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## Review of Hard Years: Antidotes to Authoritarians

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**Classics Revisited: *Hard Years: Antidotes to Authoritarians*, Eugene J. McCarthy, 2000, paper, 214 pages, Washington, D.C.: Lone Oak Press, 1-883477-38-7.**

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Eugene McCarthy, a United States Senator from 1959 to 1971, presidential candidate in 1968, poet, and prolific author wrote this collection of short essays and poems to examine political “institutions and methods, and the persons who have used them both well and ill.” In this four-part book, McCarthy draws upon his scholarly knowledge and insider tales while offering eclectic, critical, and hopeful timely lessons.

The first section McCarthy calls, “Institutions.” He explains that “rather than destroy our institutions, what we must do is restore their integrity, perfect them, and preserve them for the long haul.” He discusses the U.S. Constitutional design of the three branches of government and gives most attention to the offices of the president and vice-president, the Supreme Court, the military, corporations, universities, and political parties. McCarthy includes numerous quips with witty commentary and biting, yet almost charming verbal takedowns. In discussing President Lyndon Johnson’s relationship with Congress, McCarthy explains, “Johnson’s attitude toward both houses of Congress caused him problems in the later years of his presidency. He had experience in driving cattle, when the technique is to start the cattle slowly and then stampede them at the end. But when you deal with Congress, you should know about the psychology of pigs, which is opposite that of cattle. In driving hogs, you start them as fast as you can, you make all kinds of noise, and you try to panic them. You shout at them in Latin. But once they are started, you slow them as you go along. When you get them right up to the pen you want them in, you come to a stop. The pigs will then look right and left and think that they have discovered it. And in they go.”

With an opinion on seemingly everything that touches politics, McCarthy offers plenty of wisdom and wisecracks in this book. In his essay on the courts, he discusses how the courts are overburdened and asked to do too much – both in terms of case volumes and the nature of the political questions they are asked to settle. For example, he says, “the failure of Congress and the President to take the initiative on civil rights forced the courts to act. This often meant that there was no administrative machinery or supporting legislation to sustain the court decisions. So there was an imbalance between what the courts ordered and what was carried out. The result was great friction, as in the case of busing. A similar problem developed with the due process guarantees.”

He concludes this section with an argument for more nonlawyers on the Supreme Court, naming historians Henry Steele Commager and Barbara Tuchman, as well as sociologist David Riesman and political theorist Hannah Arendt as good options for future presidents to consider.

Throughout the book McCarthy reserves his strongest criticism for what President Eisenhower dubbed the “military industrial complex.” From war machine corporations to the military and political elites, the profiteers of an ever-increasing military budget prop up dictatorships, autocracies, authoritarians, and continue to receive support from both major political parties. McCarthy says the military establishment “has become a kind of republic within the Republic. The

military influence, as President Eisenhower warned in his Farewell Address, ‘is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. Since he spoke, the situation has become more serious, more dangerous. The military budget has gone from about forty-five billion to roughly eighty-four billion dollars a year.’ Now, in the year 2023, the U.S. military budget tops 800 billion dollars a year.

Like others, McCarthy notes that the pathway to totalitarianism and autocracy is paved with determinism, “the uncritical acceptance of certain ideas, the uncritical yielding to procedures. The clearest example of this today is the militarization of American government policy, culture, and thought.” From the various “wars” on poverty, cancer, drugs, and other non-military subjects, the “individual is caught up not only in the military complex but in a whole combination of complexes.” This blind, yet all-too-common popular acceptance leads to authoritarian actions and systems.

Due to the winner-take-all, single-member districts, one characteristic of American democracy is the two-party system. McCarthy never was a party loyalist and always had independent, iconoclast views, especially on the roles of political parties. He says, “The most serious immediate test of democracy and American political process is outside the Senate and outside the House. It rests in more responsible political parties and more responsible and relevant presidential elections.” After a historical review of various third-party candidates, McCarthy concludes, “the two-party system is not a matter of revelation. It was not written on the back of the tablets that Moses brought down from the mountain. It was not even recommended by the very wise, even inspired, men who drafted our Constitution. It does not have an unbroken tradition. So on all counts – revelation and wisdom and Constitution and experiences it is subject to rather serious challenge”

The second section is “Operations.” This section includes wide-ranging commentary on primaries, the cult of the expert, lobbyists, protests, and political activism. McCarthy warns the reader, “we must guard against compromising our methods and principles because we are satisfied that our ends are good.” It would be interesting to hear McCarthy’s commentary on primaries today, especially with the Democratic Party recently removing Iowa as the first caucus state. As someone who was so clearly shorted by party bosses in the 1968 primaries, McCarthy is the right person to call for democratizing party primaries. Spreading the voting over several days and using more absentee voting are two ideas he writes about. And due to Covid-19 and other reasons, many more voters can now cast absentee ballots prior to election day.

The third section is “Principles.” McCarthy states, “the record of history shows that most bad things have been done by people who felt that their ends justified the methods they used.” There are several moving poems in this section that readers will enjoy. I found it difficult to know if there is a rank-order to the principles McCarthy most supports. He is not a pacifist but is best known for his stance against unjust and ill-conceived military use and expenditures. Arguing for a more globalist view, McCarthy says “there is no place in the world today and no person in the world for which we do not have some degree of obligation and responsibility.”

The fourth section is “A Good Person is Not So Hard to Find.” This is an interesting, if somewhat limited section. It is a short set of ten personal shout-outs to people who McCarthy sees as noteworthy for him personally and for humanity.

McCarthy's book is a reminder that authoritarian antics and regimes have seeds rooted all around the U.S. and the globe. While some of his language and views are outdated, much of the book's theoretical underpinning will be of interest to readers, especially fans of Senator Eugene McCarthy.

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