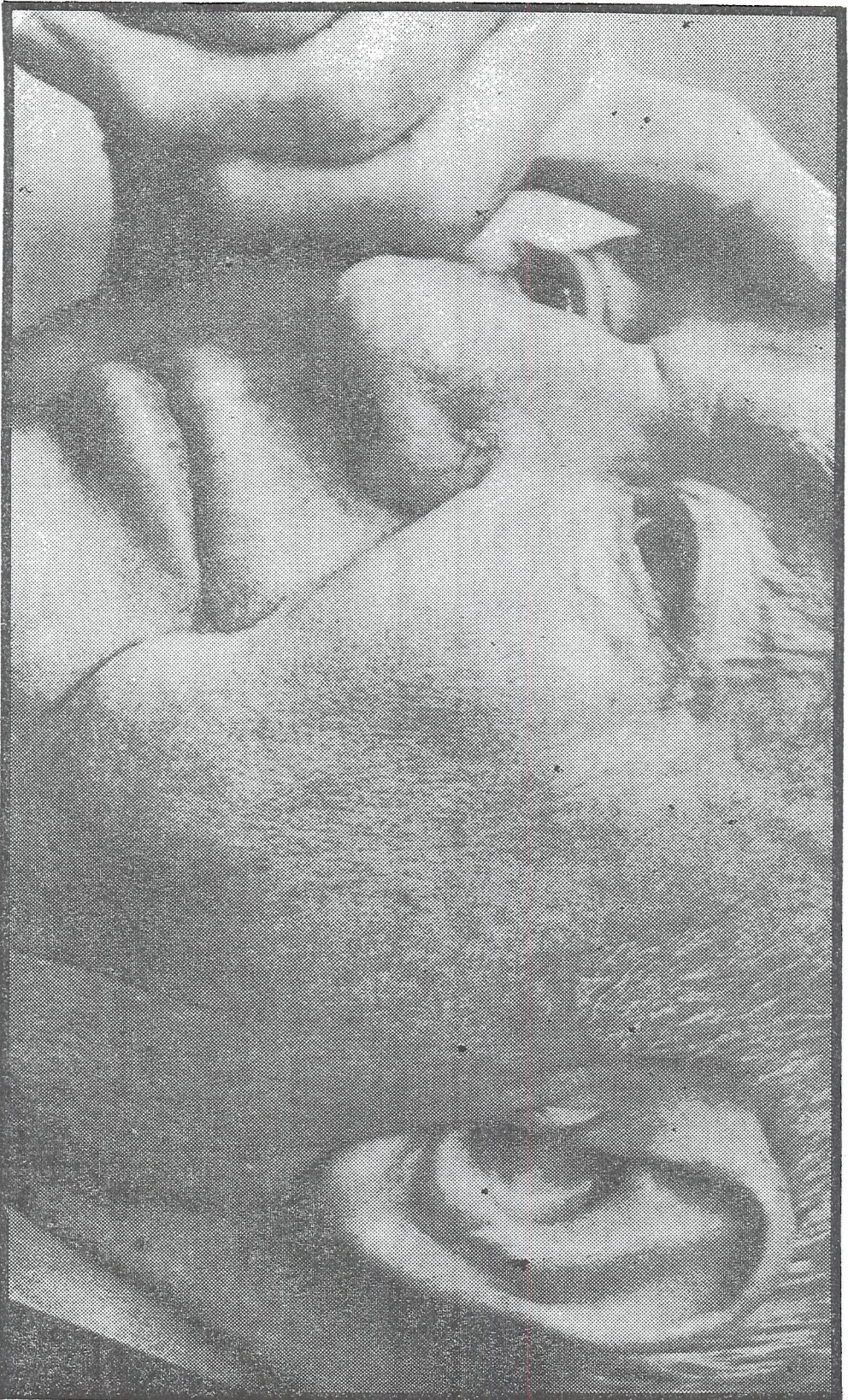


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His Very Own Uncle Sam

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By Alan Lechuk

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N. Y. — I think it occurred when Senator Gurney turned to Senator Ervin and accused him of harassing the witness, not questioning him, that I sensed my strong personal affection for Senator Sam, affection beyond respect, affection approaching family feeling. I was not merely stunned by the vilification, I was pained, as if my favorite uncle or grandfather, whom I knew to be good and just, were being slandered in full public view.

