

Muskie: A Sketch from

by Joseph H. Nicholson, Jr.

America is now examining Edmund Muskie, our would-be leader. His appeal to us is visceral. He is gentle father, rugged individualist, immigrant's son—a Lincoln, tall and silent, come again to a land divided.

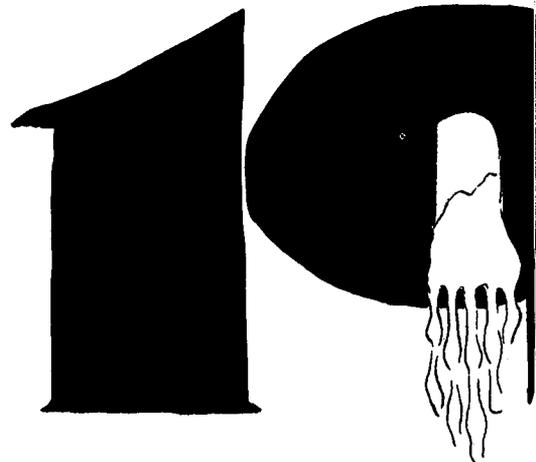
Perhaps this Muskie is merely the creation of our need for a new national belief, but somehow he does not betray the belief as quickly as most politicians. He naturally conveys America's distant heroes without the corniness of Johnson or the phoniness of Nixon. For him the stale cigar smoke that stains other professional politicians has never adhered.

Where Nixon's platitudes provoke derision, Muskie's similar platitudes receive a favorable response. He can get away with telling a Boston audience "if we all once again assume the morality, the dignity, and the clarity of purpose that have been our heritage, together we can lift the spirit of America," a statement that differs from "lift of a driving dream" only in the reaction it provoked. He can commend the American Legion for "a splendid commitment to make right the master of might" and warn graduates at a high-school commencement about "the dangers and pitfalls which surrounds you," such as "relaxed moral standards of personal behavior."

The question is not whether Muskie is real or plastic, but whether his style of leadership is suited to the presidency. I had a chance to work on

his staff for several months and observe him from the inside. My assessment is by no means definitive—it is impossible at this point, for instance, to know what Muskie will do about foreign policy issues. He has always shunned a leading role in this area, and as a senator clings to the fields of his expertise—pollution, some housing issues, and potato farming. He has not made up his mind on many other larger questions, either. But the way he makes decisions, and how he reacts under the pressures of his campaign, may be a small indicator of the way he would run the country as President.

Muskie is a counterpuncher, a defensive person who does not like to swing until he has been attacked. Probably it goes back to his first years of school in Rumford, Maine, shortly after World War I ended. There were strong prejudices against Eastern Europeans. His Yankee classmates rid-



Joseph Nicholson is a Congressional Fellow. His first assignment was with Senator Muskie's staff. He now works for Rep. Paul McCloskey.

the Inside



iculed his Polish ancestry and his Roman Catholic beliefs. His father, an immigrant tailor, told him to disregard people who called him a "dumb Polack." But he was a sensitive youth. He became withdrawn and it wasn't until high school that he began to form friendships outside his family. Muskie's sensitivity has changed very little during his years as a state legislator, governor, senator, vice-presidential candidate, and presidential contender. He shuns attacking others and he cannot abide criticism. He is a deliberate, cautious man who would rather ponder the alternatives than espouse a cause. And so, the demands of his presidential bid are uncomfortable.

A rare public display of the toning down he does in private occurred when he spoke at a crowded California press conference recently: "The text which you saw was not an authorized text of my speech. It was

VINT LAWRENCE

released without my approval. I do not say the President showed 'utter disregard' of Congress in invading Laos. . . I would say he showed 'disregard.'" This rejection of his staff's wording on the Laos invasion is not an isolated occurrence on the Muskie staff, where "immoral war" becomes "tragic war," "view with alarm" becomes "view with concern," and "I oppose" becomes "I question."

"How Dare They?"

