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Joseph Rauh

ADA and McCarthy

"If ONE STANDS FOR AN IDEA one must stand up for the man who espouses it." With these words and because of its long-time stand in favor of an immediate political settlement of the Vietnam war, Americans for Democratic Action last February endorsed Senator Eugene McCarthy and became his first organized political support. What appeared to many as an exercise in futility in those dark days before New Hampshire could have been predicted by anyone understanding ADA's politics of ideas and ideology and knowing how deep-seated was its opposition to the war.

The summer and early fall of 1967 had been a time of grim despair in Liberal political circles. President Johnson was continuing to escalate the most unpopular and unnecessary war in American history. Years of neglect of the cities and the hopelessness on the home front while the war continued were producing riots on the streets. The young and the militant could find no hope in political processes as a method of change. Their despair appeared confirmed by the absence of any major figure ready to challenge an incumbent President whose political skill, power, and ruthlessness seemed to awe all potential rivals, even including a man of such undaunted courage as Robert F. Kennedy. On the other side of the political road, Rockefeller played Hamlet—and with far less reason.

But appearances were deceiving. One man was not awed by the cliché that an incumbent President has a lock and chain on the renomination of his Party. While the press and the politicians focused attention on Senators Kennedy and McGovern as the most likely challengers, Senator McCarthy quietly measured the extent of the hostility to President Johnson and his war and the possibility of others taking the leadership in an intra-Party rebellion. Finding no one else who would make the challenge, he decided to take the plunge himself, and on November 30th he made the public announcement of his candidacy.

The next sixty days did not seem to go well. The polls showed Johnson ahead by four or five to one; one network commentator speaking

from New Hampshire said McCarthy would be lucky to get five or ten percent of the vote. The press announced that there was no hope of closing the gap, that low-key campaigning could never succeed, that the decision to enter the New Hampshire primary was a disaster. A friend of mine, warning against an ADA endorsement of McCarthy, told me that "Gene's entry into the race is the greatest thing that could have happened to Johnson; he's so weak he makes even President Johnson look good."

It was against this background that the ADA Board met on February 10th to chart its course. At this point President Johnson overplayed his hand. John Roche, the President's intellectual-in-residence and a former ADA National Chairman, and Gus Tyler, political director for the International Ladies Garment Workers and spokesman for the pro-Johnson labor forces on the Board, started a public fight against our endorsing Senator McCarthy. They turned what would have been a routine event into the major political story of last February. Threats of resignation, of financial withdrawals, of ADA's end, made the ADA Board action the political center of attraction. When ADA's National Board finally expressed its deep-seated hostility to Johnson and the war by quite predictably endorsing McCarthy, the story was on the front page of every newspaper, and the Senator had won his first major victory over the President.

What the ADA faced at its National Convention in May was something quite different from mere opposition to President Johnson, opposition which had escalated with every escalation of the war. By the time of ADA's Convention the McCarthy campaign, powerfully augmented by the entry into the race of Robert Kennedy, had driven President Johnson from the field. Now there were three liberal candidates in the race, one of whom, Vice President Humphrey, was a founder and former National Chairman and National Vice Chairman of ADA, as well as the personal friend of most of ADA's leadership. Yet the Convention did not hesitate. With almost no dissent, it reaffirmed its endorsement and support of Senator McCarthy in these words: "Important as was Senator McCarthy's role in forcing a change of course in Vietnam and in obviating the deadly prospect of a Johnson-Nixon race this fall, he has done even more. Senator McCarthy has made political participation a viable course for thousands of politically alienated Americans, both young and old. He has talked sense to the American people on foreign and domestic issues. He has proven a standard bearer by whose side we are proud to stand."

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It was not and it is not easy for ADA to oppose Hubert Humphrey. It was in sorrow rather than anger that we watched him become the evermore enthusiastic spokesman for the disastrous policies in Vietnam, with their corollary of neglect at home. But we recognized that the politics of ideas and ideology left us no choice except to support the candidate who stood with American liberalism on the foremost issues of the day—reconciliation abroad and reconciliation at home. In that spirit we go to the Democratic National Convention to battle for the nomination of Senator Eugene McCarthy. We expect to win—but win, lose, or draw, don't say it isn't fun to follow principle the whole way.