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Mary McGovern And Joseph Riemer (May 31, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. MARY McGOVERN
MR. JOSEPH RIEMER

May 31, 1972
Rockville Center, New York

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mrs. Mary McGovern, Mrs. Eugene V. [Vincent] McGovern, in Rockville Center, New York. Today's date is May 31, 1972, Arena interviewing. I will begin by reading part of the correspondence that is in the possession of Mrs. McGovern that took place between Mr. [Eugene V.] McGovern and President Nixon. This letter, which is a copy, is dated November 8, 1946, typed, no signature, Eugene McGovern and reads:

"My dear Dick: Politicians and statesmen in their optimism are often like prizefighters 'we will win by 300,000' says the candidate at 8 o'clock election night and at 10 o'clock he is conceding defeat. 'I will knock him into the next county,' says the pug, while already mentally banking his share of the loser's purse. Somewhat too like the contractor I once worked for who told me that business was good, never better, and an hour later had his lawyer in the office signing the bankruptcy papers.

"Is it any wonder with these parallels in mind that when you told me a year ago down on Church Street, New York, you were going to run against Jerry Voorhis--and not only run against him but also beat him--I thought it was only the outcropping of the characteristic optimism of a man running for office.

"But you did beat Jerry Voorhis and all of us who know you rejoice in your victory. Congratulations. I hope that in everything you undertake you will

"have the angels on your side. Sincerely,
Eugene McGovern." Addressed to Honorable Richard
Nixon, Representative in Congress, 2706 East
Whittier Boulevard, Whittier, California.

ARENA: The original letter in reply to Mr. McGovern from
Richard Nixon, Whittier, California, November 14,
1946:

"Mr. Eugene McGovern, Cauldwell-Wingate Company, 101
Park Avenue, New York, New York. Dear Gene: Many
thanks for your congratulatory letter of November 8.

"I hope that business will take you to Washington
very soon as it would be a real pleasure to see you
again.

"With best personal regards, Sincerely yours, Dick."
And underneath typed Richard M. Nixon.

ARENA: Mrs. McGovern, may I begin by asking you first, do you
remember how old your husband was when he did pass away
and maybe the year when he was born?

McGOVERN: He was born in 1907 and he passed away in 1968.

ARENA: Well, the main thing is the year of birth gives us an
idea of the ages of him and the President. What was
his contact with the President from the best of your
recollection? In other words what was your husband doing, where
was he--even though you don't remember everything they said to one
another--but what was it that brought the two men together?

McGOVERN: Well, they were in the Navy and Gene was a lieutenant,
j.g. I don't know what the President's rank was.

ARENA: He started as lieutenant, j.g. And he had been in the
South Pacific, but when these two gentlemen met, the
President and your husband, had they served overseas?

McGOVERN: No. As far as I know they met in . . .

ARENA: And what was the function of your husband at the time
with the Navy. Just what was his job from your recol-
lection?

McGOVERN: That was in '45. I don't know how long they were there
together but I believe that they were on termination
of war contracts.

ARENA: Had your husband been a lawyer also like President Nixon?

McGOVERN: No, he was in the accounting field.

ARENA: Do you recall if the President ever came to visit you or did you ever see him during this period yourself?

McGOVERN: Not during that period, no.

ARENA: When did you first meet him? You need not worry about the exact day or exact year. Had he been Vice President?

McGOVERN: Well, we went down to the Inauguration when he was Vice President.

ARENA: And that's when you saw him.

McGOVERN: Yes.

ARENA: Well, there were two as Vice President. The first one would have been '53 and the second one would have been '57.

McGOVERN: I think it was '53.

ARENA: And that would have been the first time.

McGOVERN: Yes.

ARENA: Did you get a chance to speak with the President personally?

McGOVERN: Only to shake hands.

ARENA: Did he bring up anything about the period when he knew your husband in the remarks he exchanged with you? Something about their working together, for example?

McGOVERN: I don't remember.

ARENA: What do you recall about your husband's conversations with you about the President, even during the Inauguration period? I realize there must have been a lot of confusion for you, but maybe you may recall some of the things he may have said about working with the President, what type of a fellow he was. Did he drink? Did he play cards with your husband, for example, do you recall?