Faltering as he can be in advocacy, few can approach Muskie's eloquence under attack. His voice rises in pious rage, his eyes blaze, his jowls quiver, and his finger strikes out against the air. Such angry denunciations of opponents have often preceded his election victories in Maine. When then Senator Frederick G. Payne charged him in the 1958 election campaign with favoring handouts and increased government spending, Muskie accused Payne of "the lowest type of politics." That Muskie, who went on to defeat Payne in his first election to the Senate, could react with genuine outrage to such a mild criticism attests to the boyhood sensitivity he has never overcome. Richard Nixon might have known what to expect last election eve when Muskie spoke on national television to denounce the President for lying about Democrats. He spoke while still livid over the White House's direction of a campaign which placed ads in Maine papers questioning Muskie's attitude toward extremism and violence. "Honorable men have been slandered," the Senator began in righteous indignation. "They imply that Democratic candidates. . . actually favor violence. . . and champion the wrongdoer. That is a lie. And the American people know it is a lie. How dare they. . . ?"

The staff with which Muskie surrounded himself over the years reflected his cautious, competent, but unimaginative way of doing things. Until the presidential campaign forced him to change, the Senator handled all his

affairs through his long-time administrative assistant, Donald E. Nicoll. He used Nicoll to shield himself, to hire and fire staff members, and sometimes to settle his disputes with other senators. However, Nicoll insisted on making even the most minute decisions himself, and he wasn't able to handle the staff when it began expanding. After hesitating for more than a year, Muskie demoted Nicoll to research chief, brought in several new advisers, and allowed some of the old staff to be fired.

And none of the new advisers made him more uncomfortable than Daniel Lewis, his chief legislative assistant. Lewis was just the sort of smart upstart, an inquisitive 27-year-old product of Yale Law School, whom Muskie would never have tolerated in years past. Indeed, he wouldn't even have met him because Nicoll wouldn't have let him past the reception room. But Muskie felt that this was the kind of creature that Bobby Kennedy had had and he figured he needed one, too. He needed someone to provide him with the bold, innovative ideas presidential candidates were expected to spout. It was not really his style. So, not surprisingly, Muskie often found himself equivocating or backtracking after he gave one of Dan's strongly worded speeches.

On his first day in the office, Dan walked in with his shoulder-length hair flowing behind him and an armload of imaginative legislative ideas. Shunning the mail which the other legislative assistants spend their time answering, Dan prepared a notebook full of one-page proposals covering all the major national issues and then some. Muskie gasped and told him it would take four senators to do all that. Muskie was befuddled by Dan's pace and the boldness of his proposals. He got Dan to cut his hair, but he had more difficulty coping with his ideas. Dan wrote a floor statement about defoliation and "indiscriminate bombing" in Vietnam. "Is this accurate? Do you mean to say that this has

been going on?" the Senator asked to Lewis' astonishment. After Muskie spoke in the Senate, GOP Minority Leader Hugh Scott stood up to say he was surprised to hear Muskie talking that way about our military activities in Vietnam.

Mr. Clean

Like his old staff, Muskie's legislative record over 12 years in the Senate can most charitably be described as competent. The record is virtually limited to areas of Muskie's committee assignments, most notably pollution and housing. Critics view Muskie's major legislative achievements as largely Pyrrhic victories, watered-down laws which stand in the way of more substantial measures. The pollution subcommittee, which Muskie has chaired since its creation in 1963, produced the greatest number of his bills, and, more importantly, gave him his first foothold on the public mind. The Senator worked diligently while the subcommittee was still obscure, and he capitalized on his work when ecology developed into the motherhood issue of the 1970s. Muskie became the Senate's Mr. Clean. Few senators dared vote against his bills to make the water and air cleaner. However, Senator Jennings Randolph, whose Public Works Committee encompasses the pollution subcommittee, weakened Muskie's bills in committee. Randolph, a West Virginian who maintains close ties with coal magnates and other major polluters, has regularly co-sponsored Muskie's antipollution bills after the damage was done, which has resulted in Ralph Nader's accusing Muskie of favoring polluters over the public. "Senator Muskie has never seemed inclined toward taking a tough stand against private industry," a Nader task-force report stated. "Muskie, an extremely astute politician who by temperament avoids conflict and unfavorable odds, was influenced by a desire to get the bill through Congress with a minimum of acrimony."

If Muskie has not taken tough stands on his own bills, he has been even more reluctant to take stands on national issues outside his narrow realm of interest. Perhaps this is a valid policy for a senator. But as a presidential candidate, Muskie's old reluctance to say anything has turned into extreme caution about what he does say.

