

# A Mighty Long Fall

An Interview With Eugene McCarthy

by Bill Kauffman



Senator Eugene McCarthy is America's senior statesman without a party. An Irish-German Minnesota Catholic who left the seminary for academe, McCarthy was elected to the House of Representatives in 1948 and the Senate in 1958. He was the link between the Old Progressives of the Upper Midwest and the postwar liberals; as time goes by, his profile sharpens, and McCarthy seems much closer to Bob LaFollette than to Adlai Stevenson.

His challenge to President Johnson in 1968—an act of political suicide—gave voice to an incipient antiwar tendency in what had been an extremely hawkish Democratic Party. His strong showing in the New Hampshire primary drove LBJ back to his ranch, Bobby Kennedy into the race, and McCarthy into a kind of involuntary exile.

McCarthy ran for President as an independent in 1976 and was all but physically barred from competing in the 1992 Democratic primaries. His contention that we are becoming a country in which “everyone belongs to a corporation and everyone else belongs to the federal government” makes him unwelcome in a party that regards Bill Bradley as a cerebral maverick. Richard Rovere once wrote that McCarthy was too far left on foreign policy and too far right on domestic matters to win the Democratic nomination. Or was he just too far out? He pledged to serve only one term if elected and to fill the White House Rose Garden with “humble vegetables” because “you’d have a hard time announcing war in a cabbage patch.” He published volumes of poetry and railed against the tyranny of the IRS. Of late, he has proposed to increase the number of congressional districts to 2,000 and revitalize the electoral college by turning it into a deliberative convention of 2,500 members elected in districts of 100,000 people.

Horse-race journalist Jules Witcover complained of Mc-

Carthy’s “sometimes lackadaisical, sometimes mystical, nearly always aloof manner.” McCarthy, who turned 80 in March, was hearty and genial when I interviewed him at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City.

**Q:** What happened to the good old Midwestern Progressive/Populist tradition? From Bob LaFollette to Richard Gephardt is a mighty long fall.

**A:** You see it in Minnesota, where some of the old Farmer-Laborites strongly opposed the fusion of the Democrats and Farmer-Laborites back in 1944. They said they would lose the spirit of Ignatius Donnelly and the old Progressives and the Non-Partisan League. I think the conservative force in Minnesota was actually the labor movement. They became pretty much Establishment; it came to a head in the 1968 campaign.

The party lost its bearing in '68 on the issue of the war in Vietnam. If Humphrey hadn't been the candidate, the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party would've been the most antiwar party of any state in the union because they had the double tradition: the isolationism of the Farmer-Laborites, some of them opposed even to our involvement in World War II, and the internationalist Jeffersonian strain that had come from some of the old Democrats. But with Humphrey as the candidate advocating the war, why, the traditional position was rejected and the party became simply an instrument of the national party.

**Q:** Isn't it odd that in 1968 the most prominent antiwar figures in politics and music were both Minnesota poets, Eugene McCarthy and Bob Dylan?

**A:** Well, I wasn't recognized as a poet. Dylan came out of the northern part of Minnesota, which was pretty radical: the most radical labor faction in the state was the Iron Range. Bob didn't

---

*Bill Kauffman is the author of Every Man a King, Country Towns of New York, and America First!*

do much in Minnesota politics: I'm kind of disappointed he didn't come back and campaign against Humphrey, although we didn't have a primary so there was no real showdown.

What happened to the party is that it accepted the Great Society, which was really quite foreign to the tradition of the Non-Partisan League and the Farmer-Laborites. They were not a welfare-directed political movement. It was more like the New Deal: they were going to change the structure and let welfare disappear because people didn't need it. Johnson supposedly thought he was completing the New Deal, but actually the Great Society was an abandoning of the New Deal, whose main thrust was to provide work and a decent income. The emphasis in the Great Society was we're going to have more Food Stamps and more help for the poor and more rent subsidies and more Medicaid provided by the government: I think that's where they lost it.

**Q:** Do you feel a kinship with an earlier generation of Midwestern and Western Progressives and Populists: the LaFollettes and Borah and Wheeler and Nye?

**A:** In Minnesota it was Ignatius Donnelly.

**Q:** The Prince of Cranks!

**A:** Yeah, he got a bad reputation. It's sort of like Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. I have to watch that: I can be for anything or against anything now and be irresponsible, and I think Donnelly got caught in that. He had to be for or against things automatically, especially if they were bucked mainstream politics.

**Q:** As far as I can tell, no major American politician writes his own speeches, let alone his own books, anymore. Should this concern us?

