

■ Senator Eugene McCarthy's Announcement of Presidential Run

Date: November 30, 1967

Author: Eugene McCarthy

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

The fall of 1967 was a critical moment in the history of domestic opposition to the Vietnam War. U.S. involvement in the war in South Vietnam had been escalating since 1965 and protest against the war had grown in size and militancy. Three major protests in October signaled the intensifying opposition to the war: the Oakland Anti-Draft Riot, the "Dow Day" protest at the University of Wisconsin and the March on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Mainstream opposition to the war had been expressed mostly through the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, of which Senator Eugene McCarthy was a member. Antiwar liberals, seeking a political alternative to radical street protest, were searching for a peace candidate to oppose Lyndon Johnson in the Democratic primaries the following year. Initially hoping to enlist a wavering Senator Robert Kennedy, it was instead Eugene McCarthy who stepped forward to challenge the incumbent president of his own party.

The intellectual and calm McCarthy soon attracted passionate, young volunteers to his campaign. In February and March of 1968 McCarthy's "Children's Crusade," as some dubbed it, descended on New Hampshire, going "Clean for Gene" (being well groomed and conventionally dressed) and went door to door for the McCarthy campaign. On March 12, McCarthy outstripped expectations, winning 42 percent of the vote to Johnson's 49 percent. This revealed Johnson's vulnerability and on March 16 Robert Kennedy entered the Democratic primary to challenge Johnson as well. Faced with this growing opposition to the war in his own party, on March 31, 1968 Johnson shocked the American public by announcing he would not seek a second term as president.

The McCarthy and Kennedy peace campaigns competed in several primaries through June. After Kennedy's victory in California and his devastating assassination later that day, McCarthy's volunteers largely disbanded and the once vibrant McCarthy campaign lost steam. That August the Democrats ended up nominating Vice President Hubert Humphrey on a prowar platform in Chicago, amidst deep divisions within the Convention Hall and battles between police and protesters outside. Nevertheless, McCarthy's historic campaign had made opposition to the war respectable and a major campaign issue in 1968.



Eugene McCarthy. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

Defining Moment

After years of U.S. military advisors supporting South Vietnam's pro-American government against a communist insurgency, in 1965 President Lyndon Johnson began sending U.S. ground troops to defend the tottering South Vietnamese government and launched a bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Due to the Cold War consensus of containing communism, America's direct entry into the Vietnam War was initially met with widespread public and Congressional support. A small and peaceful antiwar movement emerged in 1965, which many dismissed as outside of the American political mainstream. As the war escalated each year with the introduction of more U.S. troops and a wider bombing campaign, the antiwar movement grew in size and intensity.

By late 1967, America's commitment to South Vietnam had grown to approximately 500,000 troops and a segment of the antiwar movement announced a transition from "protest to resistance." Protests in Oakland, Madison, Wisconsin, and Washington, D.C., led to violent confrontations with police and numerous protesters arrested or hospitalized.

Meanwhile, mild Congressional opposition to the war grew in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee led by Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright. Unlike the rest of Congress, where support for the war was strong, the Foreign Affairs Committee included members who were critical of the war like Eugene McCarthy, Frank Church, and Al Gore, Sr. During televised hearings, the committee and many of its witnesses revealed skepticism of the rationales for the war as well as the Johnson administration's claims of progress.

In the fall of 1967, antiwar liberal activist Allard Lowenstein began a "Dump Johnson" campaign to recruit someone to challenge Lyndon Johnson for the presidency on a peace platform. Lowenstein believed it was critical to move opposition to the war from the streets into mainstream political channels. Lowenstein hoped to recruit Senator Robert Kennedy, brother of the assassinated president John F. Kennedy, but Kennedy was deeply torn about challenging an incumbent president with whom he had a long and ugly rivalry, and declined.