McGOVERN: I don't think so. And I never heard him say anything about drinking.

ARENA: How close do you think they were from the standpoint of friendship? For example, he was planning to bring him out here some weekend. He wouldn't do that with just anyone.

McGOVERN: No, he admired him when he first met him.

ARENA: He did.

McGOVERN: He really did, and Gene wasn't like that. I would say he was slow to mix like that, wouldn't you Joe?

RIEMER: Yes, I would say so.

ARENA: Further comments and recollections during this interview will be made by the brother of Mrs. Eugene V. McGovern and, therefore, the brother-in-law of Mr. McGovern. His name is Joseph Riemer. Mr. Riemer's residence, while not the same, may be considered the same for mailing purposes of this interview, which will be mailed to the residence of Mrs. McGovern. Would you want to add anything to what Mrs. McGovern has just said concerning your recollection of the conversations between your brother-in-law and President Nixon. Whatever comes to mind concerning his comments to you under any circumstances. It may have been with others present or it may have been just something that came up.

RIEMER: Well, the first thing that I think I ever remember Gene saying about Nixon was that he didn't think he would make it in politics because he was too idealistic. I remember Gene saying this and it probably was around the time that the letter was written with respect to his first entering politics. And I think as far as their work in the Navy went, Gene had a tremendous capacity for work. He loved to accomplish things and to get things done and to take on a big burden and get it done right. And he had a tremendous admiration for people who were similar to himself in this regard, and less tolerant or less admiration for people who kind of sluffed off, and I just have the hunch that they both were the same with respect to the incredible volume of regulations that were issued on termination of contracts and this kind of thing--government regulations for people who have to do the job at the base level.

I often thought that probably both of these fellows took it seriously, learned the job, got it done and did quite a quantity of work. I can remember that the admiral who was in charge of the office tried to give Gene a double spot promotion, which is almost unheard of in the Navy. That would be taking somebody from lieutenant j.g. and skipping lieutenant and making him lieutenant commander. And it was not approved by other people, but the admiral, I believe, put Gene in for it and I think it was based on his tremendous capacity for work. I think that it was in this area that probably Gene and Richard Nixon came to admire each other, and I think it was kind of a mutual admiration society.

ARENA: Did you possibly ever get to meet the President yourself?

RIEMER: He was at both of the weddings of Mary's girls; I met him outside of St. Agnes.

ARENA: Well, just for the record, I would like to get the name of your daughter and from your recollection the wedding and the full name and location of the church. Mrs. McGovern, now that you have your wedding picture album out. Let's take the first one and would you give me the date of the first wedding, in which the President attended, as your invited guest.

McGOVERN: Yes. It was my daughter, Mary, and she married Patrick Lee.

ARENA: And what is the date?

McGOVERN: May 25, 1963.

ARENA: And where was the wedding held?

McGOVERN: St. Agnes Cathedral and the Rockville Links Country Club for the reception.

ARENA: And in some of the pictures, correct me if I'm wrong, I do see the President dancing with the bride.

McGOVERN: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall her recollection of his dancing? Did that come up in a conversation in any way? He certainly seems to be enjoying himself from the picture. But do you recall whether she said that he was a smooth dancer or anything like that?

McGOVERN: I really can't say.

ARENA: And just out of curiosity, was the bridegroom a Republican or a Democrat? Did that come up in any way?

McGOVERN: The bridegroom, I think, was a Democrat [Laughter] at the time. But he is not now, I understand that Pat is with the Republicans. You know, where they go out and get the vote out. They work with the local party.

ARENA: A volunteer worker.

McGOVERN: Something like that.

ARENA: Could I have the information on the second wedding that he also attended? That is again, the name of your daughter and her married name and where the wedding took place and the date?

RIEMER: At the first wedding which was at the Rockville Links Country Club Mr. Nixon played the piano.

ARENA: Oh, is that right, during the reception he went over to the piano and played it?

McGOVERN: There was a group of priests. They had a band, and this priest had a washboiler, an old washboiler, that he had this stick and he could get musical sounds from it. And this was Monsignor Williams and Father Harold Langley and the President and they hit it off. Monsignor Williams and the President played a duet on the piano.

