
Interview: Sen. Eugene McCarthy

Challenging the Democrats' 'War Party' With a Youth Movement—1967

This interview with former U.S. Sen. Eugene McCarthy was conducted by Nina Ogden on March 8, 2003. Senator McCarthy served in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. He challenged the incumbent President of his own party, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, for the 1968 Democratic Presidential nomination.

McCarthy: I went to my doctor this morning, and was late leaving his office because he couldn't stop talking about the war and how much he can't stand what Bush is doing. He said his mother can't stop talking about how afraid she is of Bush. He's about 60, so she must be about 80. This fear of Bush is hitting all generations. No one wants this war except him and Lady Macbeth Cheney and her husband and their people.



EIR: Lyndon LaRouche has been stressing that the Democratic National Committee leadership is the war party, but the people who vote Democratic are against this war.

McCarthy: That's why I thought during the Vietnam War, that it had to be challenged within the Democratic Party. We had to take it to the voters in the Democratic primaries. The Democratic Party at that time was primarily responsible for our involvement in the war. From John Kennedy's Administration through Lyndon Johnson's, the number of military personnel had increased from about 900—who were there at the end of the Eisenhower Administration—to about 17,000, who were only supposed to be there as advisors to help bring "democracy" to Vietnam. By 1965, Lyndon Johnson was escalating it, under the advice of [Dean] Rusk, [Robert] McNamara, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Gen. [William] Westmoreland. I had some doubts about the intelligence we were getting almost from the beginning, but as the criticism of the war mounted, Lyndon's people became more defensive, and the language of their defensive response more violent. Our motives were questioned—they called us "Nervous Nellies." But all of their assessments didn't add up.

For instance, a critical point came in February 1965, when Secretary of State Rusk advised 25 or 30 of us in the Senate

that Gen. Nguyen Khanh, who then led the government in power, was leading a strongly supported, stable government, which would be effective for a long time to come. Rusk spoke to us at about 9 or 10 o'clock at night. When we picked up the morning papers, we got the news that the Khanh government had been overthrown. Taking into account the time zone difference, the overthrow was happening at just about the time Rusk was telling us how stable that government was.

EIR: Those miscalculations sound all too familiar.

McCarthy: The administration was calculating by means of statistics. Secretary of Defense McNamara was experienced in the statistics of the automobile industry in Detroit, an industry in which the president of one of the Big Three [automakers] could not, by the very nature of the Big Three—at that time—ever fail. His failure to understand the difference between those statistics and the human reality of the war, moved him to one misjudgment after another.

The Johnson Administration, in speeches and rhetoric, began to enlarge the Vietnam War to a war where, as Rusk said in a 1967 press conference, "Within the next decade or two, there will be a billion Chinese on the mainland, armed with nuclear weapons." Hubert [Vice President Humphrey] made a speech saying, "The threat to world peace is militant aggressive Asian communism, with its headquarters in Peking, China." In September of 1967, McNamara announced that the United States would begin deployment of a "Chinese-oriented" antiballistic-missile system.

We made speeches against these policies. On Oct. 16, 1967, I took my case against this to the floor of the Senate. The principal point to be made against Rusk's press conference was that the growing debate on Vietnam was not, as he tried to put it, a debate over procedures for carrying out policies on which the nation [the United States] was united; but, as now, it was a debate of great substance over policies about which the nation was deeply divided.

Rusk's assessment was a continuing application of the John Foster Dulles strategic theory, and was a new reflection of the ancient fear of the "yellow peril." . . .

I said that the Secretary seemed to accept the Chinese Communists' belief in world revolution. It must have been encouraging to the Chinese propagandists to see the basic tenet of their propaganda endorsed by the American Secretary of State.



Senator McCarthy with President Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House on June 11, 1968. McCarthy challenged the sitting President of his own party in primaries, on the principled issue of a disastrous war, and the nation's youth rallied behind him.

We spoke out; we voted against the escalation. In January of '67, fourteen Democratic Senators, including myself, signed a public letter to the President expressing our general agreement with Mike Mansfield, who was the Democrats' Majority Leader; Aiken, the senior member of the Republican Party; and Fulbright, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, who had all called for the bombing of North Vietnam to be suspended.

EIR: Sen. Edward Kennedy and a total of ten Senators just sent a letter to President Bush questioning the new doctrine of preventive nuclear war.