**A:** I think it's a serious matter. I can see where Presidents need help, because they're writing for history. I never thought Kennedy's speechwriters were well-chosen: Sorenson, Arthur Schlesinger. When Biden's plagiarism was exposed, I was critical of him because he didn't plagiarize anything from me: the ultimate insult! He had a quotation from Bobby Kennedy, and Adam Walinsky went public and said Biden hadn't plagiarized Kennedy, he'd plagiarized Adam. It's like a surrogate mother: if the kid turns out well, she says "it's mine!" For scholars of the future, it'll be like reading T.S. Eliot and asking, "Where did he get this? Who was the ghostwriter?"

**Q:** You've run for President both within and without the two-party system. Where do you prefer to be?

**A:** John Adams said the worst thing we could have under our Constitution was politics controlled by two strong factions. There are three or four things on which the Progressives ought to be committed, but they seem indifferent. One is the federal election law, which they should have opposed in '74-'75 because it actually legalized the two-party system. You force politics into two parties, then you force it into confrontation, especially when you have an administration that can't be overthrown except every four years. The federal election law denied political freedom and set up the process by which the corporations and corporate PACs have become the dominant force in American politics.

**Q:** How do we break the two-party stranglehold?

**A:** I don't think we can get Congress to do it. Jim Buckley and I and a few others took the federal election law all the way to the Supreme Court: the New York ACLU joined us, but the liberal Democrats didn't support us. We've got a case pending in New York on my exclusion from the debates by the networks in 1992 on the grounds that this has been an assumption of political power by the networks. Television operates between two poles: greed and fear. Greed is obvious, but they're afraid of Democrats and Republicans: they may lose their licenses or be regulated.

**Q:** Newspapers and television and radio stations are owned today by chains and faceless conglomerates. How do we break up these concentrations?

**A:** Newspapers are privately owned—you run into freedom of speech—but there's nothing to keep us from limiting the ownership of television and radio licenses. Newspapers probably shouldn't be allowed to own a television station, or at least not more than one, because then they're dependent on the government.

**Q:** The Washington press corps never tires of boasting how fearless and independent they are. Did you find them so?

**A:** The *Washington Post* is practically a house organ for any administration, and it's big into telecommunications. The only way you can have freedom of speech is to have more people speaking, and I suppose that is the most serious threat to personal and political liberty in the country: the concentrated control over television and telecommunications.

And there are other things we ought to be concerned about in a free and open democratic society: the redistribution of economic power. The way I see it, the way to progress is to go to a six-hour workday.

**Q:** How do you do that without massive intervention by the federal government?

**A:** We did it in 1938, when we went to the eight-hour day, five-day week, and retirement at 65. What you've got now is a modern-day enclosure movement. Every time AT&T lays off 10,000 people, the market goes up. It's like Adam Smith: throw the serfs off the land and you'll be more productive. Old Sam Compers in 1893 said if one man is out of work, you ought to have a redistribution of work until he's absorbed. Now we say, who cares? Put 'em on welfare.

It's unrelated, but we've come to accept the protection of income which comes from capital rather than income produced by labor. So we have to pay for government out of taxes on income and on wages, while we've progressively exempted capital. The old Progressives, the Henry George people, said the *only* things you should tax are land and capital gains.

We ought to have a capital levy on accumulated wealth. It's a better plan than taxing the next generation and the one after that: let's tax the two that are gone. Paul Mellon, in a recent book, said he didn't know how much wealth he had; he didn't even know how much was accumulated every year. We ought to call people like Paul Mellon and say, "Paul, we worry about you. You don't know how much wealth you've got: you might

not have any. So what we're going to do is start taking it away from you until it gets down to where you recognize it. When you can count your money, Paul, raise your hand and we'll stop taking it away."

**Q:** You spoke in 1968 of the "militarization of American life." How have we been changed by our 50-year experience with what George Washington warned against: an "overgrown military establishment"?

**A:** Tocqueville warned about democracies creating a military establishment that was bigger than needed, for it becomes a republic within a republic. And that's what we have now.

**Q:** To some extent, isn't this the result of defense commitments made by Democrats in the 1940's?

**A:** I went to Congress in 1949, and we cut the defense budget before the Korean War to, I think, \$16 billion a year. Then the war came on, and it went up and never came down again. The military-industrial complex was not in place in 1950: it was only after the Korean War that they put their marbles in a row. You couldn't touch them after that.

