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Historical Musings

Reflections on George McGovern, Teacher and Mentor

On 21 October 2012, George S. McGovern died. Newspapers across the country carried long obituaries about this man, praising his heroic war record, his work as director of President John F. Kennedy's Food for Peace program, and his role as a humanitarian. Writers recounted his long political career as a United States congressman and senator from South Dakota and as the 1972 Democratic candidate for president of the United States. The event of his death prompted the sort of national conversation reserved only for the most notable and admired Americans. Despite this richly deserved outpouring of praise, however, something was missing: George McGovern's first career, as a teacher and mentor at a small college in South Dakota.

George McGovern was my professor, speech coach, and class adviser at Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, and he changed my life. Although more than sixty years have passed since my first class with McGovern, I still remember much about that experience—many of the points and arguments he made, even some of the readings he assigned. Mostly, though, I remember my freshman year at Wesleyan as a time when the world seemed to open up before my eyes. For a girl from a small town west of the Missouri River in South Dakota, McGovern's courses made world events and politics understandable for the first time, and they conveyed the possibility of betterment and change.

Our entering class in the fall of 1951 was small, perhaps one hundred and fifty at most. Like myself, most of the freshmen were from small towns, farms, and rural areas throughout South Dakota. While our transition to college was exciting, it was also circumscribed. We had moved from small places to a small college (Wesleyan's campus had only three major buildings at the time) in a place located on familiar

Dorothy Schwieder (then Hubbard) attended Dakota Wesleyan from 1951 to 1955, the year her senior portrait appeared in the *Tumbleweed* yearbook.

ground—the sparsely settled, somewhat isolated environment of the Great Plains. So, while Wesleyan offered the rich promise of higher education, it also remained a product of its place and time.

I suspect that most of our freshman courses were the basics, old staples of the sort familiar to most first-year college students, but one class stood out. George McGovern, a Wesleyan graduate then working on his Ph.D. in American history at Northwestern University, had returned to his alma mater two years earlier, and he was teaching a course in a three-part series called "Human Relations."

Robert Sam Anson, in his book, *McGovern: A Biography*, writes that McGovern had completed his course work for the Ph.D. at that point in time, and he had also done the research for his dissertation. The environment at Wesleyan would allow him some time to complete the

dissertation, and, presumably, to earn more money than he had made as a graduate teaching assistant at Northwestern. Anson described the human relations courses as "a social-scientific survey of current events" that were "a reflection of McGovern's ideas and those of Dakota Wesleyan's president, Samuel Hilburn." Anson wrote that Hilburn was a "radical educational reformer" who encouraged his faculty to experiment with interdisciplinary teaching.[1]

I do not recall discussing the course with many of my fellow freshmen, but I clearly remember being struck from the beginning by McGovern's well-organized, informative lectures. My sense was that McGovern had been thinking about these courses for some time; the man just seemed to know so much! Later, as I continued with my own

1. Anson, *McGovern: A Biography* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972), p. 64.

Open fields surrounded the Dakota Wesleyan campus in 1953, shown in this aerial view from the *Tumbleweed*. The phrase ". . . where the Tumbleweed grows" is a line from the school song, "The Scotchman."

College Hall, which housed the library, classrooms, and administrative offices, burned down in February of 1955, the year the author graduated. Science Hall, where she took her classes from McGovern, was located to the right of this building.

education, the word "erudite" would retroactively come to mind. Nor do I recall much class discussion, although McGovern worked to draw us out and get our opinions and reactions to the assigned readings. I also remember that I felt somewhat intimidated by the presence of the sophomores and other older students who had enrolled in the class, all of whom seemed to know far more than I. McGovern must have sensed something of this feeling among the freshmen, for after a few weeks, he asked each of us to write out our reaction to the course. I said that I felt inhibited by the older students, but I also remember writing that I learned something from their responses.

Others may have felt similarly, for McGovern responded by deciding that the freshmen needed their own section. So he detached us from

the older students and taught us separately. I doubt that we freshmen thought much about this move; perhaps such was business as usual at college. It was not, however. Not until decades later, when I became a college teacher myself, did I realize how unusual it was, and how much effort it took for an instructor to teach an additional section. I am also sure that McGovern restructured his lectures for the freshmen, so that all students could gain the most benefit from the course. And all of this occurred while he was working to complete his Ph.D.

George McGovern, himself a graduate of Dakota Wesleyan, taught at the college full-time and coached its speech team from 1949 to 1953 while he worked to complete his Ph.D.

