

'Canuck' Episode: A '72 Dirty Trick

9/23/73

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Sen. Edmund S. Muskie sat in an anteroom off the Senate floor the other day, reminiscing about the political events of 1972. At the beginning of that year, he was reading polls that told him he was likely to wind up in the White House. At the end of that year, he was back in the Senate, one of the presidential campaign's most conspicuous also-rans.

"When I go out around the country now," Muskie said wistfully, "they say to me, 'That was a dirty trick they played on you, senator.' They don't elaborate, but everybody knows what they're talking about—the letter."

"The letter" is, of course, the "Canuck" letter—the correspondence from a yet-to-be-identified writer to the Manchester (N.H.) Union Leader that set in motion events that led to Muskie's emotional display in the New Hampshire primary and, many say, to his eventual downfall.

When the Senate Watergate Committee moves into the "dirty tricks" phase of its public hearings shortly, the "Canuck" letter is likely to be regarded as a prime dirty trick of the 1972 campaign. The frontrunner victimized by it, the popular impression holds, was goaded into an excessive demonstration of emotion and sent reeling out of contention.

See CANUCK, A8, Col. 1

CANUCK, From A1

Was that what really happened? If so, and if it can be demonstrated that the letter was a fraud perpetrated by the Nixon reelection committee, then this particular bit of political pranksmanship contributed at least indirectly in 1972 to the subversion of the American political system.

In a public climate that is ready to believe the worst about politicians of both parties, dirty tricks have come to be regarded as politics-as-usual. Unless the Watergate committee can show that what happened in 1972 went beyond that, the second phase of the hearings could be anti-climactic, and large segments of the public could be turned off on Watergate.

Both the Senate Watergate committee and the office of Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox have been investigating the origins of the "Canuck" letter. But as of now both say they have not identified the author or found any tie to the Nixon campaign.

Even without identification of its author, however, the "Canuck" letter episode stands as a classic case study of a repeated phenomenon in American politics. Once again—as in George Romney's 1968 interview remark that he had been "brainwashed"—a single event, fraudulent or otherwise, and the reaction to it snowballed into a cause celebre.

It is true the letter was no more scurrilous than many other materials introduced into the heat of a campaign. It charged that during a Florida campaign stop, an aide to Muskie—not Muskie himself—had made an invidious reference to blacks and "Canucks"—Americans of French-Canadian descent who live in New England. When asked what his aide meant, the letter-writer charge, "Muskie laughed and said, 'Come to New England and see.'"

The letter was printed in the Union Leader at a critical juncture in the Muskie campaign, triggering a response by Muskie—an emotional tirade against the newspaper's publisher, William Loeb, in front of the Union Leader building—that by Muskie's own reckoning put his campaign on the road to ruin.

"It was a very rough thing," the senator from Maine said the other day. "I don't know whether that particular episode was responsible for my disappointing showing in New Hampshire (he received 47.8 per cent of the vote). But I suspect it cast a pall over the remainder of our effort. We could never quite get over it.

"It signaled a change in the attitude of the press toward my campaign. It was the beginning of a period of nega-

tive press reaction. It affected my staff, and it made it harder for me to get up every day and go out and campaign. So in a very real sense, I guess it was a watershed incident."

It was not the "Canuck" letter itself, it must be noted in any appraisal of the episode's impact, but the reprint of two magazine articles about Muskie's wife, Jane, that really triggered his emotional outburst. But a review of the incident with Muskie and key aides here and in New Hampshire underlines the fact that he never would have gone to the Union Leader on the snowy morning of Feb. 26, 1972 had it not been for the "Canuck" letter. And his clearly intended purpose in going there was to answer the allegations of bias raised in that letter.

Here, as reconstructed in conversations with Muskie and those aides, with the benefit of 18 months' reflection, is what happened:

When the "Canuck" letter, signed by a "Paul Morrison" of Deerfield Beach, Fla., appeared in the Union Leader on the morning of Thursday Feb. 24, along with a front-page editorial entitled "Senator Muskie Insults Franco-Americans," Muskie already was having troubles in New Hampshire.

Also committed to early presidential primaries in Florida, Illinois and Wisconsin, where he was not known as well as he was in New Hampshire, Muskie had absented himself from the state for long periods. Aides in New Hampshire were picking up negative soundings that voters thought Muskie was taking them for granted.

It was a theme to which Loeb's paper and Loeb's editorials were playing a strident accompaniment, and as the campaign forces of Sen. George McGovern blanketed the state, Muskie's lieutenants in the field began to worry. McGovern, they feared, was making points by his presence in the state and by his repeated challenges to Muskie to debate.

Three weeks before the primary on March 7, Muskie had told campaign workers crowded into his Manchester headquarters that he was counting on them to carry the ball for him because his decision to run a national campaign for the Democratic nomination required him to spend much time elsewhere.