You could see the military-industrial complex developing, though, in the 1947 Defense Reorganization Act, and in the changing of the "War Department" into the "Department of Defense." I called the Pentagon and asked, how did this happen? There must have been a meeting where somebody said look, we're gonna change the name of this damn thing, because if we call it the War Department people are gonna say, "Where's the war? And if there isn't one, where are you gonna have it?" And we don't want to answer that question. So let's call it the Department of Defense because defense is unlimited. And it's true: we never declare war anymore. We just declare national defense.

And then they did away with the draft. The volunteer army is really a mercenary army. The militarists said we want an army that is there because they want to fight: they're under contract and will fight any kind of war. The liberals said, we want an army in which we don't have to fight if we don't want to; you can stay out of a war you don't like. In Desert Storm, some of the soldiers said they signed up, they have a contract, and so they gotta fight. And some of the people who might have been critical of the war said, "They signed up; they gotta fight." So it insulated a military action from any kind of social or moral judgment.

**Q:** You've written of "our loss of control over our foreign and military policy." What do you mean by that?

**A:** There was really no decision made on Desert Storm: it was kind of a happening. I suppose it started, linguistically, when Nixon called the Cambodian action an "incursion." It was the first "incursion" in history. You wonder where they get a word like that. There's no verb for incursion. You can't "incurse." In an invasion, you "invade"; an incursion, on the other hand, is an existential happening. Who, me? Who decided? It just happened. They started to call Grenada an "incursion" but it worked too well so they called it an "invasion."

Now that communism is gone, they're building up the real danger: Islamic fundamentalism! Allah is coming. I thought we'd done in Allah in Desert Storm. It's crazy. Bhutto argued

that Pakistan should have a nuclear bomb, that Islam was the only major religion that didn't have the bomb. The Christians got their God and they got their bombs. The atheists have lots of bombs, but no God. The Israelis got the bomb to go along with Yahweh, but he was never very reliable, he just had tricks: blow the trumpet and the walls will fall, stop the sun in the sky. In Islam, all they had was Allah, and Allah really needed some support.

**Q:** You cosponsored the Immigration Act of 1965. If you knew then what you know now . . .

**A:** Most of what happened came later. The act anticipated immigration of about 360,000 a year, but the automatic provisions got out of control. The act's numbers were reasonable, and it did away with the traditional standards that were based on prejudice.

**Q:** Is there a case to be made for those standards?

**A:** If we're going to bring in people from strange cultures, we should do more to assimilate them. We throw them into a very complicated culture and they tend to congregate and not assimilate. This automatic stuff for family relationships: it isn't even logical. If you say the American experience is one we want people to have so they can feed it back to their own people, you ought to have people from as many families as you can. But to concentrate it in family groups: there's no feedback. Then we got into letting in refugees. We created most of them: Laotians, Cambodians . . .

**Q:** The chickens of empire coming home to roost.

**A:** That's right. The whole Cuban thing was the result of that crazy invasion. We get Cuban refugees determining policy toward Cuba and Hispanics determining policy toward Mexico.

**Q:** Would it be best if the Spanish-speaking regions of the country simply seceded? We're not really part of the same country, are we?

**A:** Well, it gets worse. Concerning Spaniards, most of them won't really learn English, and we discourage assimilation with bilingual education. In 1977 or 1978, I spoke to the International Cartoonists of the Western Hemisphere—not of the world, just of the Western Hemisphere—and a Mexican cartoonist said, what's your position on the return of the Panama Canal? I said I would do it, but to offset it you have to take Texas. He said we'll take the land but not the people. So it may be good policy to do what you said: give 'em half of Texas. We took it from you, and we'll give it back to you.

**Q:** Should we worry about foreign investment: for instance, German corporations buying up Iowa farmland?

**A:** I don't worry much about land because they can't take it away—you can expropriate it. I'm more concerned about Murdoch getting control of television stations when there's no evidence he has any concept of what America is. You give him control over things which should not be subject only to commercial standards for judging success.

In 1960, when I was campaigning for Kennedy, people won-

dered whether Kennedy was going to send an ambassador to the Vatican. I said it wouldn't be high on my list of things he should do; I'd rather have an ambassador to General Motors, First Boston, Morgan Guaranty, AT&T, the Pentagon . . . they've got more influence on American life than the Vatican does.

**Q:** You have bemoaned the "personalization" of the presidency. What do you mean by that?

**A:** Harry Truman was the last really constitutional President. He knew when he was President and when he was Harry Truman. He had respect for the Senate in foreign policy. He knew what the House of Representatives was. He respected the role of the courts. When he attempted to take over the steel companies and was overruled by the court, he backed down, but he went to the court for a test. On the other hand, when Kennedy had trouble with the steel companies, he had the FBI and IRS call the people up and say we're going to look at your reports. Lyndon brought them into the White House, and said if you fix prices in my presence, it's all right; if you do it in Pittsburgh when I'm not there, you're violating the antitrust laws.

