

George S. McGovern

Jul 19 1922 - Oct 21 2012



George Stanley McGovern - - husband and father, teacher and politician, proud South Dakota Democrat, author and advocate for the poor - - lived a life of service through decades of American history he also strongly influenced.

Born in Avon, South Dakota on July 19, 1922 to the Rev. Joseph and Frances McLean McGovern, George left Dakota Wesleyan University (DWU), in Mitchell, where he excelled in debate, to join the Army-Air Force in 1943.

That same year, on Halloween Day, he married Eleanor Stegeberg, a fellow DWU student who had grown up on a Woonsocket farm and got to know George after having beaten him in a student debate competition. They would eventually have five children - - Ann, Susan, Teresa, Steven and Mary - - and a 63-year marriage.

A B-24 pilot at the age of just 22 and assigned to a bomber group in Italy, George flew 35 combat missions across Europe, safely-landed his damaged plane on several occasions and was discharged at the war's end as a First Lieutenant having won the Distinguished Flying Cross with three Oak Clusters.

After the war, he and Eleanor returned to DWU, and following his graduation, joined its faculty as a professor of history and political science.

He later completed a Ph.D. in History at Northwestern University, and studies at nearby Garrett Theological Seminary. But living through the war pushed George towards public service, so he began traveling town-to-town and farm-to-farm rebuilding the South Dakota Democratic Party and competitive two-party system in the state.

No one worked harder or with greater organization on the campaign trail; George would walk both sides of the entire length of a main street, shake the hand and listen to every person on the sidewalk or in the coffee shops. In an era before hand-held electronic devices, George had accumulated an archive of 40,000 voter 3x5 cards and could retrieve names and details from memory with ease.

In 1956, George won a seat in the US House of Representatives.

There he served two terms, lost a run for the US Senate in 1960, but won a Senate seat in 1962 after having served as the first Executive Director of President John F. Kennedy's new Food For Peace program - - a formative experience which allowed George to peaceably shift government power and American food resources towards hungry people.

After a run for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 1968 to help hold together the-assassinated Sen. Robert Kennedy's delegates, George worked to reform party rules so the nominating procedure would be more transparent and accessible.

And during a drawn-out primary campaign, George won the Democratic Party's nomination for Presidential in 1972 - - a race he led with unprecedented grassroots support under the banner "Come Home, America" - - for peace in Vietnam and reconciliation at home.

It was a race he did not win against President Richard Nixon, but the campaign's integrity restored hope to a dispirited public and established a principled model for national campaigns to come - - validated by the resignation

of a scandal-ridden President Nixon two years later.

George served three terms in the Senate, until January, 1981, where he contributed substantially to a series of comprehensive farm bills and chaired the new US Senate Special Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs.

After his Senate career, George worked on Middle East peace, and further focused on child nutrition through two appointed positions: US Ambassador to the UN Agencies for Food and Agriculture, and, separately, as UN Global Ambassador to the World Food Program.

He also co-founded a world-wide school lunch program with long-time friend Bob Dole, the former GOP Senator from Kansas.

For these decades of work enriching the lives of countless families and children around the globe, George was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom - - our country's highest civilian distinction - - by President Bill Clinton, in 2001.

In more recent years, George stayed intricately connected to South Dakota, national and international issues. He lectured about policy and politics on campuses here and abroad. He would work, as was his habit, on just a few hours of sleep, and frequently asked arriving visitors for their input on a fresh draft of an op-ed or magazine piece he had been crafting on a yellow pad.

He even finished last year, at age 89, the 14th book he had written, co-authored or edited - - What It Means To Be A Democrat, and conducted book signings in several states also for a recent biography of President Abraham Lincoln.

No portrait of George would be complete without remembering the succession of outrageously affectionate and outsized Newfoundland dogs George and Eleanor nurtured and cherished.

He loved going for a walk across the DWU campus, or on a drive to Lake Mitchell, or to a night at the movies. He enjoyed dinners at Chef Louie's and kept everyone amused and amazed with stories and anecdotes from his youth, the campaign trail, or the Senate floor.

And he kept his childhood and life-long faith with his beloved St. Louis Cardinals, expressing no surprise at their last-minute qualification for this year's playoffs - - just as they had done last year on their way to a World Series championship run that George had followed with inning-by-inning delight.

More than anything, George adored Eleanor, their grown children, and 10 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren, was engaged in their interests, schooling and careers, and generously helped with advice, encouragement and support.

George McGovern lived an exceptional public and private life of more than 90 years with an uncommon energy, adherence to ideals, thirst for knowledge and a consuming dedication to others.

George rarely raised his voice in anger, but always raised the level of discourse and achievement around him.

He didn't live for confrontation, but risked his life in the greatest struggle of the century to defeat evil on a grand scale, yet never bragged about his personal war-time achievements.

Instead, he used that experience as a working, life-long foundation for a more peaceful, constructive, and forgiving world.

We who knew and loved him will remember his singular dedication to a life that made a difference.

We resolve to honor George's spirit by emulating his example.

Public viewing will be held from 1:00 pm to 6:00 pm Thursday, October 25, 2012, at First United Methodist Church, 401 S. Spring Avenue, Sioux Falls, SD, with the family present to greet friends from 5:00 to 6:00 pm. A 6:30 pm Prayer Service will follow the visitation at the church. Funeral Services will begin at 1:00 pm, Friday at the

Mary Sommervold Hall at the Washington Pavilion of Arts and Science, 301 S. Main Avenue, Sioux Falls, SD.
Private burial will take place at Rock Creek Cemetery, Washington, DC, at a later date.

Memorials may be directed to Feeding South Dakota, 3511 N. 1st Avenue, Sioux Falls, SD, 57104.