McCarthy Still Perplexes Pros

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Comment on the American political scene appearing in English newspapers is often more objective and analytic than much writing in our own country. This article, written by the London Observer's Washington correspondent, Antony Howard, explores the inner workings of Sen. Eugene McCarthy, who has now emerged as a Democratic challenger to President Johnson for the Democratic nomination. It should be noted that the London Observer, although similar in name to this newspaper, is not affiliated with it.)

WASHINGTON—Last Thursday morning, wearing a loose-fitting grey suit and a quiet maroon tie, the currently most friendless figure in the U. S. Congress appeared by appointment with the press in the old caucus room of the Senate.

It would be wrong to describe him as striding in purposefully —if anything, indeed, his whole gait suggested that he had simply dropped by. It was, to say the least, an improbably entrance for a man about to announce that he was proposing to run for president against the leader of his own party.

But then Senator Eugene McCarthy—even after 20 years on Capitol Hill—is still an improbable politician. The professionals have never known quite what to make of him. More than any other member of the House or the Senate he has always been his own man.

That is as obvious in his private life as in his public career. There are probably not many Senators' homes in Washington where you find on your way upstairs two chairs with a guitar strung across them blocking our way ("It's all right, " you're told cheerfully afterwards, "it's only to keep the dog from coming down").

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NOR, FOR THAT matter, can there be many leading political figures in America who—regardless of the threat to their own careers—insist on going to stand on the sidelines of mass peace demonstrations if only to make sure that an 18-year-old daughter comes to no harm.

Gene McCarthy, of course, comes from Minnesota—and that is probably half the secret. He belongs to what America's best television commentator, Eric Severeid, has called "that cold weather stretch of political contrariness reaching from Wisconsin to Montana where something in the soil or barometric pressure has always produced rebels."

McCarthy's own claim to being a maverick is, if anything, re-inforced by the fact that he is the first Catholic—though a very different one from the East Coast Irish or Italian variety—to be elected to statewide office in predominantly Protestant Minnesota in over one hundred years.

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ALL THIS, NO doubt, has something to do with his (to many people) reckless and (to others) romantic decision to challenge President Johnson directly on the Vietnam issue in at least four of next year's primaries.

Initially, if only because of his reputation for detachment and diffidence, he was about the last person whom the dump Johnson Democrats expected to emerge as their champion; in fact when a group of professional liberals were shopping 'round for a candidate last September they did not even bother to go and see the senior Senator from Minnesota.

But, quietly and unostentatiously, McCarthy had nonetheless been making up his mind. He says today that the decision to run was really made for him by Dean Rusk's performance at a press conference on October 12—when the Secretary of State suddenly presented a new justification for the Vietnam War in terms of the period of there being within a decade "a billion Chinese armed with nuclear weapons on the mainland of Asia."

"There comes a moment" McCarthy explained over a lunchtable a week or two later "when you just can't let people be denied a voice in Democracy any longer. Some had to say you've gone to far. Some had to stand up against them."

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IT IS VERY much in the pattern of McCarthy's political history—and indeed in his youthful background as a postulant in a Benedictine seminary —that he should eventually have decided that he had no alternative but to be that "someone" himself.

One of the least noticed aspects of his 20-year career in American politics is his readiness to take risks that would make most conventional politicians shudder.

He did exactly that when, as a House member with 10 years' seniority, he gambled his whole political future by successfully taking on an establishment-backed rival Senate nominee in a Democratic primary and then going on to dislodge an entrenched and popular incumbent Republican.

The odds this time admittedly are a great deal heavier—a fact that McCarthy publicly recognizes in a way that journalists find irresistible and politicians infuriating.

"I think," he will say with a mocking half-smile "that I should acknowledge that the President probably is the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination in 1968 right now."

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IN FACT, THE challenge that McCarthy presents to Johnson is not just one of policies; at least equally it is one of personality. Both his enemies and his friends agree that "Gene just doesn't give a damn"—and it is precisely this carefree quality that makes him a much more serious personal threat to LBJ than a routine cautious, calculating politician could ever be.

"You know," a Senate colleague said to him the other day, "What I can't forgive you for, Gene? It's when you discuss these serious matters—and then give that twinkle in your eye as if to suggest that we'll all have a good laugh about it afterwards."

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THE SENATE colleague, it's fair to say, was every inch a politician; but McCarthy is as much aware as anyone that one of the things he will have to live down is his reputation for irresponsibility and flippancy —for being the type of politician who prefers to stand at the back of the Senate chambers whispering bonmots and aphorisms rather than taking part in the real battle going on on the floor.

But what can be a liability in a legislator can easily be an attraction in a candidate. Certainly, all those who heard Gene McCarthy announce his candidature and deal with superb aplomb with the questions afterwards were in no doubt that there had suddenly emerged on the American political scene the wittiest and most literate political figure since the early days of Adlai Stevenson.

Stevenson, though, eventually became no more than a martyr for another man's triumph—and the most informed estimate remains that that is the best McCarthy can hope for. But, again, what totally defeats other politicians is that he appears genuinely not to mind.

Would he, he was asked the other day, if the cards fell out that way, stand aside and make way for Bobby Kennedy as Johnson's challenger in 1968.

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"WELL," HE SAID, this time grinning broadly, "I don't know, about stepping aside—it might not be quite as voluntary as that —though I want to make it clear that I don't necessarily see that as a great disaster." (In private, he had already told Kennedy that if he should feel compelled eventually to make a move and take the whole thing over "then that's perfectly alright with me.")

The romanticism is indeed throughout balanced by realism —a realism that can show itself in surprising, and, to some of his new fairout admirers, probably disconcerting ways. McCarthy, for example, has no hesitation in branding the Vietnam war "politically indefensible and morally unacceptable." But that does not mean that he is prepared to argue for a unilateral withdrawal forthwith or even an immediate stopping of all the bombing especially on supply routes.

He was strongly in favor of not resuming the bombing after the 37-day pause in January, 1966—as he thought then there was a genuine chance for negotiations; he was nothing like so concerned about prolonging the brief Christmas bombing pause a year later as he was certain at that time that there was no hope of getting peace.

It is this type of sophistication that threatens to make the administration's only-too-apparent effort to pin upon him the label of being "a peace at any price" candidate a difficult feat to bring off—the more so as McCarthy has already rather cheekily accused LBJ of being "precipitate" in giving his Manila promise to pull all American troops out of Vietnam six months after any negotiations were concluded.