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A Connecticut Yankee in King John's Court

Whatever happens to the political fortunes of Eugene McCarthy in Chicago in late August, the impact of his decision to become a 1968 Presidential candidate will be felt in John M. Bailey's Kingdom of Connecticut for years to come. "Gone are the days of blind loyalty to the party organizations," says an experienced Hartford reporter, "and gone with them is the feeling of trust among Democrats." Bailey's Knights gaze at each other uneasily across the Round Table. Too many lances were broken in the spring tournaments. Too many of the challengers refused to abide by Camelot's rules.

Those challengers first gathered together last winter to draw up their own rules, soon after Senator McCarthy's November 30 declaration of availability. Driven to action by their opposition to the Vietnam war and by their anger over Black poverty, their response to his declaration was immediate. Throughout December small groups began to meet in Hartford and West Hartford, in New Haven and Woodbridge, in Westport and Greenwich, in New Britain. Those in attendance were middle-aged liberals left over from the New Deal, former Stevenson volunteers who had infiltrated the Democratic organization after the disappointments of 1952 and 1956, and Kennedy fans tired of waiting. More importantly, there were dozens of the young, ready to give political action a try.

Leadership was soon vested in the Reverend Joseph Duffey, a Protestant teacher at the Hartford Seminary, and Mrs. Anne Wexler, wife of a successful Westport doctor. Both in their early forties, dedicated and tireless, this pair emerged as a new force on the Democratic scene in Connecticut. Duffey is quietly eloquent, politically adept, skillful at reconciliation. Anne Wexler is perceptive and toughminded, and she has a smiling, handy charm. By the time a national McCarthy for President organization had been set up in Washington, the Senator's Connecticut supporters were already organized and arming for six months of jousting with the man who is not only Chairman of the Democratic State Committee but, since 1960, National Chairman as well.

Some of us had first jousted with John Bailey in 1952 when we
formed the Volunteers for Stevenson in Connecticut. This was my first exposure to him. I had a certain status as a Connecticut Yankee when I was called to his attention in the Stevenson campaign, and for this my ancestors deserve some credit. One of them settled in Norwalk in the 1660's; another entered the U.S. Senate in the 1830's, and my grandfather served as a State Senator at Hartford in the 1880's before going on to Washington as Grover Cleveland's Commissioner of Patents. I was born in Norwalk, graduated from Yale, and returned to New Haven in 1949 to pursue a career in book publishing.

In addition to this Yankee background, my Democratic Party credentials included a campaign stint for FDR in Boston in 1940 and, along with FDR, Jr. and a Yale classmate, Jonathan Bingham, now a Bronx Congressman, I participated in the abortive New York 1948 scheme to secure the Democratic Presidential nomination for, first, Dwight Eisenhower, and, second, Paul Douglas. Those who went as far as the Philadelphia convention of that year with these bizarre goals in mind included Jacob Arvey from Chicago, Mayor William O'Dwyer of New York—and Connecticut's new State Chairman, John M. Bailey. It was the last time the King failed to identify the party's national nominee well in advance of the convention. In 1960 his headstart was, of course, notable, and led to his elevation to the National Chairmanship of the Party, as well as to five Washington posts for his Connecticut political protégés, Abe Ribicoff and Chester Bowles.

In the twenty years since Harry Truman's astonishing election, John Bailey has made himself secure. He shoehorned Bowles into the Connecticut governorship, lost him two years later, then returned with his Congressman Abe Ribicoff to regain the State Capitol in 1954, and to nail it down with Ribicoff's reelection in 1958 by an astonishing plurality of 246,000. Bailey expertly handled the state's patronage, which Governor Ribicoff was happy to let him dispense. He also developed the legislative skills which made him an indispensable off-stage presence in the State Capitol.

But it was in the selection of candidates that Bailey showed the greatest finesse. Every two years he managed a series of "consensus" decisions at the Party's nominating convention in the Bushnell Auditorium, Hartford's concert hall. These decisions were reached in the backstage dressing rooms of the "Bushel" rather than out front on the stage or in the audience. In one or another of those rooms many a disappointed aspirant has agreed to subside—and subsequently to say so from the rostrum, thus making unanimous the public decisions of the
convention. The willingness to knuckle under, to forego the primary as a weapon of retaliation, to close ranks behind the convention's choice—these have been the rules of the game so well understood at the Round Table.

King John, in his garb of modern politician, plays the game to win, and in winning he has always recognized that compromise is a lance, consensus a suit of armor. "You gotta do what you gotta do," is his favorite phrase in Connecticut. He uses it constantly to explain the lack of a job to a Party supplicant, to deny a nomination to a Party aspirant, to shift his support to a surprising choice.