The readings for the human relations courses covered a wide array of books and articles. I remember three titles in particular: Ashley Montagu's *On Being Human*, which emphasized the importance of social cooperation; Owen Lattimore's *Ordeal by Slander*, recounting his defense against attacks by Senator Joseph McCarthy; and *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*.[2] The latter book described Steffens's work as a "muckraking" journalist investigating fraud and corruption in government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Steffens traveled to various cities to interview machine politicians and others involved in municipal government. Their responses were frank, often describing corruption, malfeasance, and graft. For a freshman from a small rural community, this experience was eye-opening. Did things like that really go on in the world? And what could be done to stop them?

I do remember that the reading list seemed long, a view other students apparently shared. One comment in a 1953 issue of the college newspaper, the *Phreno Cosmian*, humorously, if insensitively, compared our instructor to the slave owner in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "George Simon Legree of Science Hall McGovern has asked his human relations class to read all the books on the west side of the library after we finish the south wall," the writer quipped. "We of the human relations class would like to pose this question: What about the north and east walls? We feel this is a problem of literary discrimination."[3]

At the same time that McGovern began his teaching career at Wesleyan, he also assumed the duties of the college's speech coach. Wesleyan had a long tradition in debate, oratory, and extemporaneous speaking and in doing well at student speech tournaments. Our speech team was small—we usually traveled to tournaments in one car—but this fact also meant that most of us could gain a great deal of experience. One annual event was the Rocky Mountain Speech Tournament hosted by the University of Denver. Our large sedan felt small as we watched

2. Montagu, *On Being Human* (New York: H. Schuman, 1950); Lattimore, *Ordeal by Slander* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1950); *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1931).

3. *Phreno Cosmian*, 13 Feb. 1953, quoted in James D. McLaird, *Dakota Wesleyan University Memory Book, 1885–1920* (Mitchell, S.Dak.: Dakota Wesleyan University, 2010).

vans pull onto the University of Denver campus, bringing teams from schools like the universities of Washington, Oregon, and Utah. While we were badly outnumbered, we more than held our own. One of our proudest moments came in 1953 when George McGovern received a special coach's award for having the team with the best record in the Rocky Mountain event during the previous three years.

McGovern worked tirelessly with his speech students. He met with each of us many times, reading and rereading what we had written. He edited our words, crossing out phrases and penciling in more appropriate ones. This routine became something of a joke with my friends.

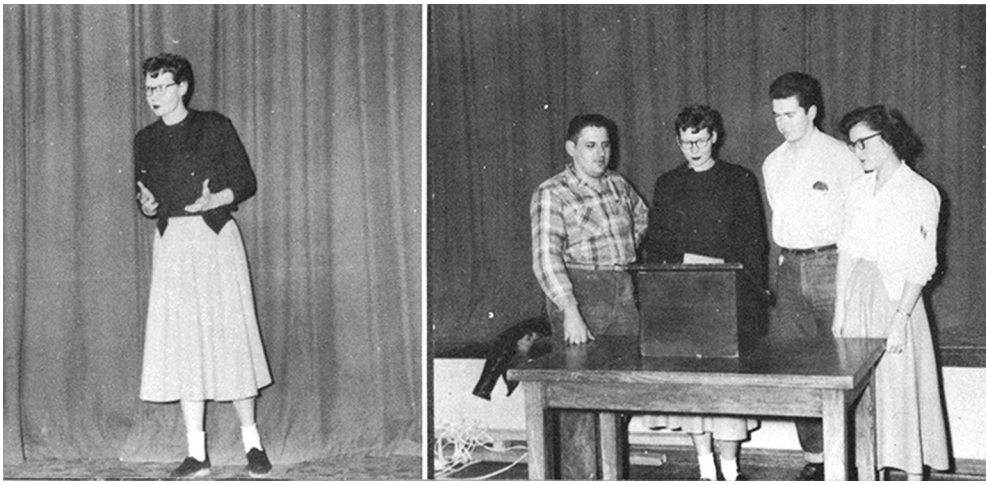
Members of the Dakota Wesleyan chapter of Phi Kappa Delta, the intercollegiate speech society, are pictured here in 1953, the year McGovern won his award for coaching. In the front row, from left, are Donna McLain, Margie Uhrich, Dorothy Hubbard, Gerry Morris, and Tom Bintliff. At back, from left, are Mait McNamara, Chuck Horner, George McGovern, and Elmer Schwieder, whom Dorothy Hubbard later married.

They kidded that my finished orations contained few of my own words, but McGovern showed us the importance of careful work and how to pursue it. Once our written orations were complete, we practiced our delivery—on stage—with McGovern standing at the back of the hall. Each student received suggestions on how to move about the stage, when to gesture or pause for emphasis, and the importance of emphasizing certain words. Again, nothing was left to chance.

McGovern taught full-time at Wesleyan for four years. In 1953, he went to work as the executive secretary of the South Dakota Democratic Party. The title, however, was really a bit of a misnomer; what George McGovern essentially did was to rebuild—some might say create—a modern Democratic Party in a state that had long been a Republican stronghold. Still, he found time to continue coaching speech and teaching a few additional courses at Wesleyan. I went on to take several more of his classes—in the language of the time, I "majored in McGovern"—but it was the three human relations courses that most shaped my worldview and my future.