Little-noticed at the time was a second part of the Muskie talk—a slashing attack on Loeb and his name-calling journalistic tactics. Muskie launched into the attack with un concealed zest, and in doing so he was only following some advice he himself had given to Sen. Thomas J. McIntyre (D-N.H.) in 1966—to fight Loeb head-on in his bid for re-election.

On Feb. 21, Muskie finally yielded to pressure and decided he would debate



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Sen. Muskie denounces publisher William Loeb on Feb. 26, 1972.

MrGovern and three lesser challengers. His managers hoped that the debate would arrest Muskie's slide in the voters' esteem and give his New Hampshire campaign an upbeat push toward the finish.

When the "Canuck" letter appeared, some workers in the Muskie campaign saw it as a further opportunity and as a catalyst for action. Among them was Tony Podesta, a young campaign organizer from Chicago who was the

Muskie out-of-state coordinator for New Hampshire.

The longtime conventional wisdom in New Hampshire had been that the only way to deal with Loeb was to ignore him. Maria Carrier, the Muskie in-state coordinator, checked with Franco-American leaders in Manchester. They told her the letter was not an insult and would have little impact.

But according to Podesta, phone calls began coming in from Muskie

backers indicating otherwise. "We had a number of our supporters in the French community saying it was hurting," Podesta recalled. "The alderman from Ward 7 in Manchester was about to endorse Muskie; but when the letter was published, he called and said he couldn't do it." Street canvasses in Manchester also showed a Muskie dropoff, Podesta said.

Podesta phoned George Mitchell, a chief Muskie campaign aide in Washington, on Friday morning, Feb. 25, and recommended that Muskie come to New Hampshire at once to answer the implication of a slur against French-Canadians. Mitchell in turn called Muskie, who was in Tampa, Fla., to tell him about the "Canuck" letter and editorial, and to pass on Podesta's recommendation. A copy of the letter and editorial were sent by telecopier to Muskie.

Muskie and Podesta subsequently talked by phone and Podesta telecopied a memo to Muskie in which he inquired: "What do you think of an outdoor press conference on the steps of the Union Leader on Saturday morning with Mayor Dupuis of Manchester and 100 leading Francos from New Hampshire and a couple of busloads from Maine?"

Muskie agreed to make a statement, but for some reason initial plans were made to hold a press conference at Muskie's hotel headquarters in Manchester, not in front of the paper.

Through all this, the focus was entirely on responding to the "Canuck" letter. Unknown to Muskie at the time, Loeb had followed on Friday morning with a short, two-month-old item from Newsweek magazine which itself was a rewrite of an earlier story in Women's Wear Daily. It quoted Mrs. Muskie as inviting women reporters to trade "dirty jokes" and otherwise let their hair down on a campaign bus. The Newsweek item was run in the Union Leader as a "guest editorial" and entitled "Big Daddy's Jane."

Muskie recalled that he did not learn of the references to his wife until he arrived in Manchester by plane about midnight Friday. Aides said he was "outraged" by it, but he said it "did not occur to me then I should make a special point of it."

"I didn't feel any particular emotion," he said. "I didn't feel a flush of emotion. I just found him (Loeb) distasteful and disgusting."

Podesta recalled that he and Hugh Gallen, a New Hampshire Democrat and Muskie's state campaign manager, rode with the candidate from Manchester Airport to the hotel, and that Muskie was completely silent until about halfway there.

Then, according to Podesta, Muskie said: "That son-of-a-bitch. I've been waiting 25 years for this. Tomorrow

morning one of us is going to be destroyed."

Muskie said he has no recollection of that comment, but would not challenge it, either. He recalled that he looked upon the reference to Mrs. Muskie as another piece of evidence of Loeb's tactics, and was not particularly upset by it that night.

But apparently he did a slow burn. "The next morning I was goddamned mad," he said. "You work yourself up to these things. You make up your mind to bring on a confrontation, and it has an effect on you."

When Muskie learned late Friday night that the press conference had been scheduled for the hotel, he asked Podesta to hurriedly arrange to obtain a flatbed truck from which he could speak outside the Union Leader, and—after midnight—to round up as many of the faithful as possible to be there in the morning.

The next morning, in heavy snow, Muskie climbed aboard the truck with a large entourage of Franco-American backers and Art Barker, director of the Florida drug rehabilitation center at which the "Canuck" remark allegedly was to have been made. Barker testified that he had been at Muskie's side every moment and the slur never had been spoken. Maine and New Hampshire French-Americans attested to Muskie's longtime friendship.

Then the candidate himself took over. Becoming increasingly emotional as he went along, Muskie denied that he had made any slurring reference at the Florida stop, reiterated his respect for Franco-Americans and his close ties with many of them. He called Loeb a "gutless coward" and a liar.

This was all according to plan, discussed shortly before at a breakfast strategy meeting. During that meeting, some of those present now recall, Muskie kept mentioning the reference to his wife, but the focus of what he would say outside the paper was the "Canuck" letter.

At the end of his speech, however, almost as a throwaway and to the surprise of his aides, Muskie suddenly began to talk about Loeb's reference to Mrs. Muskie — a reprint of an item that had appeared elsewhere 10 weeks earlier and had never gotten a rise out of Muskie.

