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The Minnesota Story

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John Cummins
The Minnesota Story

"THESE MCCARTHY PEOPLE," said a Humphrey aide recently, "are mean as hell!" If passionate conviction and devotion to a cause are any measure, the man is right. McCarthyites mean business. The political amateurs of the "children's crusade"—students, clergy, faculty, housewives, independents, suburbanites, ex-Republicans—have learned their lessons quickly. Hundreds of thousands of Americans across the nation who have never before participated in politics have shaken the political "pros" to their toes. (One doesn't hear so much about the "children's crusade" any more, or about McCarthy being a mere "footnote" in history.) These citizens have shown that the democratic system can be made to work, and by forcing the administration to back down on Vietnam, they have already changed the course of world history.

I am immensely proud of Minnesota's part in these dramatic events. Those who think the midwest is all corn and conservatism should be aware that it is Minnesota's uniquely liberal climate that has made it possible for two men, both former college professors and both from the same state and party, to contend for the office of the Presidency. Indeed, few states have sent so many well qualified people of both parties into national political life.

Although Minnesota is about evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, even her conservatives are more liberal than most liberals elsewhere. Nixon has never had any real strength here, even among Republicans, and polls show that McCarthy stands slightly ahead of all present contenders for the Presidency in the state.

The Minnesota story of McCarthy's campaign for the Presidency began in the spring of 1967, when Dr. Maurice Visscher of the University of Minnesota called me to urge that we, together, should embark upon direct political action with regard to the Vietnam war. At that time I was president of the United Nations Association of Minnesota, and Dr. Visscher, a political, social, and religious liberal, was associated with SANE and the United World Federalists. We were old friends. At the University Club we met with a handful of concerned faculty members and a small group of politicians willing to risk their political

futures. In this way we started what was then known as "Dissenting Democrats."

It was our conviction at that time (and still is) that we could work most effectively within the Democratic Farmer-Labor party, to which we had all belonged for many years. We also believed that there was enough of a popular ground swell on the war issue so that, eventually, a political figure of national importance would come forward and offer himself as a focal point for our movement.

In September 1967 our first public meeting was held in my church. Al Lowenstein spoke and Dr. Visscher explained the purpose and organization of Dissenting Democrats, circulating an open letter to President Johnson and pleading for funds. We explained that Minnesota Dissenting Democrats was a new group being formed within the D.F.L. to work for a change in U.S. policy in Vietnam. We pointed out that similar groups were being formed among Democrats in California, New York, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, and Iowa. We stressed that no matter what the public might hear or read, we were a political organization within the Democratic party. We pointed out that we were not irresponsible "peaceniks," nor were we working to "dump L.B.J." We pointed out that we were seeking to work only in and through the Democratic party to accomplish the return of our party to the strong positions it had always held: opposition to military escalation and "brinkmanship," and continued social and economic progress at home.

We pointed out that President Johnson's sharp decline in popularity was undoubtedly due to his Vietnam policies, and that this unpopularity constituted a threat to the entire Democratic party and all its candidates. We agreed with Senator Eugene McCarthy, who had recently noted that if there was no significant change in administration policy on Vietnam, Democrats would be forced to seek new candidates in 1968.

We pointed out that Dissenting Democrats were not limited to the alternatives of bolting their traditional party, staying home, or voting loyally for an incumbent they could no longer in good conscience support. We suggested that there is a far better means built into our familiar political system: those Democrats who could not support the President's action in Vietnam could join with other like-minded Democrats at the precinct, ward, and village caucuses, at the county and district conventions, and at the state D.F.L. convention, to elect delegates to the national Democratic convention who would be determined that a negotiated settlement should be achieved in Vietnam. We felt that if

we made these views known widely enough before the national convention, and if enough of us had the courage to speak out, Democrats could once more vote their consciences.

We felt that the President would ignore his party at his own political peril, while a genuine change in policy in the direction of de-escalation would prevent an open split in the Democratic party. But by using our traditional means of being heard, by working to elect delegates who would represent our views, we would be ready to say to the national convention, assembled to nominate a candidate for the Presidency: "No democratic nomination is automatic. No man can bear our standard again merely because he has done so before. Leadership of the magnitude of the Presidency should never be offered as a reward for past services." If need be, Democrats would be in a position to say: "Mr. President, we tried to tell you, but you stopped listening." At that time, we hoped this would never have to be said, but we felt that all Americans must know that we meant business.

At our second public meeting, Robert Vaughan spoke at the University of Minnesota. He then aspired to run for the Senate in California, and wanted to test the strength of a liberal appeal in Minnesota before the California campaign.

Later, in October, a meeting was called at the home of State Representative Alpha Smaby to hear Al Lowenstein. Invitations to this meeting came directly from Alpha by phone. Present that night were about forty people, whom Alpha referred to as party faithfuls. She wanted people with some political experience who were against the war and who might be interested in helping to organize the Dissenting Democrats. Some of these party faithfuls accused Dissenting Democrats of being a movement to "dump Johnson." There were those who did not want to hurt Johnson or the party, only to change the policies. It was good to have these views aired, but they really had no place in this movement. No-one that night was ready to admit that this was a "dump Johnson" movement, but I think that all of us who wanted to work for Dissenting Democrats wished to do exactly that, and as we came to realize in later weeks that we were all of one mind, we admitted it freely.