In Connecticut, Bailey did what he had to do in support of Adlai Stevenson in 1952 and in 1956 and then became the first urban boss to spot the 1960 winner—at least three years ahead of time. Following his elevation to the Washington scene, he continued to manage both the National and Connecticut chairmanships during the next eight years, a task made easier by his devoted ally at home, Catherine Quinn, who worked tirelessly for the Party, month in month out, always in John Bailey's name, and by Lyndon Johnson, who was willing to have Bailey renamed in 1964, but who made no heavy demands on him thereafter.

Then in January 1968 Bailey made the remark Eugene McCarthy never fails to recall. "The Democratic National Convention is as good as over," Bailey said. "It will be Lyndon Johnson again, and that's that." In the next six months, every time John Bailey thought he could clearly see what "you gotta do," the picture blurred. First came Johnson's withdrawal, a development Bailey had obviously not prepared for. Worse, it happened just ten days before the implausible Connecticut primary engineered by the McCarthy supporters in thirty towns and cities. Then came Bobby Kennedy's assassination—leaving Bailey with only two leading contenders. It happened just sixteen days before the Connecticut state convention.

These two events—the April town primaries and the June state convention—were the spring tournaments in the McCarthy effort in Connecticut. The strategy for these events was drawn up in January. The problem was plain: how to break through the usual procedure by which the Connecticut Democratic Party at its June convention in a presidential year "selects" a slate of national delegates and then votes to bind them to a unit rule. To allow this to happen in 1968 would mean, simply, that John Bailey and his fellow bosses at the Round Table would hand-pick the list of 44 faithful Party members who, after the
necessary convention rigamarole, would go off to Chicago bound to vote as instructed by Bailey until released by him. Even Tom Dodd, already a U.S. Senator, was forced to follow this rule in 1960 when his preference was clearly for his old Senate buddy, Lyndon Johnson. To alter this process was the task Joe Duffey, Anne Wexler, and the new McCarthy contenders set for themselves.

The obvious place to begin was to tackle the make-up of the Hartford convention—to lace the delegations with McCarthy supporters. Nine hundred and sixty delegates to the state convention were to be named at Democratic town committee meetings in March. Before the Bailey forces really noticed what was up, over one hundred of these seats were won by McCarthy supporters—in Westport, New Canaan, Wilton, Weston, Woodbridge, Bethany. Next the McCarthy command went after the big cities.

Here the plan called for more complicated action. It was outlined by Geoff Cowan, a Yale Law School student, at a January meeting in the living room of Richard Sewall, a Yale English professor. The plan called for the democratic selection of rival slates of delegates to Hartford, and for petitions signed by 5% of the registered Democrats asking for Party primaries to decide between these slates and the slates put out by the regular organization. It was quickly accepted and quickly carried out. By the necessary deadline in early March, the right to hold primaries had been gained in thirty cities and towns, including New Haven, Hartford, New Bedford, New Britain, Stamford, Greenwich, and Hamden. The gauntlet had been thrown down.

Until the President’s spectacular withdrawal on March 31, the “regular” slates were viewed as “Johnson” slates because of Bailey’s announced position. But by April 10, the day the primaries were held, the “regular” slates were being called “uncommitted” because of the President’s decision not to run. It was too soon for it to be clear to John Bailey “what you gotta do,” despite New Hampshire and Wisconsin. (In February, Bailey had expressed irritation with Senator Ribicoff for proclaiming a “neutral” position for himself. “Neutral against whom?” Bailey snorted. Now it was Ribicoff’s turn. “Uncommitted to whom?” he is said to have inquired.)

The McCarthy forces knew where their commitment lay, and they persuaded their man to come into the state, a week before the primaries, for rallies in Hartford’s “Bushel” and New Haven’s Arena. Landing at Bradley Field just north of Hartford, the Senator’s airport press conference did not endear him to the King. “I’ve always thought,” he
remarked in response to a question, “that John Bailey might turn out to be like the Wizard of Oz: you pull aside the curtain and you find only a voice.” Whether in Oz or Camelot, Bailey was not on hand in Hartford that day—and Governor John Dempsey made no gesture of greeting or hospitality, nor did Mayor Lee of New Haven that evening. The Freeze was on. In Connecticut, at the Round Table, it is understood that the Freeze means “Don’t do anything until the word comes from the King.” Only Abe Ribicoff was strong enough, it turned out in June, to express his own convictions.

Four thousand supporters of McCarthy assembled in Hartford that day, six thousand more in New Haven that night. The Senator has since referred to these April turnouts, which came early in his campaign before the crowds had become large and responsive, as among the high points of his spring rounds. Certainly they had an inspirational effect on the morale of the McCarthy workers and probably some effect on the results at the polls a week later. In any event, the McCarthy slates were returned victorious in another string of towns across the state—adding one hundred and forty-five more delegates determined to vote for Senator McCarthy at the state convention. The victory in many towns, notably New Haven and New Britain, was unexpected and jolted the Bailey forces. For the first time in his regime, many of his favorite Knights were not going to be seated among the delegations fanned out in the “Bushel” audience when Bailey’s lieutenants convened the convention in June.