**Q:** This strange notion of the presidency as a "bully pulpit" from which to sound off about dirty movies, national malaise, etc.—is this one aspect of personalization?

**A:** It is. Nixon said, "I'm the moral leader of the country." Well, who the hell said so? Who ever said the President was supposed to be the moral leader?

**Q:** So if you had been elected in 1968, you wouldn't have used your office to campaign against free verse?

**A:** No, I'd concentrate on the real range of presidential responsibility. When Arthur Schlesinger defected to Bobby Kennedy from my campaign, he said I didn't have a conception of the strong presidency. He said I'd have been a President like Buchanan. That was a hell of a thing to say, because nobody knows what Buchanan was like. If he'd said I'd be like Grant, why, it means I'd have been a drunk, but you say Buchanan and everybody imagines the worst. Four or five years later Schlesinger wrote the book on the imperial presidency. Poor Arthur: he's got energy; he never quits.

When Arthur defected, I said his defection is like a mistletoe blowing out of a beech tree in a slight wind. Some reporter said mistletoe is a parasite, isn't it? Well, I said, I hadn't really thought of that, but it's one of the worst parasites. So the guy wrote that I had called Arthur the ultimate parasite!

Arthur is the compleat historian: he wrote the Age of Jackson after it was over; he wrote the Age of Roosevelt while it was in progress; and he wrote the Age of Kennedy in advance.

**Q:** Political reporters were befuddled by your habit of quoting Chesterton. Would you describe your politics as distributist?

**A:** Part of it is distributist. I used him in opposition to the federal election law and the reform of Congress. He said that the Puritans always kill St. George but keep the dragon: that's the Common Cause. The distributism of Belloc and Chesterton is not quite pertinent today. They had an idea of small shops and plots of land; we need distribution now in communica-

tions, politics, work.

**Q:** What do you make of the restoration of Richard Nixon's reputation?

**A:** I say just let him rest. I've always thought the worst thing he did was not Watergate, it was the enemies list. To use the power of the FBI and IRS to persecute people, to "teach them a lesson," was essentially fascist.

**Q:** In the 1960's, the Democrats had men—you, Senator Fulbright, Senator Russell—who understood that there were limits to power, both at home and abroad. Do you see any current Democrats in that same tradition?

**A:** Sam Nunn seemed to have some idea of what to do with the military-industrial complex, but most of it was supportive. He was like Henry Jackson: a force but not for good. They moved in when Jackson died: they had to have another "if you knew what I knew . . ." guy. I don't think Nunn quite proved out for them; they never had the influence or control on him that they had on Jackson.

**Q:** Is there any place for you, or people like you, in the Democratic Party of 1996?

**A:** I haven't been asked to speak to Democrats since 1967. In '68, we antagonized the labor movement, the Humphrey liberals, the Kennedy forces, and the standard Johnson Democrats. So there wasn't much room left in the party for us. Actually, Fulbright was an outcast in his last years.

**Q:** That was partly because he'd been critical of the Israel lobby, wasn't it?

**A:** That hurt him. That's like the Cubans influencing policy toward Cuba. I thought the high point was when Danny Inouye put in money for a university, and they said we don't want it: he's doing too much for us. Like that old Zukor book, *Don't Say Yes Until I Stop Talking*.

**Q:** My guess is that you're the only presidential candidate in recent years who would repeal several constitutional amendments.