Lowenstein was great that night. He made it perfectly clear that only political action could change the war policy of our country. He talked about getting other concerned people to the caucuses on March 5th. The thing he said that impressed me most was that "this is a campaign

for which we cannot plan ahead—that anything can happen—that patience is a virtue.”

We all know about the big changes that have caused major shifts in strategy, but this advice seemed to apply to every level of effort as we worked from week to week. Often plans that we worked so hard over were obsolete before they could ever be effective. At the end of October, a coffee party was held for Minnesota's fifth district representative, Don Fraser, an extremely liberal Democrat. When he was pressed on the war issue, Don responded noncommittally that we were only a handful of middleclass intellectuals, that we did not represent any major segment of opinion across the country, and that, after all, he had political debts to pay to his good friend Hubert Humphrey.

By the end of October we had established a new Dissenting Democrats headquarters at 1647 Hennepin in Minneapolis—just three doors from D.F.L. headquarters. Since we were, for the most part, political amateurs, we desperately needed the advice and direction of skilled professional politicians. This came from a growing number of people like John Connelly, Alpha Smaby, Esther Wattenburg, and a political “whiz-kid” from the University of Minnesota named Howie Kaibel. We also needed leaders who could work in their local areas to get people out to the caucuses, as well as lists of names of concerned people. So far, all we had to work with were the mailing lists of the second and sixth wards, “Negotiate Now” petitions, and membership lists of organizations like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, The United Nations Association of Minnesota, The United World Federalists, SANE, and so on. Names were also coming in on open letters to Johnson, but it was slow going. We felt that a lot of people who were with us would never sign that letter and would only be alienated by it. A break came when Alpha announced that Eugene McCarthy was sending us his strip mailing list from Washington—probably 20,000 names. We were told that we could use them as we wished, but that no-one outside the Dissenting Democrats' steering committee was to know where the list came from. Professor John Wright drafted a “Dear D.F.L.er” letter to go out with a contribution envelope, and we mailed as many as we could afford.

On the night of October 30th, at a steering committee meeting at Alpha Smaby's home, John Connelly received a call from Eugene McCarthy announcing that he had decided to run for the Presidency. The steering committee resolved to endorse Senator McCarthy and changed

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its name to "Concerned Democrats," which was later changed to "Minnesotans for McCarthy."

In November it was announced that H.H.H. would speak before the state central committee of the Democratic party on December 9th. We countered with an arrangement for a McCarthy forum on December 8th, complete with caucus workshops for political novices. McCarthy came, and it was his first appearance in Minnesota as a Presidential candidate.

As it later turned out, the strip list from his office was of little use. Most of our ward coordinators were people who had signed the open letter. On January 6th Professor Warren Stenberg invited all of the selected ward coordinators to meet. We thought we would be lucky to get fifty people, but about 200 showed up—more than we had invited. That day, for the first time, the organization was put on the ward level. The caucus kits came out in February, and Hop Holmberg acted as coordinator for the thirteen Minneapolis wards. Professor Warren Stenberg did suburban Hennepin County communities, simply because there was no-one else to do it. Warren never gave up. He kept coming back and telling them that "you can do it" and "here's how." They did, too! McCarthy forces swept all of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and all of their suburbs, containing collectively more than half of the state's population. Later we sent more than seventy busloads of students from the University of Minnesota into the Wisconsin primary, and they were a significant factor in the victory in that state.

For what it's worth, we lost our own state convention through an unfortunate political system that overweights sparsely populated rural areas. It is a travesty of the democratic system that one can win the support of more than half of the voters and still lose control of a state convention. We also lost the the state convention because back in January and February we had neither the money nor the people to go out and organize the rural counties. If we could have packed McCarthy people into those caucuses as we did in the metropolitan areas, we could have taken the state. That was our only hope, but it was impossible to carry out. Once the "out-state" party hacks were elected as delegates supporting L.B.J., it was too late. Nonetheless, wherever we were organized we won.

There were about 500 McCarthyites and 600 Humphrey supporters at the state convention. Humphrey addressed the delegates—rather at length—pointing out that he had always been a leader in the liberal movement. From the back of the room came the sardonic cat-call

"Yeah! In 1948!" The incident is a fair indicator, I think, that increasing numbers of young voters today are simply not buying old politicians of either party, no matter what their record.

There is no doubt that those who have brought about the new look in politics, whether young or old, are angry people. Normally quiescent, they have become involved in politics because they have witnessed, they believe, nothing less than the massive perversion of the American dream.

Students of world history already label this age in which we live as "The American Century." It has been described as the age in which a great technocracy came to dominate the entire world. McCarthy supporters prefer to think of this age, however, as the moment of truth for the greatest democratic experiment the world has ever known. For it is not yet at all clear whether this great power and civilization is devoted to furthering the dreams of humanity and the common man, or whether American civilization will now be simply another empire that rose and fell of its own weight, like many another before it.

But we are dealing with a colossus that doesn't want to be changed. No system will change itself. Those allies of ours in public life, if they really are allies, do not need advice. They need constituencies. They don't need study groups. They need votes. The next step after speeches, marches, and protests is direct political action, and, when that doesn't work, there remains only revolution itself. Meanwhile, we must each of us do what we can, not in the name of any "ism" or ideology, but in the name of plain human hope. This is what the new look in politics and the McCarthy campaign are all about.