It was Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy who agreed to take up the mantle of opposing Johnson and the war. On November 30, 1967, McCarthy entered the Senate Caucus Room and announced to the press his intention to challenge Johnson in select Democratic primaries in 1968 to raise the issue of ending the war in Vietnam. He declared he only sought to raise the issue ending the war. Since only 15 states even held primaries in 1968, with most states sending delegates to the Democratic Convention chosen by state conventions dominated by established party officials, McCarthy's campaign was dismissed by many political insiders. McCarthy's announcement, however, energized many idealistic college students who rallied to the Senator's campaign. Often, McCarthy's dry, cerebral and sometimes meandering speeches contrasted dramatically with the raucous energy of the youth attending his rallies. Many of McCarthy's supporters, however, viewed the Senator's calm demeanor as reassuring and validating.

The McCarthy campaign received a huge boost after the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, launched by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army on January 31, 1968, in which the communist forces left their rural strongholds to launch a surprise attack on all of South Vietnam's cities and provincial capitals. Although the U.S. and South Vietnamese militaries eventually repelled the communist offensive, the mere fact the communist could launch such a large-scale offensive belied the Administration's claims of progress and highlighted the fact that America was mired in a stalemate.

The Tet Offensive made McCarthy seem prescient and his strong showing in New Hampshire upended the 1968 presidential campaign, which practically everyone had assumed would see Johnson easily winning re-nomination. The now unpredictable election would be held in a year of racial unrest, assassinations, militant campus protest, a growing hippie counterculture and deepening divisions throughout American society.

Author Biography

Eugene Joseph McCarthy was born on March 29, 1916 in Watkins, Minnesota. He attended St. John's

Preparatory School and St. John's University. McCarthy's intellectual outlook was shaped by Catholic social thought, and he became a Benedictine novitiate at St. John's Abbey in 1942. He was expelled from the monastery for "intellectual pride," and after serving in the Army Signal Corps code breaking in Washington, D.C., during World War II, he returned to Minnesota as a professor of sociology at the College of St. Thomas. In 1948, McCarthy won a seat in Congress as a candidate of the Minnesota Democratic Farmer-Labor Party. He was an ally of liberal Minnesota Senator and future Vice President Hubert Humphrey. In

1958 McCarthy was elected to the Senate, and was considered, along with Humphrey, as a potential vice-presidential running mate of Lyndon Johnson's in the 1964 presidential election. After his historic run for president in 1968, McCarthy retired from the Senate in 1970 for a career writing poetry, teaching and periodic runs for president, campaigns which garnered little support. He married Abigail Quigley in 1945 with whom he had four children: Ellen, Mary, Michael and Margaret. The couple separated in 1970 but never divorced. McCarthy died on December 10, 2005.



Historical Document

Senator Eugene McCarthy's Announcement of Presidential Run

I intend to enter the Democratic primaries in four states: Wisconsin, Oregon, California and Nebraska. The decision with reference to Massachusetts, and also New Hampshire, will be made within the next two or three weeks. Insofar as Massachusetts is concerned, it will depend principally upon the outcome of a meeting which is being held there if they finish their work this weekend—a meeting of the Democratic State Committee.

Since I first said that I thought the issue of Vietnam and the issues related to it should be raised in the primaries of the country, I have talked with Democratic leaders from about 25 or 26 states; I have talked particularly to candidates for, re-election to the Senate (Democratic candidates), to some House members and also to students on campus and to other people throughout the country.

My decision to challenge the President's position and the Administration's position has been strengthened by recent announcements out of the Administration—the evident intention to escalate and to intensify the war in Vietnam and, on the other hand, the absence of any positive indications or suggestions for a compromise or for a negotiated political settlement. I am concerned that the Administration seems to have set no limit to the price which it is willing to pay for a military victory.

Let me summarize the cost of the war up to this point:

—the physical destruction of much of a small and weak nation by military operations of the most powerful nation in the world;

—100,000 to 150,000 civilian casualties in south Vietnam alone, to say nothing of the destruction of life and property in north Vietnam;

—the uprooting and the fracturing of the structure of the society of South Vietnam, where one-fourth to one-third of the population are now reported to be refugees;

—for the United States—as of yesterday—over 15,000 combat dead and nearly 95,000 wounded through November.

