

AMBASSADOR MCGOVERN, ELDER STATESMAN

(an excerpt)

RUSSELL E. WILLIS

I've been around a long time, and I've made my share of mistakes as well as things that were worthwhile. And I do think there's something to be said for the wisdom that comes simply with living a long time. So I consider it a proud compliment when people refer to me as an elder statesman.[i] — George McGovern, 11 Sept. 2003

George McGovern has played many roles in a life that spans eight decades and counting, among them: child of the prairie, decorated warrior, husband and father, professor, grassroots politician, White House bureaucrat, United States congressman and senator, leader of the loyal opposition to the Vietnam War, presidential candidate, writer, social commentator, activist against substance abuse, and businessman. From the Great Depression to the end of the Cold War, McGovern was both a product of this remarkable century as well as one of its movers and shakers. Yet, by the mid-1990s, as he entered his mid-seventies, he seemed fated to follow the twentieth century into the history books. But just before the century had exhausted its tremendous energies, he burst back into the national and international consciousness bearing the title ambassador and leading the world to embark on the task of eliminating hunger in a generation. As Ambassador McGovern, he added to his impressive résumé the title of "elder statesman." His voice now commanded the respect reserved for those considered wise, not just powerful or merely intelligent. His leadership was now grounded, not on the authority of law or power of government, but on the basis of lifelong achievement and time-tested character.

A Job Description

For it to carry any real value, the expression "elder statesman" or "elder stateswoman" cannot simply refer to politicians or government officials who have lived long lives. Neither can it stand for old people who used to be politicians or government officials. Rather, it implies both quality and quantity of accomplishment, service to the state (and to the greater good), historical significance, efficacy, wisdom, and recognition that leads such persons to be heeded when they speak and followed where they lead. Being an elder in this sense means both the sheer number of years of life experience as well as the fact that the person is seen as one who has stood up well under the weight of those years. It is probably not accidental that most of the individuals upon whose shoulders are laid the mantle of elder statesperson are those who have achieved through adversity, not simply those who have achieved.[ii]

The title of elder statesperson is honorific in the most profound sense. He or she may carry some sort of official standing or authority in a government, political party, or other public institution. However, the capacity of such individuals to affect public opinion and persuade others to act for the greater good transcends bureaucratic authority and rests, rather, with their place in the social consciousness.[iii] Further, though the title itself refers to service to the "state," historically this citation has been reserved for those whose service is free from partisan politics and places the good of the nation within the context of a commitment to civilization and peaceful coexistence grounded in justice rather than narrowly defined national self-interest. Even, and especially, in times of war, the elder statesperson's support or criticism of a specific nation's interests is grounded in the transcendent goals of justice, sustainable peace, and prosperity.

While proudly wearing the title elder statesman, George McGovern balks at the notion of himself as old or "retired." In 2003, having just celebrated his eighty-first birthday, McGovern kept a schedule of speaking engagements and events linked to his humanitarian pursuits that would bring most of us to our knees. On the second anniversary of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, and soon after his birthday, McGovern reflected on life as he entered his eighty-second year: "I think if we fully retire in the sense that [is] sometimes used, it means just doing nothing, sitting around and twiddling our thumbs. I think that's when death begins. . . . As long as you're active and caring and working and doing, I think you're basically young. I don't feel any older today than I did when I ran for president at the age of forty-nine. I'm eighty-one now, but I can honestly say my spirit is as young as it was at forty-nine when I was trying to get elected president."[iv]

McGovern's modest acceptance of his status as an elder statesman is also a product of his self-image. Various biographies and personal memoirs published over the last three decades document his personal reserve, even humility, in the face of both his authority and responsibility as a national and international leader. For instance, in recognition of McGovern's service as president of the Middle East Policy Council, Howard Campbell, chairman of the American Business Council of the Gulf Countries, thanked him for his "unique blend of humility, insightfulness, and probity."[v]

McGovern is no shrinking violet, however. Robert Sam Anson, his first biographer, referred to him as a "deceptively self-assured and even prideful man," going on to chronicle many contests of will in which McGovern was caught up before and during his 1972 presidential campaign—some of which he won and others, notably the presidential campaign itself, that he lost.[vi] McGovern's passion and determination are clear to all who meet him. But these qualities are muted by conscience and the desire to be the messenger and not the message. He exemplifies the humble assurance of one who has learned that if you are doing good, you do not have to prove yourself— to be good is good enough.