Thinking back on my encounters with George McGovern, I realize that his influence played out in ways large and small. One instance concerned a fellow Wesleyan student, Elmer Schwieder, the man I would later marry. For three years at Wesleyan, Elmer, then a pre-theology student, supported himself by serving three small churches near Mitchell. Before Elmer's arrival, McGovern, himself a former theology student, had temporarily filled in at one of the churches. When it was announced that a Wesleyan student would be arriving to take over the pastorates, McGovern—who had never met Elmer—told the congregation that he hoped they would not reduce the new man's salary just because he was a beginning student pastor. McGovern reminded the church members that students were often struggling financially, and he hoped they would "do the right thing" by this young man. They did.

Of course, McGovern's political influence is best known. His votes, positions, and speeches have received much attention, and his influence marked the 1972 Democratic convention as the advent of greater inclusion of women and minorities in American political life. But even here, the official account is incomplete. During McGovern's years at Wesleyan, one of his students was Vilma Paredes from Pan-



In these photographs from the 1954 yearbook, Dorothy Hubbard (left) practices her speech delivery on stage. The group picture features Hubbard at the podium with Elmer Schwieder at far left. The other two students are not identified.

Cam Starr addresses the speech team in this photograph from the 1955 *Tumbleweed*. In the front row, from left, are Arlette Markell, Gerry Morris, and Elmer Schwieder. At back, from left, are Dorothy Hubbard, Sam Dicks, Barbara Rollins, Pat Leach, and George McGovern.

ama City, Panama. After graduation, Vilma returned to Panama and became a schoolteacher; there she married Boris Martínez, a military man. In 1968, in a volatile atmosphere of military-government conflict, Martínez led a coup against controversial Panamanian President Arnulfo Arias and assumed power as the de-facto leader of the new regime. While Martínez attempted to hand power back to a new civilian leadership, the military ultimately remained in power, and he was deposed the following year by Omar Torrijos, who would rule as a military strongman for the next dozen years. Reflecting back on her husband's relatively liberal tendencies, Vilma later recounted how she had often told him what she had learned about good government and democracy in George McGovern's human relations classes. Regardless of outcome, it seems astounding that McGovern's lectures about democracy played a part in an important international event thousands of miles away.

Specific experiences aside, the essence of the man is what most remains with me. The George McGovern who was lionized upon his death had not changed much since 1951. He remained himself in so many ways: always compassionate and concerned about the needs of others, always believing there should be ways to solve disputes short of violence and war. Hearing his many speeches and reading about him, I was continually reminded that the man in Washington, D.C., was the same man who had mentored students at a small college in South Dakota. He taught his students that the American system was not perfect, but that problems could be solved and that people should care about one another. There was always an optimism about McGovern; not effusive, but there. It was a quiet ethical and moral conviction that the world could be made a better place.

As I sit here and write about my college years—I am now eighty years old—I recognize my astonishingly good fortune to have been a freshman at Dakota Wesleyan University in the fall of 1951. Few people have the chance to encounter such a significant figure early in their lives, but I was one of them. I marvel that an eighteen-year-old student had the extraordinary opportunity to encounter such thought-provoking and insightful views of American politics and society and to be exposed to McGovern's faith in hard work, his personal integrity, and his ability

Less than a decade after serving on the Dakota Wesleyan faculty, McGovern became director of the Food for Peace program. Here, he visits a classroom in Cairo, Egypt, in 1962 to observe the school lunch program.

to "turn a fine phrase." Little did I or my classmates know how far our instructor would go, but with the wisdom of hindsight, a special future for him seems to me to have been apparent even then.

I have no doubt that George McGovern had a major impact on the lives of many of his students, in a wide variety of ways. For me, perhaps the strongest influence was personal. I believe that his classes instilled in me a love of history. I had originally been more interested in psychology, but after my experience in his human relations classes, I began taking more history courses and graduated with a double major in history and psychology. Eventually I earned a Ph.D. in history and served

on the History Department faculty at Iowa State University for over thirty years. Somewhere, tucked away in all my papers, is a dog-eared copy of one of those original speech orations, complete with scribbled comments and exhortations telling me I could do still better. Since the fall of 1951, in the lecture room at Dakota Wesleyan University's Science Hall, I have been a "McGovern Democrat" in more ways than one.

Thank you, Professor McGovern.

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On the covers: Historians and their work are the focus of this issue, which includes an interview with John E. Miller (front), reflections on farm movements like the Farmers Holiday (back, top), and a reminiscence of George McGovern (back, bottom).