NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

The legacy of George McGovern

Pat Perriello | Oct. 29, 2012 NCR Today

I can't let the passing of George McGovern go by without saying a few words about him. He was one of my heroes.

Heroes are not very popular these days, but in my day, I had many. My heroes included such greats as Superman and the Lone Ranger. Ted Kluszewski, first baseman for the Cincinnati Reds, was one of my early childhood heroes. Later, I gravitated to favorites such as Socrates, Confucius and Martin Luther King Jr. I always considered Dr. King to be in the tradition of an Old Testament prophet.

Yet perhaps my most interesting set of heroes included both Barry Goldwater and George McGovern. They represent political candidates who were at the extreme wings of their political parties in 1964 and 1972, respectively. Goldwater, most would agree, seemed to be a harbinger of the Ronald Reagan revolution despite losing by a landslide to Lyndon B. Johnson. The legacy of McGovern did not fare as well.

He had his own landslide loss to Richard Nixon in 1972. He did attain a certain amount of vindication when Nixon was forced to resign in 1974. One has to acknowledge, however, that he made at least one major mistake from which he never fully recovered: He dropped his vice president, Thomas Eagleton, from the ticket when it was learned that Eagleton had been treated for depression. This was a debacle for two reasons. First, it seems to have been a failure of proper vetting of Eagleton's candidacy. Second, McGovern failed to stand by the candidate he chose when the news was discovered. While mental illness was then viewed much differently than it is today, McGovern still missed an opportunity to demonstrate leadership qualities in supporting a man who seemed to have overcome whatever problems he may have had.

Is there then a lasting legacy for George McGovern? He seemed to come at the end of an era. In many ways, the great progressive era of Democratic politics ended with him. He was perhaps unlucky enough to have emerged at a time when the country was moving in a different direction. Nixon had proclaimed the silent majority, and the word "liberal" had become a dirty word. The assassinations of the 1960s had worn out the appetite for progressive politics, and the watchword was all about "law and order."

Most today would acknowledge that McGovern was a good and decent man who became a respected elder statesman, but perhaps represented a bygone era. Indeed, in many ways, he serves as the quintessential representative of the peace movement and the anti-war generation of the 1960s. Does he still have anything to teach us today as we prepare for November's election?

I do think we have failed to speak out nearly enough on issues of war and peace in these last few decades. We went into the war in Iraq with essentially no one in Congress or across the country seriously questioning what we were about to do. We allowed the Bush administration to push us inexorably into a war that was misguided. We continue to avoid meaningful discussions of the war in Afghanistan despite important ethical questions. It has taken us far too long to come to grips with the many issues of abuse, such as torture and intrusion on individual civil liberties during these recent wars.

Clearly, a major difference is the lack of a draft, which keeps young people from marching in the streets or even being particularly concerned about what's happening in Afghanistan. After all, this is not their war. It has not disrupted their lives. I have to acknowledge that I, myself, have too often tended to give the Obama administration the benefit of the doubt when I shouldn't. Is anyone addressing the issue of indiscriminate drone attacks in a serious way?

The one thing we can all be sure of, however, is that George McGovern would not remain silent. He is still my hero.

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-31 03:19*): http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/legacy-george-mcgovern