washington lawyer Clark Clifford, a behind-the-scenes power in Democratic administrations going back to the 1940s.

A brief chronology of March 1968 suggests the dimensions of the political, social and economic convulsions, both in the US and internationally:

March 1: Clark Clifford receives a Pentagon internal review of Vietnam War strategy, calling for a gradual US withdrawal and the shifting of the burden of the war onto Vietnamese puppet troops.

March 9-10: A conference of gold traders and bankers in Basle, Switzerland, fails to stem panic selling of the British pound and US dollar.

March 12: The New Hampshire primary—Johnson humiliated by the large vote for McCarthy.

March 15: Britain closes banks, the stock exchange and gold market.

March 16: Robert F. Kennedy enters the race for the Democratic presidential nomination.

March 16: The My Lai massacre in Vietnam—this atrocity was not made public for 18 months, but it demonstrated the desperation and brutality of the US military.

March 16-17: An emergency meeting of world bankers is held to establish a two-tier system for exchanging dollars for gold. Only national banks, not private traders, will be allowed to do so.

March 22: Clifford removes General William Westmoreland as Vietnam commander, kicking him upstairs to become Army chief of staff and replacing him with General Creighton Abrams.

March 22: Former Communist Party chief Anton Novotny resigns as president of Czechoslovakia, clearing the way for the new Communist Party Secretary Alexander Dubcek to launch his reform program, dubbed the Prague Spring.

March 25: Clifford meets with the “wise men,” a dozen former top US foreign policy and military leaders, to assess Vietnam war strategy.

March 26: The “wise men” meet with President Lyndon Johnson at the White House and tell him a drastic change of course is necessary.

March 28: Martin Luther King Jr. leads a march in Memphis in defense of striking sanitation workers, which is violently attacked by police. A 16-year-old is shot and killed. One week later, King himself would be assassinated in Memphis.

March 31: President Johnson announces he will not run for reelection.

Despite the enormous dimensions of this crisis, the political movement that had emerged against the war in Vietnam was ultimately neutralized and diverted into safe political channels. This was a complex process whose full dimensions can only be suggested here.

State provocations undoubtedly played a role. It is worth noting that of the four best-known figures associated with opposition to the Vietnam War in 1967-1968, only one, McCarthy, was still alive two years later. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April 1968, Robert Kennedy was gunned down in June 1968, and United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther died in the crash of his small plane in May 1970.

The most important fact is that the Democratic Party played its time-tested role as a political shock absorber for the American ruling elite,

providing an outlet for political and social tensions that might otherwise have found expression in a far more radical and openly anti-capitalist form. The McCarthy and Kennedy campaigns in 1968 paved the way for the capture of the Democratic presidential nomination by Senator George McGovern in 1972 on an avowedly antiwar program. The vast majority of the youth and working people radicalized during this period remained trapped within the framework of the Democratic Party or, frustrated in their desire for a real alternative, left politics altogether.

McCarthy's personal role was critical. With the Democratic Party establishment intervening in 1968 to block the nomination of an antiwar candidate, McCarthy would have won widespread support had he decided to break with the Democrats and run as an independent antiwar candidate. But he did no such thing.

After losing his fight for the nomination, McCarthy essentially sat out the fall election campaign. He seemed personally embittered by the experience of the Democratic primaries, famously describing the Kennedy campaign as “those sitting by their campfires up on the hillside, throwing notes of encouragement down to those fighting the battle on the valley floor and then coming down to join in shooting the wounded and declaring victory when the battle was won.”

In the final analysis, both the McCarthy and Kennedy campaigns were aimed at rescuing US imperialism from the quagmire of the war, under conditions where the ruling class increasingly saw its greatest danger not in Vietnam, but at home. McCarthy cited the need to restore public confidence in the political system, justifying his decision to run against Johnson by declaring, “I am hopeful that this challenge may alleviate this sense of political helplessness and restore to many people a belief in the processes of American politics and of American government.”