In popular terms, the McCarthy victory in the Connecticut primary was even more significant. Approximately 44% of the Democrats voting in the thirty cities that April day had indicated a preference for the Senator from Minnesota.

In the weeks that followed, the McCarthy entrants in the Hartford tournament made careful preparations. They met in New Haven one day in May to rehearse their strategy and to make assignments of the roles they would play in the Hartford convention. Almost three hundred people gathered that day from all parts of the state at the Yale Law School Auditorium to work in panel sessions and then to hear Congressman Robert Kastenmeier from Wisconsin tell the story of the glories achieved in that state. They also listened to Joe Duffey present a well considered plan for long-range maintenance of the position of the McCarthy supporters in the Connecticut Democratic apparatus. And before they went home they contributed a total of over $10,000, which was sent that weekend to Oregon and California.
Just as the April primary had been jarred by the assassination of Martin Luther King, which took place five days earlier, so the Hartford convention in mid-June was thrown into turmoil by the assassination of Robert Kennedy. But again it was the Bailey forces who were to be left in the greater disarray. The McCarthy supporters knew what they wanted and proceeded to do what they had come there to do: to make every effort to win fair representation among the forty-four delegates to go to Chicago in the light of the widening McCarthy support in the state.

The strategy followed in Hartford was simple: to try to secure a vote, if not on the main issue of proportional representation, then on some minor issue that would permit the size of the McCarthy contingent to be measured.

The attempt to propose a resolution in the Rules Committee the night before the convention, met with failure, although a minority position was recorded and was reported out before the convention the next day. And it was on this resolution offered by the minority McCarthy group that the only chance of measuring our support was effected. John Bailey had estimated that strength at 225 of the 958 delegates present. Joe Duffey estimated it at 250. When the roll call was completed on the resolution, 282 people had voted for the McCarthy position. John Bailey and his Knights could be seen on the platform poring over the adding machine tapes. Joe Duffey and Anne Wexler were figuring with pencil and paper from the other side of the platform. The arithmetic spoke for itself: 282 votes represented 30% of the delegates present; 30% of 44 is 13. From that moment in the convention the McCarthy supporters demanded thirteen of the forty-four delegate seats to Chicago.

As the afternoon droned on, the maneuvering began in the small back rooms. Bailey began with five delegate seats; Duffey stuck to thirteen. After two hours of conferences, some of them conducted in the backstage wings, others on the lawn outside, many of them broken off and then continued, the positions began to shift a little. But Bailey refused to go above nine, and Duffey, who had secured a caucus vote to go as low as eleven, and then ten, flatly refused to settle for nine.

In the end, John Bailey tossed a piece of paper on the table in front of Joe Duffey in an upstairs room. “Write out the names of your nine delegates,” he said, “and let me have it in fifteen minutes for presentation to the convention.” It was as direct as that. “You gotta do what you gotta do.” But Joe Duffey didn’t have to do it and he knew it. After
one more parley among his own people, he asked for time from the rostrum to present the McCarthy view. In quiet and considered language he gave the reasons for the decision not to settle for nine, and then he and Anne Wexler walked down off the platform and up the aisle, with 282 McCarthy delegates falling in behind them. The walkout received national attention. It was instrumental in the decision in New York state the next week to follow suit when, again, the McCarthy supporters were deprived of the just number of delegates in terms of the popular strength they represented.

Later, at the alleged insistence of Hubert Humphrey, Bailey renewed negotiations with Duffey. The McCarthy supporters were told that, if they settled for nine, the nine could include two to sit on the Chicago Convention Committee, one on the essential Rules Committee. After some days of negotiations and conferences with his supporters, Duffey accepted the nine, but reserved the right to further protest. The decision to continue the protest by entering four more delegates as a challenge to the Credentials Committee was made in late June. Thus it is that Connecticut is sending at least nine, and perhaps thirteen, delegates to Chicago pledged to Senator McCarthy. Chicago represents the Big Tournament. How the Connecticut McCarthy delegates will be treated there, what lances will be broken, and what the consequences will be in the long run for the Democrats of Connecticut, and for the Democratic Party, remain to be seen.

Whatever is to be decided will be decided in large part by John Bailey, the man devoted to winning and devoted to necessity. “You gotta do what you gotta do.” But what has to be done in Chicago also remains to be seen.

Beyond that is the larger question. Mark Twain stated it in the preface of his Connecticut Yankee: “The question as to whether there is such a thing as divine right of kings is not settled in this book. It was found too difficult.”