In an attempt to show national leadership, Muskie chartered a plane last year to attend the funeral of a black student killed at Jackson State College by Mississippi police. In the past, the Senator had shunned many opportunities to play such a role, saying, "I'm not going to twist and bend myself out of shape." But he knew he wouldn't be nominated for doing nothing. "I should be more alert in responding to opportunities to show leadership," he acknowledged. So when Charles Evers, mayor of Fayette, Mississippi, appealed to Muskie for an expression of concern by white leaders about the Jackson murders, he responded. The trip drew favorable national press coverage, but it provoked a rare torrent of adverse mail from Mainers who felt that Muskie wasn't "being himself." They may have been right. Muskie's thinking is a product of his 57 years living in and representing a state which is nearly all white. As a natural introvert whose friendships have often revolved around his membership in such organizations as the Knights of Columbus and the American Legion, he has experienced little to help him relate to blacks. And Muskie heeded his constituents' criticism, avoiding further efforts to advance racial justice and retreating behind traditional platitudes about equality for all men. In fact, he even softened during delivery a moderate speech I wrote on civil rights to avoid the words "black," "white," and "integration." It became a mushy thing about brotherhood and working together. The Baton Rouge audience applauded warmly.

Attack followed by retreat were Muskie's tactics again when he made

public this spring several documents showing that the FBI had conducted surveillance of 40 to 60 demonstrations on Earth Day in 1970. Lewis wrote a strongly worded speech pointing out that the FBI was not authorized under the Constitution to conduct general political surveillance. The mail, however, ran four to one against the attack, and Muskie spent the next several days chastising his top aides for moving him too far left from the Democratic Party's center. On the day following the FBI speech, he received a phone call the staff felt certain was prompted by a vindictive J. Edgar Hoover. It was columnist Robert Novak, inquiring about the Senator's endorsement of the massive peace rally on April 24 sponsored by the National Peace Action Coalition. Hanging up, Muskie turned, shaken and angry, to his chief of staff Berl Bernhard and me: "There are Trotskyites and Communists in that group, he says. And he's going to write a column about my endorsing them. He's smearing me. I've said I don't like these goddam endorsements. . . . I never should have endorsed anything." The syndicated column appeared several days later under the headline "Muskie and the Trotskyites."

Muskie and the Fatigue Freaks

The Senator was visited by 10 constituents from the 1,000 Vietnam veterans who were camping on the Capitol mall to protest the war. He met them, determined not to allow himself to become further identified with the protests, yet knowing he could not afford to have it become known that he had rebuffed the veterans. He shook hands with the determined young men as they filed solemnly into his office, a high-ceilinged room with a collection of plaques, city keys, and miscellaneous mementos which give it the formal, sterile air of a museum. The vets filled the chairs and sat cross-legged on the floor before a large mantelpiece which had sported, until its recent disappearance, a bronze

medal engraved with the face of President Lyndon Johnson. The base of the vanished medal contained the inscription "To E. S. M. For his vigilance in Vietnam. Sept. 67 L. B. J." It commemorated Muskie's service on the President's Commission of Election Observers which certified that the election of General Thieu and Air Marshal Ky was an exercise in true democracy.

Seating himself behind his huge oak desk, Muskie spoke nervously between audible gasps of air. I had never seen him so uneasy. And the veterans began with the question he feared: Why couldn't he visit their mall encampment like Kennedy and Hart?

"I can't, it's my goddam schedule, that's my problem," he said, spreading his hands wide to show that he was a helpless victim of his schedule. "I'm meeting with three groups at the same time and I've got to vote," he continued with a pained smile, beseeching them to let him off the hook on this one.

"I'm not threatening. I want you to understand that," began one veteran, in a soft, slow monotone. "But I think you should know that we've been trained to be professional killers. We're not professional killers. But that's what we were trained to be. And there's a lot of guys down there with demolition training. And a lot of them are freaks. . . ."

"Yeah, a lot of freaks," another veteran seconded.

"And if we come here, veterans, guys who fought in this war, and tell you people that it's wrong," the veteran went on, "and if we go away and still nothing happens. . . What I'm saying is that we're going to stop this thing. We'd like to do it with non-violence. But we'll do it one way or the other. . . ."