—a monthly expenditure in pursuit of the war running somewhere between \$2 and \$3 billion.

I am also concerned about the bearing of the war on other areas of United States responsibility, both at home and abroad:

—the failure to appropriate adequate funds for the poverty program here, for housing, for education and to meet other national needs, and the prospect of additional cuts as a condition to a possible passage of the surtax tax bill;

—the drastic reduction of our foreign aid program in other parts of the world;

—a dangerous rise in inflation; and one of the indirect and serious consequences of our involvement in Vietnam—the devaluation of the British pound, which in many respects is more important east of Suez today than the British Navy.

In addition, there's a growing evidence of the deepening moral crisis in America: discontent and frustration, and a disposition to take extra-legal—if not illegal—actions to manifest protest.

I am hopeful that this challenge which I am making—which I hope will be supported by other members of the Senate and other politicians—may alleviate at least in some degree of this sense of political helplessness and restore to many people a belief in the processes of American politics and of American government; that on the college campuses especially and also among adult, thoughtful Americans, it may come to the growing sense of alienation from politics which I think is currently reflected in a tendency to withdraw from political action, to talk of non-participation, to become cynical and to make threats of support for third parties or fourth parties or other irregular political movements.

I do not see in my move any great threat to the unity and strength of the Democratic Party—whatever that unity may be today and whenever that strength may be.

The issue of the war in Vietnam is not really a separate issue, but one which must be dealt with in the configuration of other problems to which it is related. And it is within this broader context that I intend to make the case to the people of the United States.

Let me say that—as I am sure I shall be charged—I am not for peace at any price, but for an honorable, rational and political solution to this war; a solution which I believe will enhance our world position, encourage the respect of our Allies and our potential adversaries, which will permit us to get the

necessary attention to other commitments—both at home and abroad, militarily and did not militarily—and leave us with resources and moral energy to deal effectively with a pressing domestic problems of the United States itself. In this total effort, I believe we can restore to this nation a clear sense of purpose and of dedication to the achievement of our traditional purposes as a great nation in the twentieth century.



Document Analysis

The prosaic announcement of McCarthy's candidacy for president stands in stark contrast to the emotional reaction his announcement would stir in supporters. McCarthy does not indicate he is even running to win the nomination, merely to enter four, possibly more, primaries to raise the issue of the war and make the case for a negotiated end to the conflict. McCarthy doesn't mention Lyndon Johnson's name, but rather refers simply to "the President" and "the Administration." He declares he was prompted to run by the Administration's intention to continue escalating the war without any indication of a willingness to negotiate with the enemy.

McCarthy cites the impact of the war on domestic programs to alleviate poverty and fund education, and the devastation visited upon the impoverished people of Vietnam by the greatest power on earth. He further asserts his belief that the war is undermining America's reputation abroad.

McCarthy's announcement seems as much concerned with restoring faith in American democracy and institutions as ending the war. He describes a "deepening moral crisis" in America, and a "sense of political helplessness... [and] alienation..." manifesting itself in "extra-legal—if not illegal—protests." McCarthy hopes his campaign will re-engage young Americans, especially college students, in the political process. Some radicals accused McCarthy of running merely to sap the antiwar movement of its revolutionary fervor and divert young Americans from confronting the power structure head on and diverting them into harmless, established political channels. But by bringing opposition to the war into the mainstream, McCarthy's campaign helped break the political consensus that dismissed the peace movement as marginal and perpetuated the war.

Essential Themes

McCarthy was known in the Senate for being intellectual, dispassionate, and having a dry wit. He was seen by some colleagues as disengaged, more interested in poetry and philosophy than the day-to-day details of legislating. Still, McCarthy had a strong liberal voting record and had grown increasingly con-

cerned by the "Imperial Presidency" during the war; namely, Johnson's ability to expand the war with minimal input from Congress. McCarthy called for greater Congressional oversight of the C.I.A. and F.B.I. as well greater Congressional input on the war. McCarthy's institutional reform positions as well as his professorial demeanor appealed to his college student and educated middle-class base.