ARENA: This would be the second wedding?

McGOVERN: No, this is the first wedding--Mary's wedding.

ARENA: Now let me be sure I get the names these gentlemen. The gentleman playing the washboard did you say?

McGOVERN: It was a wash tub, a round tub.

ARENA: And that was Father?

McGOVERN: Father O'Donnell I think.

ARENA: And the gentleman seated at the piano.

McGOVERN: The late Monsignor Williams.

ARENA: And the gentleman with the trumpet?

McGOVERN: Father Harold Langley.

ARENA: And the President is standing there in this picture smiling, of course. Had he played the piano as well?

McGOVERN: Yes. He played a duet--Monsignor and President Nixon. They were a lot of fun. They enjoyed themselves.

ARENA: Now the information regarding the second marriage.

RIEMER: There was a great comment made at the wedding.

ARENA: As much as you can recall.

RIEMER: A great number of the people at that reception were Democrats. I guess mostly all Pat's friends were and others. And he [i.e. R. Nixon] got into things so well, he was so sociable and friendly and laughed it up with everybody else, both at the table and the music and everything else, someone said, "Had he acted like this in the campaign, he would have been elected."

ARENA: That's very interesting. That's very interesting.

RIEMER: The crowd was essentially Democratic, but they liked him very much.

ARENA: Were you present yourself, Mr. Riemer?

RIEMER: Yes.

ARENA: How would you describe his appearance, his sociability from your own recollection?

RIEMER: Well, that was it. He got right in with everybody, priests, lay people, young people, everybody. He was in it and he obviously had a good time and he sat down at the piano and played a duet with Monsignor Williams and everybody crowded around, and then he got up and said a few words to the bride and groom before he left.

ARENA: Do you recall what he did say, by any chance?

RIEMER: I know he brought Gene and their friendship into it and obviously wished the bride and groom well. I remember his comments as informal, warm, friendly. A lot of people took to him very much and I think the image they had of him was altered by the fact of his great ability to get in with these people, most of whom he had never met before.

ARENA: May I ask you in your own case was that the fact, in the sense you had an image, as we all did, before we've ever met him. I've never had the privilege myself. But we all have an image of him and were you surprised by the firsthand contact with him yourself?

RIEMER: I had voted for him. I had liked him because of everything Gene said. Gene liked him and Gene was my base of knowledge and he admired him, so it was easy for me to see him in a good light. Everything I ever heard about him was good.

ARENA: I was thinking not so much of just the idea of his views that you might favor or not but his personality. I am thinking of having seen him on TV and having read

something about him. But in your case, as you say, you had first-hand contact through your brother-in-law, so you would not have been caught that much by just what the image of the man was. But was he as warm, let's say, as relaxed when you saw him as you thought he would be from your past knowledge? In other words, you were not that surprised when you met him in person.

RIEMER: I don't think I had formed any great image of him contrary to this, but I think most of the people who formed their image based on a faithfulness to another party and adherence to another party had their image of him altered by virtue of his sociability and his informality.

ARENA: Before we leave this, I want to be sure we give credit for the other daughter too. Her name and her husband's name?

McGOVERN: I just wanted to add something to that.

ARENA: Oh, certainly.

McGOVERN: Even since Gene died--the first Christmas I wasn't home. I was out with Kathy [Kathleen McGovern McGuire], but the second Christmas I was home. Gene was dead for about fourteen or fifteen months and on Christmas morning, I answered the phone about 11 o'clock and it was the President wishing me a Merry Christmas. And I thought that was wonderful. As busy a man as he is that he would remember Christmas morning. And I tell it just for that reason. Some people don't think that. And you don't expect it of such a busy man.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, do you recall the reaction when he was notified of your husband's death. Did you ever hear anything from him concerning that?

McGOVERN: Well, I heard from the pastor down here but I didn't know that he was to come to the Mass the next morning. Gene was buried the day after he was elected.

ARENA: As President.