During this, Muskie seemed to retreat into himself. His eyes became withdrawn, his mouth tight. He listened intently while the veteran finished. "I know, I know," came the Senator's deepest mumble, the resonant reassurances arriving at measured

intervals. "Yes, I understand." He spoke of the veterans' many friends in Washington, the tragedy of the war, the need to end it, a dozen euphemisms he had mouthed daily for months.

"Senator, will you come visit us?" a short ex-Marine asked, his high impatient voice charged with emotion. "Tomorrow? At night? Whenever you like? This doesn't mean anything. But when we see you down there that'll mean something to us."

"Well, yes," Muskie gave in quietly if reluctantly. "When should I come? Tomorrow morning? How about 7:30 before I come to work?"

"That would be fine," the short Marine smiled.

John McEvoy, the new administrative assistant, disappeared into his adjoining office while the conversation continued. Reappearing, he slipped Muskie a note advising him that if he waited until the morning for the visit every television crew in Washington would be there to film him with the mob of radical veterans. Looking up, the Senator asked, "Well, when shall I visit you? Shall we go tomorrow? Or do you want to go down there right now?"

The decision was made to go immediately. McEvoy led the veterans out a different way, attempting to bypass a CBS film crew which had arrived in the office. He was furious when he found that the crew had gone into the hall and was filming the Senator's procession down Capitol Hill.

If Muskie is anything, he is a consummate politician, a man skilled in the art of persuasion. He can draw a favorable response from almost any group if he first mixes with them informally, sensing their tenor and concerns. With a handshake, a self-effacing joke, compliments, sometimes platitudes, he can turn a potentially hostile crowd into a favorable one. This is just what he did with a brief speech to the 1,000 veterans and their supporters on the Capitol mall. He complimented, he joked, but mostly

he spoke with solemn self-assurance of their right to be there and the justice of their antiwar cause. The scraggly army applauded warmly. One black ex-GI watching him depart observed, "Man, he rapped real good."

A Poor, Honest Fund-Raiser

When Senator Muskie pauses between his endless speeches and strategy huddles, the aspect of the campaign about which he frets the most is fundraising. In recent weeks he has come close to panic as repeated fundraising efforts have failed. The campaign has sunk into debt, and Muskie has been forced to drop about 40 of some 70 staff members who had hustled through the swank office in downtown Washington. There is a bitter feeling among some of the staff that Hubert Humphrey and other rivals for the nomination have sabotaged fundraising efforts with top Democratic fat cats.

The financially desperate situation

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has made Muskie particularly vulnerable to the painful ritual of raising campaign funds, the reluctant selling of bits and pieces of himself by a candidate. Muskie figures he needs at least \$8 million before the convention and more than twice as much after it. But his financial backers would be wise not to start viewing him as a potential White House errand boy. His dearth of financial means attests to his scrupulous personal honesty during years of public service. He also dislikes being run by other people. On important questions, he insists on making the final decision himself.

Ironically, the same Ed Muskie who insists on making his own decisions displays incredible naivete at times. On a campaign trip to California in 1968, his aides were surprised to learn the Senator didn't know about Cesar Chavez's grape strike. "Grape strike? You've got to be kidding," Muskie told his startled briefers.

Such things as Muskie's naivete, and, more important, his reluctance to take strong public stands, are reflected most tragically in his record on the Vietnam war. The war has brought forth all of Muskie's weaknesses, his indecision, and his waffling. It has even shown him putting partisan politics above principle.

Muskie once supported the war and is now a dove, but he cannot be blamed for this switch of position any more than the rest of the nation that has changed its mind during the last five years. One can wonder, however, about a man who expressed doubts about the war in two private letters to President Johnson, after which he supported the war in public testimony before the Democratic Party Platform Committee hearings in 1968 and again before the full convention as a speaker for the majority Vietnam plank.

