Highlands College   Faculty Scholarship

2-14-2013

Remembering Lee Metcalf

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A Montana Public Radio Commentary from Evan Barrett
February 14, 2013

This year is full of important political anniversaries -- 50 years since the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Had a Dream" speech; 45 years since both Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated; 45 years since the riots in Chicago during the '68 Democratic National Convention. These dramatic events helped form the political conscience of many Americans, including me. But a special anniversary date for Montanans like me was just last month on January 12th, which was the 35th anniversary of the passing of Montana Senator Lee Metcalf.

The very moment is seared into my memory -- my friend Michael and I were driving near Bozeman, working on Pat Williams' door-to-door for Congress campaign. Suddenly a voice on the radio declared that Senator Lee Metcalf had passed away. I pulled the car to the side of the road. We sat in stunned silence. How could it be? This giant was only 66 years old! Who could possibly replace him as the people's champion? Perhaps Pat Williams would fill the bill. But there was an unbelievably huge pair of empty political shoes to be filled.

Who is Montana's Lee Metcalf? Sure, he's a name on the Democratic Party's annual Mansfield/Metcalf dinner, but Lee Metcalf's story is a story of remarkable achievement. Political achievement is most easily measured by the people you fight for … and those you fight against. Historically, Montanans have had a strong streak of populism, and in that Montana tradition, Lee Metcalf's record was one of fighting FOR the little people … and AGAINST the big and the powerful.

Based on that record of achievement, Lee Metcalf was a giant for everyday workers and for organized labor… a giant for education. He was a giant for clean air, safe water, free-flowing streams... a giant for public lands and for wilderness. Montana's Lee Metcalf was a giant for Native Americans and a giant for health care. He was a giant for consumer rights … women's rights and for civil rights -- in a very big way for civil rights.

Born in Stevensville, Lee Metcalf, after a brief stop at UM, attended and graduated from Stanford University. Returning to Missoula for Law School, he was elected to the Montana Legislature at 25. After serving as an assistant State Attorney General and serving with distinction in World War II, Montana's Lee Metcalf was elected to the state Supreme Court at age 35, to Congress at 41 and to the US Senate at 49.

And through it all Montana's Lee Metcalf was fighting … In the State Legislature he was fighting FOR the little people when he pushed for a minimum wage. He fought AGAINST the giant Anaconda Copper Company when he battled to force mining companies to pay miners for the actual time they were under ground in the mines, not

just paying them until the shift whistle blew. And he carried that fight FOR the little people … FOR the powerless … when he went to the Congress and then to the Senate.

You can get a quick perspective of this remarkable man by going to YouTube and typing in "Remembering Lee Metcalf" where you will see a short biographical film that I produced back in 1996.

Among other things, the film tells of the critical, but little known, role Montana's Lee Metcalf played in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

One of the first to welcome Lee to the Senate was Hubert Humphrey. Over the next years Metcalf and Humphrey formed a close friendship and a nearly unbeatable political partnership. Their greatest triumph was the Civil Rights Bill. As Senate progressives, led by Humphrey, readied the bill for what would be a very close vote on the floor of the Senate, a group of intransigent senators, mostly from the South, planned a series of parliamentary maneuvers to kill the Civil Rights Bill. Months earlier Mike Mansfield had asked Lee to serve as temporary president pro tem of the Seante. That meant Lee would chair the floor debate over the Civil Rights Bill. Just as expected, the conservatives threw up parliamentary roadblock after roadblock, but Lee, from his position in the chair, judiciously steered the debate around every attempted delay. The historic bill passed and became one of America's most important laws. "Metcalf has stripped us of any parliamentary strategy," said one frustrated opposition senator. "That man was the Civil Rights Bill's secret weapon."

So this year when we think of political anniversaries … of Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King … of civil rights in America … we can also think of a strong-willed Montanan who made a real difference for millions of little people who had a just cause, but had little political power. That's one of the things January 12th 2013 reminded me of.

Again, go to YouTube and type in "Remembering Lee Metcalf" to learn more of this important Montanan.

This is Evan Barrett at Highlands College of Montana Tech… Remembering Lee Metcalf.

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Evan Barrett, Butte, has spent the last 44 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.