

Eugene McCarthy and the Rise and Fall of Postwar American Liberalism

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In Review



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Dominic Sandbrook
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When Senator Eugene McCarthy died in December, obituary writers and columnists revisited his 1968 presidential campaign, his poetry and his quirky political afterlife. In Minnesota they remembered his service in Congress, from 1952 to 1970. A few writers recalled that as devout Catholics, McCarthy and his wife, Abigail, never divorced, although they were separated from 1969 until her death in 2001.

McCarthy was raised in a Catholic family in Watkins, Minnesota. He attended a Catholic school, and at the age of 16 entered St. John's University in central Minnesota, from which he graduated less than three years later. Neo-Thomism shaped McCarthy's thinking, but he was also deeply influenced by the faculty at St. John's, which was caught up in the "radical European Catholicism" of the interwar period, including personalism, social radicalism, corporatism, medievalism, the rural life movement, and especially the liturgical movement with its strong social content. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin were frequent guests at the school. This atmosphere, writes British historian Dominic Sandbrook, drew McCarthy to the American liberalism of the mid-20th century.

After teaching for five years in public schools, McCarthy went back to St. John's as a member of the faculty, then left teaching to enter the novitiate. Within a year, both he and the monks recognized that he had no future as a Benedictine. He left St. John's to work in the War Department. At the end of World War II, he and his wife tried to start a rural Catholic commune, but they were more interested in reading and contemplating than in planting and harvesting.

As Sandbrook acknowledges, McCarthy rarely talked about his faith, which makes it difficult to determine precisely how much his religious upbringing and training affected his later actions. In fact, although McCarthy wrote extensively about politics and his political career, he never addressed his important formative years. We know that when McCarthy was teaching high school in Mandan, North Dakota, he and some of his fellow teachers gathered in the evenings to talk about public issues, their discussions fueled by articles in national magazines such as the *Nation* and *Harper's Magazine*. One of those issues apparently was the relationship of religion and politics.

In 1946 he moved to St. Paul to join the faculty at St. Thomas College, and from there he was sucked into politics and elected to Congress in 1948. Ten years later, as a rising star of the Democratic Party, McCarthy, dubbed "Aquinas in a suit" by

some Minnesota Democrats, was elected to the U.S. Senate. Although Sandbrook argues that McCarthy's social Catholicism was moderated in the postwar era by his reading of Edmund Burke, John Henry Newman, G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, that isn't evident in McCarthy's writing.

In his most complete political manifesto, *Frontiers in American Democracy*, published in 1960, McCarthy devoted one of the 12 chapters to "Religion and Politics." Most Americans accept the separation of church and state, he wrote, but not the separation of church and politics. "If a man is religious and if he is in politics, one fact will relate to the other if he is indeed a whole man," wrote McCarthy in the gendered language of the time. "The religious beliefs of an individual cannot help but have some influence on his political action."

He laid out an agenda that he thought a religious public individual should adopt. It included feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless and opposing segregation and racial injustice. The Christian politician must "hold fast to the moral law" and speak the truth.

"The ideal Christian politician is not necessarily the one who is seen most often participating in public religious activities, or conferring with religious leaders," McCarthy wrote. "He is not necessarily the one who is first and most vociferous to claim that his position is the Christian one and who attempts to cover himself and his cause with whatever part of the divided garment . . . is within his reach."

He added: "The Christian in politics should be judged by the standard of whether through his decisions and actions he has advanced the cause of justice, and helped, at least, to achieve the highest degree of perfection possible in the temporal order."

In the late 1950s McCarthy was still described as a "classic example of 'bearing witness' to the faith." Then something changed. Sandbrook suggests that it might relate to McCarthy's ambition, to his realization that he could become the first Catholic president of the United States. The rising star of John F. Kennedy ended that dream.

McCarthy's faith seems to have diminished somewhat after Vatican II. After his defeat in the race for the 1968 Democratic presidential nomination, McCarthy became a court jester in exile, providing steady commentary on political developments while occasionally launching campaigns (or at least thinking about launching them) for president, senator or representative, or shocking the political

establishment with such moves as endorsing Ronald Reagan for president.

Sandbrook believes McCarthy's retreat to the political wilderness marked the bankruptcy of American liberalism, although the crucial factor may have been the mobilization of the previously quiescent conservative movement. McCarthy happily played the martyr role of his hero Thomas More in the process.

McCarthy, like some of the other politicians of his time, witnessed to his faith in the public square. Today politicians are much more likely to seek not to witness to their faith, but to propagate it through politics. As McCarthy wrote, when religious issues become political, "people are less ready to hear what the Christian judgment may be."