Well, old Grandfather or Uncle was stunned too by the unfair and inaccurate attack and there hung a moment of moving silence (with Uncle's lips fumbling for words) when one didn't know if maybe the old man was indeed too old to defend himself. Alas, he wasn't, he did; and in his characteristic way. In his thick accent and froggy resonance, he replied that he had no intention of harassing the witness but was cross-examining him, and was doing it in the only way he knew, which may have been rough and not too fashionable or up-to-date seeing as he was a country lawyer basically, but it was the only way he had ever done it for the last fifty years. Grandfather had come through.

Now it's that last characteristic—lack of fashionableness and doing things his own (country) way—that has as much to do with his becoming

a hero during these Watergate weeks as any of his other estimable qualities. Intuitions of the man's worth and character were to be surmised earlier on, before the hearings began, perhaps [especially] at that moment when he stood up to the Tyrant's habitual claim to executive omnipotence (called here executive privilege). No, Grandpa who looked something like a walrus had been a citizen and lawyer and legislator for far too long in the Republic to be taken in or scared off by dictatorial threats; thus his own immediate democratic threat, to send his sergeants-at-arms to pry open that newly created White House of Privilege and bring down the fellows in question to face the people. Did the Tyrant know then that he was not dealing with a lackey of his court, but a man who was his own man in a democracy? Well, some of us did. For in his angry rejection of Divine Monarch Rights (read Dictator or Tyrant threats), Grandpa Ervin reeled off a little lecture on democracy—the people's place in it and the President's—that was a cross between Twain and Jefferson, and that would serve as a far better lesson in patriotism than flag-saluting or Red-bating, or decal displaying. Yes, you could sense premonitions then—with knowledge joined by moral outrage, passion and personal style by intellectual substance, Mansfield-politeness replaced by Ervin-anger—that an American hero was in the making.

My dear Senator, it's been a long, long time in our national life—for myself, for many of us, almost twenty years, when we first learned about democracy through an elfin, white-haired gentleman lawyer who took on and defeated another egomaniacal tyrant on national television—a long time since we've had someone to look up to, respect, laugh with, and finally even, love. Someone whom we'd want to sit down to dinner with, as well as one to lead us. Stevenson for all his many civilized virtues lacked tested moral courage and intellectual stamina; the Kennedys lived too few years and were bannacked with political machines; Gene McCarthy and George McGovern came close during the snowstorms of New Hampshire and briefly afterwards before fading badly. But it's been you, dear wise Senator, making Watergate over into the Tyrant's Waterloo, against the wishes of the Department of Justice, the Administration, even Harvard, prosecutors, you, Senator, who have touched the hero-chord in an age when heroism has been (deservedly) demythologized and heroes exposed as papier-mâché figures. Now in the process you've revitalized democracy, replacing empty rhetoric and lies with true democratic substance; and also, in the process, revitalized that cliché-ridden horse, television.

Forgive me, sir, for moving into lofty lingo in this casual age, but I think you help us redefine the mean-

ing of the heroic: the joining of the ordinary (downhome stories) with the extraordinary (your knowledge of the Constitution and the law); the opportunity to meet a great challenge and take on a monstrous opponent; the acknowledgment of vulnerability while getting the job done. In a book by the late historian, Richard Hofstadter, this chapter subtitle described Thomas Jefferson: "The Aristocrat as Democrat." I would reverse this with you, Mr. Ervin, and say: "The Democrat as Aristocrat."

Now I mean by that, sir, that in the midst of dealing with lies, cover-ups, crimes, mechanical hacks and conscienceless bureaucrats, cheats, extortionists, perjurers, burglars, bagmen and blackmailers, while dealing with the low sordid crimes of the Tyrant (the higher ones, of Indochina, as you well know, need another courtroom), you have remained just, cultured, intelligent, graceful, learned. And angry, properly angry. Let's not forget that. Fortunately, sir, you're the first to be aware of the dangers of a man thinking himself a king in a democracy, beyond the laws and the people of the land. Isn't that in part what your current investigation is about, and particularly your present plea for the Tyrant to act like a man again and face the people before it is too late and he is broken in his role as self-anointed king?

Alan Lechuk is author of the novel, "American Mischief."