When faced, for example, with attacks on his personal courage and patriotism during the Vietnam War, he did not use his World War II experiences and accomplishments, including the fact that he was a decorated hero, as a defense against his political detractors. Many have

speculated in recent years whether modesty and his naturally quiet and introspective demeanor harmed his presidential aspirations. I once asked Eleanor and George whether they thought his war record would have made a difference if used in the campaign. They just looked at each other for a moment and then changed the subject. In a 2001 interview of Stephen Ambrose following publication of his book *The Wild Blue* about McGovern and his B-24 crewmates, the author was asked why McGovern was "reluctant to trumpet his war record during the campaign." Ambrose responded: "None of the press people ever seemed to be interested in bringing it up—nobody ever asked him about it, to my recollection. There are millions of veterans out there that this same thing is true of. They're not so much reluctant to recall what they experienced, but they are not going to volunteer anything if no one asks. In George's case, I just think that he felt the time had come to share his story." [vii] As in the words of Ecclesiastes, "to everything there is a season." By the early years of the twenty-first century, McGovern was one of the last of his generation, one of the last who could tell this story. So he did, with no glorification but in the quiet voice of an elder, one who could speak with authority about sacrifice and service.

Elder Statesman in Waiting, 1981-1998

McGovern faded from the political limelight following his departure from the Senate in 1981. He returned briefly to challenge Ronald Reagan and the New Right by seeking the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984. [viii] Although he withdrew from the race and never again ran for political office, he certainly did not put himself out to pasture. In addition to trying his hand at business, McGovern filled his time with three primary pursuits that focused his energies during...

...

Elder Statesman "with Credential"

Arriving in Rome in 1998, the newly minted ambassador must have felt exhilarated at the opportunity for a new start, even at this late age, to pursue a life dream, as well as the resources to fulfill that dream. In this case, his resources were substantial. First, George McGovern was a duly appointed ambassador representing the most powerful and wealthy nation on earth. Second, he was working with what was, arguably, the most effective organization in the world for combating hunger. Third, he came to the job with a lifelong passion and life experiences that would motivate and equip him for this work. Fourth, not only did he have name recognition and know-how to use it, his notability was bolstered by the fact that he was becoming widely accepted as an elder statesman by his American colleagues, by foreign diplomats and politicians, by aid-agency personnel, by the popular press, and even by his bosses back in Washington, D.C. [xii] Fifth, he had the outline of a plan that he would soon unveil. In short, he had the best possible platform from which to launch a viable and effective assault on global hunger.

Beginning his twelve-hour workdays in Rome and a globe-hopping schedule, McGovern immediately received a respectful hearing from heads of state, foreign ministers, and other ambassadors. Since his diplomatic duties were linked to the humanitarian efforts of agencies of the United Nations and not the political agenda of any one nation, he was free to take a truly global, politically less-encumbered view of his responsibilities and opportunities. As ambassador, he was "always dealing globally—from morning until night, with global problems ...

...

A Prophetic and Unencumbered Voice

While a high-school student in Mitchell, South Dakota, George McGovern joined the debate team to help him overcome his natural shyness. It must have worked, because McGovern has rarely been reticent in expressing his opinions since that time. Throughout his political life, McGovern's rhetoric exhibited the edginess of a true populist representing causes and persons that he held dear. Always a tough-minded, honest, and forthright thinker, he now carries the weight of prophet and elder. He speaks unashamedly and boldly as someone whose wisdom has been honed and needs to be reckoned with by friend and foe alike.[xxv] He also speaks for those who have no political voice—namely the poor and dispossessed, especially the children. Increasingly, and with growing fervor, he speaks for those who do not yet even have a voice future generations.

