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Remembering George McGovern



By Kenneth M. Quinn



In remembering George McGovern, I am especially envious of those who had known him for many decades, back to when he was first appointed by President Kennedy to lead America's effort to confront hunger in the world and his race for the presidency.

My first meeting with him came only in 2003 in the rotunda of the Iowa State Capitol when he attended our World Food Prize ceremony. We were honoring Catherine Bertini as our Laureate for her leadership of the UN World Food Programme, with which he was so closely associated.

As we stood there, Senator McGovern pointed up to the magnificent dome and told me the marvelous story about his first time ever in the public spotlight. It came when he was just 13 years old and was, as he



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national edition. He laughingly told me that it was the start of his political career.

I reminded Senator McGovern of this story when I spoke with him in 2008 to tell him that he had been selected as the World Food Prize Laureate for that year. Exhibiting his characteristic modesty, he was extraordinarily gracious in expressing appreciation for this honor, but stressed the absolute necessity for Senator Bob Dole to be honored at the same time. I assured him that would be the case.

The two Senators were one of the most remarkable sets of Laureates the World Food Prize has ever recognized. They spoke to an overflow crowd during a joint public colloquium in which they recounted their life-long experiences that had brought them to having such an acute focus on hunger. Two nights later, we were back at the Iowa State Capitol, where the formal ceremony to present the World Food Prize is held.

Senators McGovern and Dole were sitting in the front row on opposite sides of the main aisle in the legislative chamber. When it came time for them to receive the prize, they literally reached across the aisle and joined hands, and then stood and moved forward together. In his characteristic wit, Senator Dole remarked: "Here we are, two losers, who are finally winners."

But the most powerful moment of the evening came when the two men spoke. Both outlined how they had come face-to-face with hungry people as young boys during the Depression, with homeless, out-of-work migrants knocking on the door of their homes, offering to work for food, or just hoping for a few cents to help them buy a loaf of bread.

Both men also described how time and again their heroic wartime service further shaped their outlook, as they came face-to-face with hungry children and adults in Europe. Their experiences in uniform provided a lasting bond that was far stronger than any differences in political philosophy that might have divided them during their time in Congress. It was, no doubt, this shared, deep-seated aversion to human suffering that allowed them to provide the leadership in shaping both programs for food assistance in America and school feeding programs around the world.

And then, at the conclusion of the award ceremony, in a moment indelibly etched in my memory, George McGovern sang the song that his mother had sung to him as a little boy — "Jesus Loves the Little Children." His soft voice filled the hushed chamber and brought tears to the eyes of many, including my own. The linkage of his work to feed hungry children around the world back to his moral upbringing as a young boy could not have been more profoundly demonstrated.


It will always be a signal memory of my life that I had the enormous privilege to present the World Food Prize sculpture to Senator McGovern that night.

One of the more enduring and endearing memories of Senator McGovern's time as a Laureate came at



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and Marshall Matz, they assured me that despite being 86 years old, Senator McGovern was still running every morning.

I saw some of that strength and vigor when I was fortunate enough to be in Washington earlier this year to attend Senator McGovern's 90th birthday party. While looking thin and a bit frail, the Senator displayed an amazing stamina as he stood for almost an hour signing autographs and talking to the long line of admirers. It was, therefore, shocking to learn last week that he had entered a hospice and was near death.

As an Iowan, I take some comfort in the thought that one of Senator McGovern's earliest political memories took place in the Iowa State Capitol, and that the capstone recognition of the endeavor for which he will be forever remembered — alleviating hunger — came in that same majestic building in 2008 as he received the World Food Prize — the "Nobel Prize for Food and Agriculture."



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