

For the Love Of Politics

By Myra MacPherson

Frank Mankiewicz and the man he is trying to get elected President are as dissimilar in style as their dissimilar childhoods might have foretold.

There was George McGovern, the son of a preacher, growing up in a South Dakota town that reminds him of the aimless small town-ness of "The Last Picture Show." And there was Mankiewicz, two years younger, growing up in Hollywood—the son of Herman Mankiewicz, the ascerbic observer of the human scene who gave us "Citizen Kane" and the Marx Brothers' "Duck Soup."

While McGovern was sneaking off to his clandestine "flicks," and maybe an ice cream soda, Frank Mankiewicz knew mansions with swimming pools and saw his parents partying with people like Ben Hecht, Dorothy Parker, the Marx Brothers, Orson Welles and William Randolph Hearst.

Herman Mankiewicz—Hecht one called him the Central Park West Voltaire—was one of the leaders among the New York expatriate wits in the '20s and '30s who hated Hollywood, the town that made them rich. He left his son a legacy of wit, a dislike of Hollywood and a love of politics that drew Frank Mankiewicz to Washington, Robert Kennedy and ultimately—because of Kennedy—to McGovern.

Mankiewicz talks reluctantly and sparingly of his Hollywood youth. "My father convinced me Hollywood was not a real world. I don't remember a single dinner table conversation that involved his work. It was usually politics," said Mankiewicz the other day, wolfing down an egg salad sandwich and answering phone calls in his cramped office. "My father was a frustrated political columnist."

A heavy drinker and gambler, the elder Mankiewicz had an irreverence that rankled movie moguls. Once, being punished, he was told to write a Rin Tin Tin script. In Mankiewicz's version a house is on fire and the dog is carrying a baby *into* the flames. Mankiewicz may have been the originator of that famous caustic one-liner, when he said of Orson Welles (who claimed credit for the Kane script when it won an academy award), "There but for the grace of God, goes God."

Frank grew up in an atmosphere of urbanity and overachievement as well as one of strong family love, fostered by his Jewish mother. (His father, the son of a Jewish immigrant who became a professor, was an athiest).

Frank's mother, now widowed, has on her mantle the Citizen Kane Oscar and the latest "Who's Who in America" marked at her sons' listings (Frank's brother Don wrote TV pilots for "Marcus Welby" and "Ironside" as well as a novel).

Although Herman's fame was declining when he hit 40, his son Frank, was not even nationally known until he was 44—four years ago. As Robert Kennedy's aide, he carried the news to the press, his face creased in sorrow, that Kennedy was dead.

Before that, Mankiewicz ran unsuccessfully for the California legislature, was a newspaperman, a Beverly

Hills lawyer, a director of the Peace Corps in Peru, and Robert Kennedy's press secretary from 1966.

Mankiewicz uses his wit to hide his deep feelings and as a foil—successfully evading questions by the press, who clearly enjoy the humor, if not the lack of substantive information.

The other day he ducked a question about Philadelphia Mayor Frank L. Rizzo backing a Republican with the same crack he made about former Treasury Secretary John Connally—"his defection to the Republicans raised the intellectual level of both parties."

This week, he used characteristic understatement when McGovern's running mate, Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton, disclosed he had been hospitalized, under psychiatric care on three occasions.

While others were saying it was a disaster, Mankiewicz was saying, "It is not a plus."

Stung by a report in the paper that young McGovern aides wished Mankiewicz's power diluted because he had become "too Machiavellian," he nevertheless cracked, "As I recall, he ran a couple of successful campaigns. It's worth it all now, if three centuries from now, they're saying somebody's too 'Manwiewiczian.'"

Mankiewicz is complex enough to have been called a variety of adjectives besides Machiavellian—cool, pragmatic, brilliant, arrogant, vain, charming, testy, condescending, aloof, petty.

There are those who praise him as a political maneuverer and others who feel that he and other aides, are not as sharp as they should be in some instances. Some critics say Mankiewicz and other staff members made a disastrous goof in not checking out Eagleton, but Mankiewicz takes the position that they did all they could; that they checked out the only rumors they had heard—that Eagleton had a drinking problem. Mankiewicz said they were false.