Although he appears from time to time on television talk show (such as Larry King's) and plans to write at least one more book, the press is McGovern's medium of choice, particularly major metropolitan newspapers and leading magazines. Within the past few years, however, he has also discovered the power of electronic media to multiply the effects of almost anything written in the traditional press. In late 2002, for example, McGovern's "The Case for Liberalism: A Defense of the Future against the Past" appeared in *Harper's Magazine*. Because he served on its board of directors, McGovern knew the magazine had a modest circulation. Even so, he kept meeting people who had read the article. When he asked if they were subscribers, they inevitably replied that they had picked the article up on the Internet or received a copy by email. He came to realize that "you can reach several million people with one article in a way that wouldn't have been possible ten years ago, or even five years ago." While admitting that he was not completely comfortable with "all these new-fangled gadgets," McGovern acknowledged that the new technology-enabled "those articles I've written and some of the op-ed pieces I've written for the *L A Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* and *Washington Post*" to gain wider circulation. "I find those [articles] laying on people's desks or I see them being discussed on television. I know that's one way that I can be effective," he concluded in 2003.[xxvi] This phenomenon, the e-version of the grassroots politics that McGovern's political life has long exemplified, signifies how his voice continues to resonate with the ideas and ideals of each new generation of Americans and in each new medium.[xxvii]

Two pieces McGovern wrote in 2002 and 2003, in particular, have found responsive audiences. The first was "The Case for Liberalism," in which he argued that the philosophy of conservatism,

by its very nature, cannot and historically has not changed American culture into a "more just and equitable society." Rather, it is the philosophy of liberalism, McGovern claims, that can provide a "practical and hopeful compass by which to guide the American ship of state." [xxviii] The second piece, "The Reason Why," was published by The Nation. The title of the article was taken from two lines of Alfred Lord Tennyson's famous poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade:" "Theirs not to reason why,/Theirs but to do and die." [xxix] In this criticism of the Bush Administration's decision to wage war in Iraq, McGovern argues that there does indeed need to be a voice that demands to know the reason why.

Together, these articles provide a platform from which McGovern can play the elder statesman's role. His purpose is not merely to represent the other side of the issue. Nor is he acting only as a social commentator or political pundit. Rather, he means to provide historical, philosophical, and even moral perspectives on crucial social and political issues of the day. At this stage in his life and work, he strives to pass on wisdom, insight, and hope to the future even as he speaks forcefully to the perceived mistakes of the present.

To Keep the Dreams Alive

Only history can record the ultimate legacy of George McGovern, for the United Nations global ambassador on hunger plans to be on the job as long as he can manage. At ceremonies marking the founding of the George and Eleanor McGovern Library and Center for Public Service at Dakota Wesleyan University, McGovern was asked how he, at age seventy-nine, was able to accomplish his remarkable activities as the United States ambassador to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome. Pausing for a moment to reflect, he replied, "My work on hunger these past few years has probably been the thing that kept me alive." [xxx]

When asked about that statement in September 2003, McGovern recalled the words of actress Katherine Hepburn, who had passed away that summer at age ninety-six. "She said something like this," McGovern answered, "and I think this is verbatim: 'You have to keep going—I've been as terrified as the next person, but you have to keep the dreams alive.'" As a much younger and angrier man, Senator McGovern had once exclaimed, "I'm sick and tired of old men dreaming up wars in which young men do the dying." [xxxi] As an elder statesman, he continues to question the reasons for going to war. He dreams of ending global hunger, and his work keeps thousands upon thousands of children from dying. To be true to his legacy is to keep his dream alive.