After the party running the war changed in 1968, Muskie finally went public with his criticism. Forgetting an earlier denigration of dissenters, Muskie endorsed the Vietnam Moratorium Day observances in 1969 as a

"constructive way to intelligently discuss Vietnam." He decided that the Thieu-Ky regime did not merit support as a democratic government. But he also openly admitted that the change to a Republican administration was part of the reason his views on the war changed. "Parties do have their institutional role with respect to each other. Nixon criticized President Johnson for some of the things he's doing himself," he said. "That's the basis of our party system." It was callous defense of his own partisanship at a time when Americans were losing more than 50,000 of their relatives and friends in a wrongful war.

Breaking the Lance

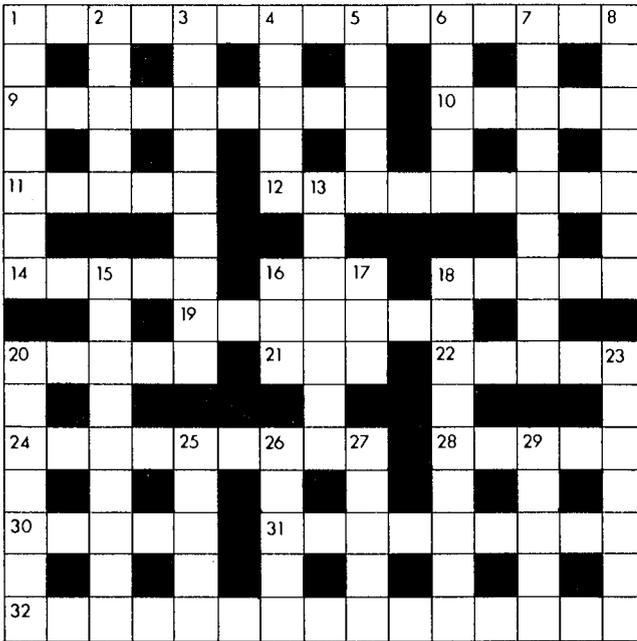
These glimpses of Muskie do not form the basis for any conclusive assessment of what he would be like as President. Politicians have been known to grow as the roles they filled became more demanding. It is clear, though, that the qualities for which Muskie is known as a senator, and those that he has shown in the campaign thus far, do not fit comfortably with the nation's need for strong leadership. This is somewhat ironic when one considers that the very reasons Muskie became attractive as a candidate—his reticence, his reluctance to be identified too quickly with a specific point of view—may be the basis for the problems he would have as President.

After his switch on Vietnam, the Senator was asked by a newsman why he hasn't been out front and center on the important issues, why he had not broken his lance at any really major cause. Muskie's reaction to this criticism: "It might be one I would make myself. . . it is a question of style, and this is something I have got to answer for myself. I do think that a man who is a candidate for President ought to be willing to assert that kind of leadership, 'the break the lance' kind of leadership. I don't know whether I am adapted to it. We'll take a look at it."

Indeed we will. ■

The Political Puzzle

by John Barclay



Across

1. Prediction in inviting Wes Hall over, come next week. (2, 5, 8)
9. Task to use police force (6, 3,)
10. Kind of man or air. (5)
11. One bald remark. (2, 3)
12. Look round for riches, pal! (9)
14. Where the French noble is, there is money. (5)
16. It isn't wholly accurate to call his wife unsavory. (3)
18. Wild animal heavily laden. (5)
19. These are potent enough to rile six men. (7)
20. Lots of papers carry smear. (5)
21. No pig hoping for a badge. (3)
22. Annoying activists on Capitol steps. (5)
24. 435 Congressmen do pretty well at poker. (4, 5)
28. Mr. Moore had a girl. (5)
30. She put continent in the sun. (5)
31. First signs of spring? (9)
32. Pledge of allegiance? (4, 2, 2, 5, 2)

Down

6. Look it up, or down, it's the same. (5)
7. Roots cave keeps us warm. (9)
8. He didn't heed lax rule on not breathing. (7)
13. Substitutes hang around in ripe sox. (7)
15. This ruler was rich slave. (7, 2)
16. Follows Phil to the edge. (3)
17. Type of type. (3)
18. Hope Spanish raze panes. (9)
20. Negative fur sale. (7)
23. Ian leaves antipastos behind at the inn. (5, 2)
25. French king in her life. (5)
26. In the past you set out to do it. (3, 2)
27. They say all men are. (5)
29. With nerve, you won't see Mexico. (5)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 18.