The *Washington Post* obituary of McCarthy was one of several that quoted the apt comment of journalist Jim Naughton, who observed that the Minnesota senator, for a few months in 1968, “stood at the flash point of history with a book of matches in his hand.” It should be added that McCarthy's essential purpose was to douse the matches and make sure no fire was set that could become a political conflagration.

McCarthy was quite conscious that his overriding task was to block the development of an independent political movement against the Vietnam War that would break with the two main capitalist parties. In announcing his candidacy on November 30, 1967, he declared his intention to combat any tendency “to make threats of support for third parties or fourth parties or other irregular political movements.”

This defense of the two-party political monopoly, at the moment of its greatest crisis in the post-World War II period, was a vital service to the American ruling elite. That accounts for the generally laudatory comments, across the whole spectrum of official bourgeois politics, from liberal Senator Edward Kennedy to conservative columnist George Will, that followed the news of McCarthy's death.

McCarthy's own political history had prepared him well for this role, since he entered politics as part of the effort by the Minnesota Democratic Party, led by Humphrey, then mayor of Minneapolis, to complete the absorption of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party (FLP), the most significant third-party formation in US electoral politics since the Socialist Party campaigns of Eugene V. Debs in the first two decades of the century.

From 1918 to 1946, Minnesota's Democratic Party was an also-ran third party in the state, with the Farmer-Labor Party competing in close contests with the Republican Party. Farmer-Laborites controlled the state government for much of this period and represented the state in Congress as well. The Democrats won more than 12 percent of the vote in only three of eight gubernatorial elections, and the party had little support outside of Catholic working class neighborhoods of St. Paul and Duluth, and among anti-communist American Federation of Labor (AFL) trade unionists, opposed to the more radical Congress of Industrial

Organizations (CIO).

In 1944, the Farmer-Labor Party merged with the Democrats to form the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party (still the party's official name in Minnesota). An important role in the merger was played by the Stalinists of the Communist Party, who controlled positions in both the CIO and the FLP, and were pursuing their wartime policy of Popular Front unity with the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic Party.

With the end of the war, however, the Democrats under Humphrey launched a vicious anti-communist campaign aimed at defeating the Stalinists and driving them out of the merged party. His circle of supporters in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) included many who would go on to prominence in state and national politics: Orville Freeman, Walter Mondale, Donald Fraser and Eugene McCarthy, then a young professor at a Catholic college.

The initial battles saw only mixed results for the right-wing faction. At county caucuses in 1947, the Humphrey faction, which used the AFL and the anti-communist Americans for Democratic Action as its organizing centers, was defeated by the CP-led faction, which controlled the local CIO. But a year later, a group led by McCarthy swept the caucuses in Ramsey County (St. Paul), and the Stalinists walked out of the state party to back the Progressive Party presidential campaign of Henry Wallace.

McCarthy put himself forward as the Democratic candidate in a St. Paul-based congressional district, and, tying himself to the victorious presidential campaign of Democrat Harry S. Truman, won a seat in Congress in November 1948. Ten years later, following in the footsteps of Humphrey, McCarthy won the state's other seat in the US Senate, defeating an incumbent Republican. Humphrey and McCarthy together represented Minnesota in the US Senate from 1958 to 1964, when Humphrey stepped down to become Johnson's running mate and was replaced in the Senate by Walter Mondale.

The extraordinary predominance of Minnesotans in the post-World War II national Democratic Party is well known. In seven consecutive presidential elections, from 1960 through 1984, a senator or former senator from Minnesota played a central role in the Democratic campaign: either as the Democratic presidential candidate (twice), the Democratic vice-presidential candidate (three times), or as a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination (four times).

This was in large measure the byproduct of the intensive political warfare in the state party from 1944 through 1948, in which the political physiognomy of the postwar national Democratic Party—liberal demagoguery on domestic policy (indispensable for combating the Stalinist-led left), militant anti-communism in foreign policy—was hammered out. Humphrey typified this combination: after winning the leadership of the state Democratic Party in a four-year struggle against the Stalinists, he first came to national attention in 1948 with a speech on civil rights to the Democratic national convention that provoked a walkout by segregationist delegates from the southern states.