After McCarthy's surprise showing in New Hampshire on March 12, Senator Robert Kennedy announced his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination on March 16. Many of McCarthy's supporters viewed Kennedy as an opportunist trying to steal the fruits of their hard-fought victory. Robert Kennedy's entrance, however, was the realization of a deep fear Johnson had harbored since President John Kennedy's assassination of a Kennedy restoration. The worsening situation in Vietnam and Kennedy's entrance into the race led Johnson to announce his withdrawal from the race for re-election on March 31.

Standing as a peace candidate and aspiring national unifier, Kennedy ran both a more charismatic and more professional campaign than McCarthy. Whereas McCarthy had deep support among white college students and educated white middle-class reformers, Kennedy ran strong with minorities. The 1960s was a decade of racial progress with Lyndon Johnson's milestone civil rights legislation, as well as growing racial divisions and urban rebellions/riots, especially after the April 4, 1968 assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. McCarthy had compiled a strong civil rights voting record, yet was unable to connect with African American, Puerto Rican and Mexican American voters during his 1968 campaign, unlike the more empathetic and inspirational Robert Kennedy.

Kennedy entered too late to contest the Wisconsin primary, which McCarthy won. Thereafter, McCarthy and Kennedy slugged it out in the primaries with Kennedy winning in Indiana, Florida (which McCarthy didn't contest) and Nebraska, and McCarthy winning in Oregon. The final showdown came in California where Kennedy's strong minority support propelled him to a 46 percent to 42 percent victory over McCarthy on June 4. After an energetic speech at his victory

rally at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, Kennedy was shot while passing through a kitchen by a mentally unstable assassin, Sirhan Sirhan.

After the final primary in California, McCarthy's student volunteers disbanded and the energy disappeared from the McCarthy campaign. Although McCarthy still made appearances on TV and at small rallies, close friends believed McCarthy entered a period of emotional depression leading up to the Democratic Convention in late August.

McCarthy's old ally from Minnesota, Vice President Hubert Humphrey entered the race for the Democratic nomination in April, eschewing the primaries and seeking to build up a lead in delegates among party regulars. Humphrey's support with labor unions and big city mayors allowed him to defeat McCarthy and the other peace candidate Senator George McGovern, who ran in Kennedy's place.

During the Convention, McCarthy and his delegates were shocked by the violence wielded by Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's police against antiwar protestors (a mix of nonviolent and militant activists). After losing to Humphrey and the defeat of the peace plank at the Convention, many supporters of McCarthy and Kennedy were unwilling to support the prowar Humphrey.

Behind in the polls to Republican nominee, former Vice President Richard M. Nixon, Humphrey announced support for a bombing halt against North Vietnam a week before the November election and saw his poll numbers begin to climb overnight. McCarthy, in response, gave a grudging endorsement of Humphrey on October 29, mere days before the election. Nixon defeated Humphrey and third party "Law and Order" candidate Governor George Wallace of Alabama in one of the closest elections in American history.

McCarthy's campaign signaled a growing rift in the Democratic Party between college-educated, middle-class white progressives, who questioned the premises of U.S. cold war foreign policy and embraced the cultural changes of the 1960s, and the party's blue collar union members and urban ethnic white base. The former would henceforth, alongside African Americans and other minorities, form the base of the Democratic Party as many white, blue-collar workers began drifting to the Republican Party. After the loss of Democratic white voters in the South in 1964 due to Lyndon Johnson's support for civil rights, the further split in the party over Vietnam in 1968 marked the death knell of the New Deal coalition forged in the Depression era which had kept the Democratic Party in the White House for all but eight years between 1933 and 1969. Many historians regard the 1968 election as the beginning of the Republican ascendancy that kept the Republicans in the White House for all but eight years between 1969 and 1993.

—Robert Surbrugg, PhD

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