McGOVERN: He didn't know. He died November 2, 1968, and Monsignor Melton told me, he is our pastor, and he told me, but not until after the funeral, that the Secret Service and the local police had worked, as the President was to come to Gene's Mass. But if you remember, that election was close and he was on TV that morning at 10:00 a.m., and to think that as Gene's Requiem Mass was being said, he was accepting the Presidency. And Monsignor Melton said to me, the morning before the funeral, "Mary, did you hear that the election was close?" And he said, "[Hubert H.] Humphrey is contesting it." I said, "What?" And he said, "Humphrey is

contesting the election, 20,000 unaccounted votes came in. They couldn't account for them." And I looked at him and he said, "Yes, they found out they all came from purgatory. McGovern's still working." [Laughter]

ARENA: May I ask you if the subject ever came up as you may recall, even at the wedding, of the President's Irish ancestry? You know he visited Ireland recently.

McGOVERN: Yes, I remember reading that.

ARENA: But your husband was not alive when he visited Ireland as President, but I just wonder if that ever came up in any way?

McGOVERN: I don't know, but I do know when he was in New York before he ran for President in '68, when he was in that law firm, they met many times for lunch. They would have lunch together. Gene would come home and the day before he would say he was going to have lunch with Dick Nixon today. But he would never come back and say much about what they discussed.

ARENA: May I ask what your husband's business was? He was not a career man in the Navy?

McGOVERN: No. He was in heavy construction. He was with Conduit Foundation Corporation.

ARENA: How frequently do you think they did get together for these lunches during this period?

McGOVERN: I couldn't tell you.

ARENA: Did you ever get to meet any of the other members of the President's family, his wife or daughters?

McGOVERN: Yes, every Christmas there was a cocktail party in the home. I was there several times and had a great time and met the children.

ARENA: Did you ever meet his parents from Whittier, California?

McGOVERN: No.

ARENA: Or ever visit in Whittier, California, and meet any of the relatives there?

McGOVERN: No.

ARENA: And I don't want to forget the second wedding, by the way, for the record and that the President also attended.

McGOVERN: This was Kathy and Tom--Kathleen.

ARENA: And the name of her husband?

McGOVERN: [Thomas] Tom McGuire.

ARENA: And the date of that wedding?

McGOVERN: June 27, 1964.

ARENA: Was it the same church by the way?

McGOVERN: It was the same church but the reception was held at the International Hotel at Kennedy Airport.

ARENA: Was there a piano available there as well as music?

McGOVERN: There was and the same priests were there. That was the next year. We had copies of these made for the priests and their mothers and they got a real thrill out of it. There was one other when they were at the piano together and I don't have that. I may be able to get it though--you know borrow it.

ARENA: In general, whatever correspondence your husband and the President had, you now have in your possession.

McGOVERN: Well, that's about it.

ARENA: Just in case future historians would like to know. Is there anything that I have not brought up, any question I have not asked, or any subject that you would like to mention yourself, Mrs. McGovern, as this interview comes to a close?

McGOVERN: I really thought it was wonderful of him to invite me to the wedding.

ARENA: The wedding of Tricia [Nixon Cox].

McGOVERN: Tricia.

ARENA: Were you able to attend?

McGOVERN: I did, yes. It was very, very beautiful.

ARENA: Did you have a chance to meet with him during the . . .

McGOVERN: Yes, there was a receiving line, and he was very, very wonderful, very gracious. He said he thinks of Gene . . .

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: Altogether, in the way of formal meetings with him, perhaps say in Washington, would one be the first Inauguration when he was Vice President and the other one the wedding? Were there any more besides that in the way of meeting with him officially in Washington?

McGOVERN: Yes. We were to several dinners when he was Vice President. He was here to the house. They played golf.

ARENA: But not officially. He was not in office at that time?

McGOVERN: No.

ARENA: But you say they did play golf?

McGOVERN: They would meet in different places and play golf at different clubs, and through some of Gene's friends they played at a club in Jersey [City, New Jersey]. And the day Gene was taken out of here sick that morning in September '67, he was taken out in an ambulance and when I got to the hospital I had to call the Nixons and notify them that their golf date for that day had to be cancelled.

ARENA: Do you recall if you got a call from Mr. Nixon about that?

McGOVERN: Oh, yes, they called the hospital. He was always more than attentive. He put himself out all the time. He called Gene when he was being operated on in Texas, in Houston. He called there twice.