McCarthy was no rival to Humphrey as a speechmaker, but his 1948 congressional campaign combined fervent support for the Truman doctrine and anti-communist foreign policy with populist attacks on the anti-union Taft-Hartley Law, just passed by the Republican-controlled Congress. A 1948 McCarthy campaign leaflet cited by his biographer Dominic Sandbrook complains of "class legislation," "higher prices," "exploitation by the big oil companies" and abuses by "the public utility monopolies."

His most notable action in national politics, before 1967, was a speech at the 1960 Democratic national convention nominating Adlai Stevenson, triggering a protracted standing tribute for the two-time Democratic nominee that nearly stampeded the convention away from John F. Kennedy. In terms of his own political philosophy, however, McCarthy sounded a distinctly more conservative note than Humphrey or Kennedy until the emergence of the Vietnam War as a major issue.

A devout Catholic who had studied for the priesthood and was devoted to the writings of Thomas Aquinas, he espoused the pessimistic philosophy of Jacques Maritain and Reinhold Niebuhr and viewed himself as closer to European Christian Democrats than Social Democrats. According to his biographer Sandbrook, McCarthy "was not always eager to be associated with the liberal political tradition of buoyant, progressive rationalism associated with statesmen and thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson, John Stuart Mill and John Dewey."

This outlook at least partly explains the distance between McCarthy and the antiwar movement that he sought, with considerable success, to co-opt into the Democratic Party. He did not try to link opposition to the war to a broader critique of American society. Unlike Kennedy, who sought support from working class and minority voters on the basis of economic issues and his association with the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, McCarthy made little effort to broaden his appeal beyond the student youth and sections of the middle class radicalized by the Vietnam War.

In the 1968 general election, McCarthy refused to campaign for his longtime political ally, Hubert Humphrey, going so far as to take an assignment for *Life* magazine, covering the 1968 World Series, rather than participate in political life. The next year, he voluntarily relinquished his seat on the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, knowing that he would be replaced by a pro-war Democrat, Gale McGee of Wyoming. He also announced that he would not seek reelection to the Senate in 1970.

In subsequent years, he waged symbolic and increasingly idiosyncratic campaigns for the presidency, in 1972, 1976, 1988 and 1992. In 1980, he backed Ronald Reagan for president, claiming that anyone was better than the Democratic incumbent, Jimmy Carter. The man who had launched his 1968 presidential campaign with a pledge to block third-party campaigns ultimately ran as an independent candidate himself, and made biting attacks on the two-party system.

In retirement, he caustically criticized a Democratic Party that had moved drastically to the right since 1968. In one interview in 2002, he told a reporter, "We're kind of in a governmental crisis. There's no real difference between the two parties, other than on irrelevant issues." The United States badly needed a viable third party, he said, pointing to the failure of the Democrats to oppose the theft of the 2000 presidential election. "This thing in Florida was scandalous, absolutely scandalous," he said. "And the Democrats didn't seem too upset with it. They just kind of let it pass."

But it was McCarthy who played an important role in maintaining the two-party monopoly at the time it was most vulnerable. This experience is of utmost relevance today, when American society once again confronts—albeit at a much more intense level—the confluence of an unpopular war, a deepening social crisis at home, and massive worldwide economic instability.

The mass popular base that the Democratic Party still had in 1968 is today drastically eroded. The party is only a shadow of the organization that, in McCarthy's heyday, was still identified with the legacy of the New Deal. When McCarthy launched his challenge to Johnson, only two years had elapsed since the enactment of such major reforms as the Voting Rights Act and Medicare and Medicaid. The massive US escalation in Vietnam that followed marked the end of any significant Democratic Party reforms.

As for the party's personnel, compared to a farsighted bourgeois leader like Franklin Roosevelt, or even a lesser figure like Eugene McCarthy, today's Democratic leaders are political midgets.



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