McCarthy: Oh those letters! When you're reduced to writing letters to the President, you're already in bad shape—the government is breaking down. Why should Senators be writing letters saying, "Hello, remember that I am a Senator and I want you to listen to me about this"? It becomes like a member of the gardening club writing to the President of the United States, "Hello, I am a gardener and must bring to your attention a certain flower."

There has been, since the time of the Vietnam War, a virtual stalemate between the Executive branch of the government and the Legislative branch. The Executive branch began to ignore the responsibility of members of the Senate to participate, as the Constitution intended, in determining the direction of foreign policy. It is certainly being ignored now.

The [Johnson] Administration was certainly ignoring the growing distrust from the people of this country and other countries, including South Vietnam itself; from the UN, through the then-Secretary General U Thant; from the House of Representatives and the Senate.

EIR: This was years into the war, not before it even started, as we find today.

McCarthy: Yes, a hundred million people demonstrating before a war is even started!

EIR: When we have been mass distributing LaRouche's statements, we find that almost no one supports this war. [Sen. Joseph] Lieberman's support for it will bring down Lieberman and the Democratic Leadership Council. That's why LaRouche's campaign is challenging the leadership of the Democratic Party.

McCarthy: Precisely. My decision to run came from my conviction that since two Democratic administrations were responsible for the war, the only place you could get a true test was within the Democratic Party itself, and that meant challenging the war policy in the primaries. We found, beyond our expectations, that the people were against the war, while the leadership was for it. We got all our money in individual contributions. Labor, led by George Meany, were against us. In fact, Meany said he was going to get back at me for what I did.

EIR: The "McCarthy kids" by the thousands made their opposition to the war known.

McCarthy: It didn't start out that way. We expected student involvement—Adlai [Stevenson]'s campaigns, in which I was involved, included student involvement; the students were very involved; but no one had ever before seen the numbers of students who became involved in our campaign.

EIR: How did you expect to campaign?



A delegation of LaRouche Youth with party official at the Pennsylvania State Democratic Convention on March 14, 2003. The Party leadership's collapse into support of President Bush's unjustified war, is a crucial issue.

McCarthy: In the way I had campaigned before.

EIR: You served five terms in the House of Representatives and two terms in the Senate.

McCarthy: Yes, we'd have some poetry and some intellectual matters and discussion of the traditional Democratic Party responsibilities. (In 1957, Congressman Lee Metcalf of Montana and I decided that it had become necessary for the liberal Democrats in the House to state their position on the important issues of the time. After a month of periodic meetings in my office or in Congressman Metcalf's, we drafted a program of action which included six vital areas to which 80 members eventually subscribed. This program included: civil rights, education, health, housing, foreign aid, and atomic policy.)

I expected, when I announced, on Nov. 30, 1967, that I would challenge President Lyndon Johnson for the nomination of the Democratic Party, that the bearing of the war on traditional Democratic issues would be brought to the voters through public speeches and some use of radio and TV. We believed, at first, that with limited funds, we could test the political system in a few states, and test the press, as a means of informing people and moving them to action. I did not expect to campaign in New Hampshire.

We thought we did not have the time to campaign there and make all the other plans and preparations for a national campaign. But when I met about 50 sincere and concerned people there, I listened carefully. Nearly everyone at an informal living room meeting I was invited to, including elected officials and party officials, spoke with deep feeling of their desire to challenge the President on the issues. They also

spoke of the difficulty of challenging the Party organization in New Hampshire, and said that an active campaign on my part would be necessary to overcome the routine workings of the Party machinery. . . .

New Hampshire became a major test of the young people of America. The difference—regarding the student campaign workers—between this campaign and any other we had experienced, was both qualitative and quantitative. The young people were inspired volunteers who undertook such responsibilities as coordinating the influx of volunteers, dealing with the press, advance men, etc. There was a general sharing of responsibility, unrelated to whether someone was an adult or came from the youth movement.

EIR: These are the jobs that are, these days, high-paid professional positions. I believe the young people in your campaign called those highly-paid positions in other campaigns “the mercenaries.”

McCarthy: The sheer numbers of young people who responded to the campaign was completely unexpected. In the ten days before the election, as many as 2,000 students were campaigning full time in New Hampshire, with as many as 5,000 joining the effort on weekends. They not only came from colleges in the East, but from campuses as far away as Wisconsin and California. At a time when you had to be 21 to vote, a good half of them were old enough to vote, and graduate students put their disciplines to work in ways college catalogues never described. Busloads of high school students also came to campaign on weekends.

