



Long after politics, George McGovern now fighting world hunger

By Elisabeth Mistretta | Daily Herald Staff

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Dozens of suburban high school teachers took on the role of pupils Friday, when former U.S. Senator and presidential candidate George McGovern turned the tables and give them a lesson in living history.

McGovern visited the Constitutional Rights Foundation of Chicago's annual education conference, held at the McDonald's campus in Oak Brook, to discuss his new book on Abraham Lincoln, teach political lessons and reveal what life holds after office.

"It's hard for me to understand people who say history is dull; I always think they must have had a bad history teacher," said McGovern, 87.

A Democrat who lost the 1972 presidential election to Richard Nixon, McGovern represented South Dakota in the Senate from 1963 to 1981. Before that, he served as a decorated bomber pilot in World War II and later earned a doctorate in American history and government at Northwestern University in Evanston.

He told the teachers his years in office taught him to respect a "holy trio" of professions he admires above all others: teachers, journalists and politicians.

"Don't let anybody convince you that all politics is rotten, that nobody in public life can be trusted," he said.

To prove his point, McGovern explained that he teamed up with an unlikely ally after stepping out of the political spotlight: another former U.S. senator and GOP presidential nominee, Bob Dole, with whom McGovern "differed bitterly" during the Vietnam War. Today, they work side by side to provide school lunch programs worldwide.

"This is my passion now," McGovern said. "I hope I live long enough with Sen. Dole that we will reach all of these kids. We now reach about 22 million. That's not enough, but it's a beginning."

He said there are about 100 million hungry children in the world whom they hope to reach through the George McGovern-Robert Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program.

McGovern's passion was sparked in 1961, when he was appointed by President Kennedy as the worldwide director of the Food for Peace program. In 2001, McGovern was appointed United Nations ambassador on world hunger, and he and Dole were named the 2008 World Food Prize Laureates for their work.

Even the book on Lincoln was pushed off a bit because of his humanitarian work, McGovern said. But ultimately he was honored for the opportunity to write about the president he admires most - and glad to remind teachers why Lincoln should inspire them.

"Lincoln became our greatest president and, to achieve that, he had to overcome a lot of handicaps," he said. "The biggest of those was a lack of formal education."



One on one with George McGovern

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Once known as the Democratic peace candidate who lost his presidential bid to Richard Nixon in 1972, George McGovern still has strong opinions on what's happening in today's political arena. This is an edited version of his Q&A with the Daily Herald.

Q. How do you feel about the current state of the economy?

A. "I think President Obama is making some correct moves. I liked that (Cash for Clunkers) program where you could trade in an old junker for a new car, not only because it stimulated the automotive industry, which is one of our biggest employers, but also because it helped get many cars that are not environmentally sound off the road. I thought that was a very good move. And the funds he's given to students' education and small business, I think that is already starting to show some results. Not huge, but progress. I sense we've hit the bottom and it's going to slowly go up from here."

Q. That said, what do you think of President Obama's overall performance so far?

A. "I think he's done well. I only see one warning flag in my mind, which is putting more troops into Afghanistan. It's hopeless for us to try and build a centralized state government. The current man leading the country (Afghan President Hamid Karzai) is corrupt and I think everyone can agree he stole the recent election. I don't think American soldiers can make up for his lack of reliability."

Q. And how do you feel about our military actions in Iraq?

A. "We never should have gone in. I did what I could before we put one single soldier in there to speak out against that. We went there even though Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11, but (George W.) Bush and (Dick) Cheney seemed determined to go there. And there were no nuclear weapons. They had to know that. I think they misled the Congress and the American people. I am not a pacifist. I am proud of my service in World War II as a bomber pilot. But with Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, I think we have made dreadful mistakes in all three wars. In addition, look at all the money that could have been saved. Trillions of dollars."

Q. With all that's happening with the Iraq, Afghanistan and the recession, do you think the state of our country is divided?

A. "I think the No. 1 domestic issue is health care, and I don't think we're so divided on this issue. Polls show that a majority of people want what every other advanced country in the world has, which is some sort of national health care. If I had my druthers, which I don't, I'd extend Medicare to all Americans. It's not (broken), it's a wonderful program, and I've been on it for 25 years. And even if you do have a good private policy, if you develop a long-term illness like cancer, heart disease or diabetes, the company may cancel your policy. We need to do something to cover the millions of Americans who can't afford health insurance and the working people."

Q. Anything other wisdom to share from your political standpoint?

A. "I don't agree with the people always saying the government is the enemy. Our government defends us against invasion, provides transportation, education and these wonderful national parks. We've got maybe the best government in the world and I wouldn't prefer to live anywhere else."