ARENA: Can you account, or Mr. Riemer, from your general observations--you did make some mention but I would just like to be sure that the question is very clear--why these two were such good personal friends, knowing your husband as you do and knowing the President as you do, as we all do? Why do you think they hit it off?

McGOVERN: I know Gene had an expression, the children were laughing about it last summer. I said to them, "Remember when Daddy would be here and he would look at your report cards and he would say 'I hate mediocrity' when the cards weren't good." And Jerry said, "Yea, ma, he got so much of it around here." [Laughter] And I think he considered the President such a wonderful person and so idealistic and so intelligent and hard-working. As Joe said before, I think that's the type of person he admired.

RIEMER: Oh, yes, Gene admired achievement and he admired people who excelled. He wanted to work hard. He wanted to get a lot done, accomplish a lot and always with ideals, as

it had to be done. You had to work hard at what you were doing to get it done and do it right and go on to bigger and better things. And I think that the two of them saw eye to eye on really the most important aspect of your efforts--what ideals are you following and how hard are you willing to work to witness it.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, as you know, the President is a Quaker. He is officially registered in the Friends church in California. Your husband, of course, was a Catholic. Did this come up in any special way? One is a very special Protestant and your husband was obviously a practicing Catholic.

McGOVERN: Very much so.

ARENA: Did that ever come up in any way? Did you ever hear them discuss religion or anything like that?

McGOVERN: I never heard Gene say. Like, there is a plaque in the kitchen that "Christ is the unseen host at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation." I never heard him say a word about anybody--anybody's nationality, anybody's ideas, you know. And I remember him saying after Nixon lost in 1960 that [John F.] Jack Kennedy is our President and he deserves our loyalty as our leader now.

ARENA: Your husband was disappointed at the loss of Nixon in the election.

McGOVERN: Oh, very much so. He cried. He had a priest here with him and the two of them. It was the saddest night here. And then after it was over that's how he spoke to the children. This is it. Kennedy is our President and we will do all we can to support him. But religion-wise I don't think it ever entered the conversation.

ARENA: Was there ever an occasion where possibly a blessing or grace was given and the President himself delivered it, do you recall? For example, in his own home, do you recall that if there was a formal dinner, maybe the President gave it? Maybe there was some other religious person there.

McGOVERN: I remember a formal dinner, but I don't recall that.

ARENA: You don't recall one way or the other, if an invocation was given by anyone.

McGOVERN: I really don't.

ARENA: Well you have remembered quite a bit and I am very grateful for one, your hospitality in allowing me to

come into your home to ask you these personal questions and also for answering them so fully and frankly. You have really given a lot of information, and I know fellow historians are equally grateful.

McGOVERN: There was one thing here I thought was cute.

ARENA: Please do.

McGOVERN: Gene wrote this in 1953 to the President. It's a long letter.

ARENA: Please read it, what parts you wish to.

McGOVERN: "My visit to Washington while you were in the House, lunch in the restaurant at your expense and the laugh we both enjoyed at your introducing me to my own Congressman, Len Hall. Later on your way to the Senate, lunch again at your expense (some freeloader am I) and hearing your plans for your campaign against Mrs. [Helen Gahagan] Douglas. Your nomination and my obituary, which up to that point would read 'McGovern was born, drifted around a little and then passed on' would have added to it 'but he knew Dick Nixon.' The night of September 23 in the living room, in advance of your broadcast, Mary, the children and I said "The Rosary" for you. Election night--all our neighbors in for the happy returns, and Colonel A. H. Davidson from your hometown in Whittier and I drinking too many toasts to the Nixons. And here was Inauguration Day and all the hectic preparations remembered us all for the swearing in, the parade, and the Inaugural Ball. So I bless you and Pat and the children now and always. Sincerely, Gene McGovern."

ARENA: Would you mind spelling the name of the Colonel again in Whittier?

McGOVERN: He isn't in Whittier now though. Colonel A. H. DAVIDSON.

ARENA: Thank you. Of course, the original would be with the President.

McGOVERN: This was when he was Vice President, February 5, 1953.

ARENA: Thank you very much again, Mrs. McGovern.

McGOVERN: Thank you. I enjoyed it too. It brought back a lot of memories.