"I've been in politics all my life," he said. "I am no child. I know these sorts of things happen. I've got to be prepared to take them. What really got me was this editorial attacking my wife: 'Big Daddy's Jane.'"

Writing in the next morning's Washington Post, David S. Broder reported that Muskie's voice broke as he read the title of the editorial, and that he

CANUCK, From A8

then said: "This man doesn't walk, he crawls."

Broder further reported that tears streamed down Muskie's face as he fought to regain his composure, saying: "He's talking about my wife . . . Maybe I've said all I should on it. It's fortunate for him he's not on this platform beside me."

The impact of what had happened was not immediately apparent. Some reporters on the scene made no mention of tears. Richard Stewart, then Muskie's press secretary, held the initial opinion that Muskie would benefit in public opinion for having stood up for his wife. Boston television shows late that afternoon focused on the "Canuck" letter answer and the Muskie camp thought they had weathered a storm.

But Broder's story, with a clear mention in the lead of "tears streaming down (Muskie's) face," was picked up around the country. CBS News had the scene on film or tape, and the next night began to show it. The word passed that Muskie had cried in New Hampshire, and the erosion was on.

The image of Muskie as a dependable New England rock of granite, one of his strongest points, was shattered. In Podesta's view, Muskie was not hurt so much by the episode in New Hampshire, where voters knew Loeb and his tactics, as he was damaged elsewhere around the country, in later primaries.

Muskie to this day insists that he did not cry. "There were no tears," he said without rancor the other day. "I was choked up because I was goddamned mad at that point. But that was all there was to it." Aides noted that Muskie was standing hatless and that snow was falling on his head and face. But tears or no tears, Muskie said the unfortunate thing was that the episode conveyed weakness on his part. "I had no feeling of weakness," he said. "I just thought it was a display of anger. Maybe too much. I'm capable of that."

At the same time, he acknowledged, "it was a mistake to go. But I made the decision and I had to accept the consequences. The way it was written—tears in New Hampshire—that's the way it will live in history, and what I say won't change that."

Muskie said he had no feeling at the time that the Nixon re-election committee was behind the "Canuck" letter that started it all, and has no evidence of it now. "I felt it was a Loeb fraud," he said. "It never occurred to me it was related to CREEP."

But if it was, he said, and if a crime was committed, the perpetrators ought to be punished, to demonstrate that the political system must not be subverted.

Candidates always face hazards, he said, but they have a right to assume that they are playing within a set of rules. He contrasted what happened to him in New Hampshire with what happened to Richard M. Nixon in his first debate with John F. Kennedy in 1960, which many believe severely hurt Nixon's chances that year.

"In that case, Nixon was hurt in a legitimate political contest," Muskie said. "In the 'Canuck' letter thing, I was hit from the blind side. You can't take a two-by-four into the ring with you."

Muskie readily acknowledged that other factors were importantly involved in his failure to win the 1972 Democratic nomination. But his poor showing in New Hampshire, he said, had a debilitating effect that ran throughout his campaign effort and press coverage of it. Without the "Canuck" letter, Muskie said, "it would have been different. Whether it would have been sufficiently different, I can't say."

What, in the final reckoning, was the political impact of the "Canuck" letter? In New Hampshire, Muskie ran strongly in all parts of the state except Manchester, where the Union Leader is published and where 40 per cent of the vote was cast. There he barely

edged McGovern, 36.4 per cent to 33.4 per cent, with 11.9 per cent for former Mayor Sam Yorty of Los Angeles, the Loeb-endorsed candidate. McGovern carried two predominantly franco-American wards and lost a third by only one vote. So there are some grounds for arguing that, in New Hampshire at least, a "dirty trick" did Muskie in.

Elsewhere, it is much more difficult to show cause and effect. Podesta for one believes that Muskie never would have won the nomination if there had been no "Canuck" letter and no "crying scene" in New Hampshire, because he would have been outgunned by George Wallace in Florida anyway, and out-organized and out-hustled by McGovern in Wisconsin and in later primaries.

"Even if Donald Segretti himself (the CREEP agent rumored to be, but never proved to be, behind the "Canuck" letter) wrote the letter and H. R. Haldeman approved the copy," Podesta said, "what we did was worse than anything they did to us."

"They provided the trigger and we proceeded to shoot ourselves."

It the "Canuck" letter episode proves nothing else, it underlines how fragile is the political process, and how greatly the course of a political campaign or the fortunes of a candidate can be affected by the introduction of an accusation, or a misstatement, or an emotional act.

The Senate Watergate committee, in putting the chronicle of 1972 "diety tricks" before the American people in the weeks ahead, may not be able to shed any more light on who wrote the letter, or whether the hand of the Nixon campaign was present. But a recitation of a great volume of such tinkering can get the essential point across: that politics is a precarious business that needs, no less than any other, fairness among the competitors to make it work as the system intended it to work.