Often considered "cold blooded" about politics, Mankiewicz, felt McGovern's only chance in 1968, according to the book "McGovern" by Robert Anson, was to "provoke Humphrey into committing a fatal gaffe, namely disowning the Johnson war policy." If that happened, Mankiewicz thought, "the ego of Lyndon Johnson would be so wounded that he would 'pull the rug out from under Hubert.'"

It was also Mankiewicz who suggested in 1968 that Sen. Abraham Ribicoff—who nominated McGovern that year and this year, too—to throw away his clichés and "say something about what's going on in the streets."

Ribicoff brought the convention—and Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago—to a roar when he took that advice and said, "With George McGovern, we wouldn't have Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago."

When Mankiewicz is preoccupied, he brushes past friends without saying hello. Holly, his wife of 20 years, recalls "When I met him I didn't like him. I admired him but I thought he was Mr. Know It All. I knew he was very, very smart, but I didn't think he knew much about humility."

In addition to his wit, his wife found "great warmth," although she says she still thinks he's sometimes "vain." "He sure as hell can make me mad, but he never bores me," she says.

His rather homely face, with the deep circles under the eyes, the split in the front teeth, the jut-jawed smile, lights up with warmth when he wants to be charming. You can see the one-liners forming, as the eyes start to laugh before his face does.

As McGovern's political director, Mankiewicz travels with him. He gives the candidate the benefit of his judgment—but not, as he did with Kennedy—his urbane

one-liners. One aide said Mankiewicz tried that once and that it bombed because of McGovern's aw shucks delivery.

"His delivery with my words would be impossible," said Mankiewicz. "He's so genuine, so straight—just what the country wants," said Mankiewicz, who once kidded McGovern that the way to change his mild mannered image was to "get a rumor spread that someone at a cocktail party made a remark that you didn't like, and you gave him a quick karate chop that broke his arm."

While he avoids any introspective philosophizing about politics or why he's in it—"I've always just loved it"—Mankiewicz says, like other old Kennedy hands, he's working for the one man he thought could do the things Kennedy wanted done. Mankiewicz urged him to take over and run in 1968, only days after Kennedy was killed. He left a political column, a TV show and considerable money to go with McGovern last July, a time when his friends were laughing at McGovern's chances.

Mankiewicz can look injured and innocent when it is suggested that McGovern waffles on issues—"very little, very little"—or that Mankiewicz himself has told a political lie or two.

"He lied like hell about Bobby's condition when he was shot," said one newspaper friend of Mankiewicz, "but that was something he had to do."

Others thought Wednesday that Mankiewicz was fudging when he said that neither he nor McGovern knew the exact medical diagnosis of Eagleton's problem.

On the South Carolina credentials vote, Mankiewicz says McGovern aides "didn't sabotage the women. All we did was counter the tactical moves of Humphrey's 50 or so people who voted for it."

But Holly, who has an ingenuous quality of candor quite absent in most politicians' wives, said, "I don't think Frank handled that very delicately. Instead of denying the tactics on television, I asked him, why didn't you just say 'we had to do it'? Frank said, 'Jesus Christ, we can't tell the women that. They're so damn mad—that would only make them madder.'" Although she says her husband has "fewer standard male notions about women than any man I ever met," she adds, "he's not a woman."

Holly says he's all for women's lib, but joked when the movement first started, "My god, this is tremendous—you get to go to work and I get to cry."

This year has been tough on the family. Although Josh, 16, sometimes travels with his father, Ben, 5, is too young to understand why his father is not home more often.

Holly has been a secretary to the constant phone calls—"I wouldn't mind, if they just gave me time to brush my teeth." She stopped waiting dinners for her husband, "when I found out I was hollering at him every night."

When Mankiewicz has time to relax, he reads, often re-reading old favorites like Orwell and James Joyce. A baseball freak, Mankiewicz uses his photographic memory ("it's been invaluable in my life") to stump friends with sports trivia: "In 1945, what major league pitcher had his name on his jersey? Bill Voiselle—number 96—came from Ninety Six, South Carolina."

As a boy, he dreamed of being a baseball player—"all my fantasies use to involve being a baseball player—the ones that didn't involve girls."

Mankiewicz says that he wants to write a "good book" about Washington, and that he "might go back to practicing law. I've got eight years to think about that," he says, adding with a confident grin, "I assume McGovern will be President eight years."