**A:** I'm pretty skeptical of every amendment adopted after the antislavery amendments.

**Q:** What about the direct election of senators?

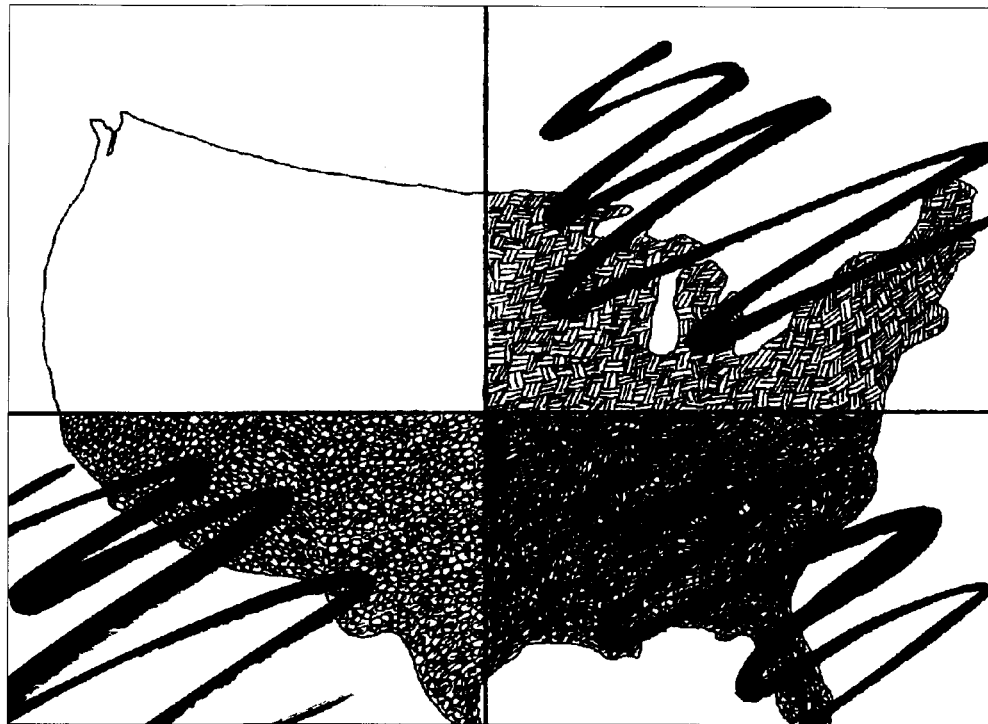
**A:** You have to have direct election because there's hardly any relationship between the way state legislators think now and the way senators ought to be thinking. Part of the problem is that party politics has been taken over by governors. They change the dates of the primaries not to provide for a more open politics but to get more control. For example, moving the New Hampshire primary up to mid-February, when I had made the case that the time for it was March 15th, when the sap was rising in the maple trees and the New Hampshire people were awake. February is the month in which human life is at its lowest ebb. The mind slows down and the body slows down—there's been no good results since 1968. ◊



# A 28th Amendment

Democracy and Constitutional Change

by William J. Quirk and Robert M. Wilcox



How different this country would be if we had a 28th Amendment which read: “An amendment approved by the legislatures of three-fourths of the States shall be valid to all intents and purposes as part of this Constitution.” Three-fourths of the states, if they desired, would then be able to change the Constitution without the approval of Congress and without a convention. This simple change would fundamentally alter American democracy. The people would be encouraged to come up with new solutions to our problems. Certainly we would have term limits and balanced budget amendments. We probably would not have federal judges supervising law enforcement and running state schools, prisons, and mental institutions. Nor would we have the unelected Supreme Court determining basic social and economic doctrine. Under the 28th Amendment, we could restore basic principles of federalism and return to a government which better reflects the values of the governed.

The merits of various proposed constitutional amendments are widely debated, but there is little talk about the amending process itself. That process, however, more than the substance of any proposed amendment, defines the nature of our democracy. Our democracy is one in which the people ultimately must determine the power and authority of the federal government. It follows that the people need to be able to amend the

---

*William J. Quirk and Robert M. Wilcox are professors at the University of South Carolina School of Law. A paperback edition of *Judicial Dictatorship* by William J. Quirk and R. Randall Bridwell will appear in October.*

Constitution without—as presently required—first having to obtain the consent of the government they are supposed to be controlling. The current amendment mechanism, which led Lord Bryce to conclude in his 1888 study *The American Commonwealth* that “The Constitution which it is the most difficult to change is that of the United States,” is a strange compromise from the last days of the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. It reflects the unresolved differences between the Virginians, represented by James Madison, and the Hamiltonians—differences, of course, which remain unresolved today.

The Constitution currently provides for two methods of amendment: in one, Congress, by a two-thirds vote of both houses, may propose an amendment to the states that will become effective when three-fourths of the states ratify it—all 27 amendments have been adopted this way; in the other, Congress, upon application of two-thirds of the states, “shall call a convention which” may propose an amendment to the states which will become effective when three-fourths of the states ratify it. Under the first method, because Congress must propose the amendment, it is unreasonable to expect any reduction of congressional powers or the powers of the other two national branches. In the second method, Congress “calls” the convention, but the Constitution does not specify how the convention is to be organized or what powers it will have. Congress, in the call, has to provide for shaping the convention. The shape Congress gives it will, of course, affect the convention’s ultimate success or failure.

George Washington, in urging the adoption of the proposed Constitution in 1789, highlighted the “constitutional door”