EIR: So from a couple hundred students when you an-

nounced in January, you went to over 5,000 students a couple of months later?

McCarthy: The results in New Hampshire were very encouraging, both to the students, and also to the many adults who were never involved in politics before. I won 42% of the vote in the Democratic primary, and came within 230 votes of defeating President Johnson. A few weeks later—on March 31, just a few days before the Wisconsin primary—President Johnson addressed the nation on television and announced that he would not be a candidate for re-election.

In Wisconsin, where some of the land had once been under the great glaciers, I received 56.2% of the vote in the primary election on April 2.

EIR: You once told me that you ran for President to avoid a French Revolution.

McCarthy: There was no way for the people to express their opposition to the war and associated policies within the framework of our system of government, to make hard political judgments, and take full responsibilities for those judgments. Before I entered the race, the mood was of protest and dissent. One example is the changes I saw at the University of California in Berkeley, where the mood changed from mere dissent to, after our campaign began, large numbers of students prepared to support and participate in the political process.

For nearly 20 years, before the test of 1968, I had emphasized, especially in talking to students, the need for a revived sense of vocation in modern society. I had emphasized that acceptance of professional status carries special responsibilities and obligations, including the obligation to take risks; and that we should expect politicians, if the issue is important enough, to show a similar sense of profession, and to understand the obligation to take political risks when necessary.

At all times, but especially in 1968, and again, if it is possible, especially now, the role of the Presidency must be one of uniting this nation, not of adding it up or putting it together as a kind of odd-sized jigsaw puzzle. To unify this nation means to inspire it. We need to develop a sense of character in the nation with common purposes and shared ideals, and then move on as best we can to achieve limited or great progress toward establishing a sense of justice.

By virtue of what happened in the first two primaries to challenge the Presidency, changes were made in our country. A public judgment was passed with reference to the war in Vietnam—and not as a separate issue, but as one which had to be dealt with in the configuration of problems in which it occurred.

EIR: What did you see among the youth of America outside your campaign?

McCarthy: I said in my statement announcing my intention to enter the Presidential primaries: “There is growing evidence of a deepening moral crisis in America: discontent, frustration, and a disposition to extralegal—if not illegal—

manifestations of protest. I am hopeful that a challenge may alleviate the sense of political helplessness and restore to many people a belief in the processes of American politics and American government. On college campuses especially, but also among other thoughtful adult Americans, it may counter the growing sense of alienation from politics which is currently reflected in a tendency to withdraw in either frustration or cynicism, to talk of nonparticipation, and to make threats of support for a third or fourth party or other irregular political movements.”

EIR: The numbers of students supporting your campaign continued to grow.

McCarthy: By the time we got to Indiana we had 10,000. We had been giving the volunteers \$10 a week, but we couldn’t afford it, so we told them we’d have to cut it in half, to \$5 a week. Then we didn’t have that, for 10,000 volunteers. We told them that if they couldn’t manage they should go home, but none of them left. In fact they kept pouring in. I’m told that Hillary Clinton came down from Wellesley to campaign for me for a couple of days. Half of our effort involved logistics, including buses to transport them, school gymnasiums and church basements, and many supporters’ homes for them to sleep in. These logistics, while difficult, consolidated further support and activity from the supporters in the various towns and cities who were housing the student volunteers.

EIR: You said that you wanted your campaign to enable the people of our nation to pass judgment on the Vietnam War itself and our involvement in it, and upon the role you hoped the United States would play in coming generations.

McCarthy: I wrote in my book on foreign policy—*The Limits of Power*, published in 1967, the year before I announced my campaign—“Many of our problems today are the result of our unwillingness or inability in the past to anticipate what may be the shape of the world 20 years in the future. . . . There is never a totally painless way to pull back from either unwise, ill-advised, or outdated ideas or commitments. But throughout history, mighty nations have learned the limit of power. There are lessons to be learned from Athens, from Rome, from 16th-Century Spain.” I also included the lessons from colonial England and France.

EIR: France seems to be responding to those lessons now, and the British Labour Party is teaching Tony Blair a lesson.

McCarthy: Perhaps we should send them the last two sentences in my book.

EIR: It reads, “A nation has prestige according to its merits. America’s contribution to world civilization must be more than a continuous performance demonstration that we can police the planet.”

To be continued.