

EULOGY FOR SENATOR THOMAS EAGLETON*

ROBIN CARNAHAN**

Time and again Senator Eagleton and I had the same exchange: I would greet him by saying, “Hello, Senator.” And his booming voice would respond:

Stop calling me “Senator.”

My name is Tom!

Do you call your mother Senator?

Then he would fervently try to convince me to forget the title and just call him Tom. And, each time, I would smile and laugh and ignore his request. You see, I never could give it up, calling him Senator. Because, to me, Tom Eagleton personified exactly what a Senator is supposed to be.

As a young girl, I had grown up wearing his campaign buttons, handing out his literature, and following his every political move.

He was one of those rare politicians who had a perfect winning record in twelve elections.¹ Missourians trusted and respected Eagleton so much that they gave him the highest margin of victory in his Senate career in 1974—his

* St. Francis Xavier (College) Church, St. Louis, Missouri, March 10, 2007.

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1. Primary and General Election Results for Circuit Attorney for the City of St. Louis (1956), Missouri State Archives, Shelf 2A/4/6; Primary and General Election Results for Attorney General of Missouri (1960), Missouri State Archives, Shelves 2A/4/7, 2A/4/8; Primary and General Election Results for Lt. Governor of Missouri (1964), Missouri State Archives, Shelf 3A/3/1; Primary and General Election Results for United States Senator for Missouri (1968), Missouri State Archives, Shelf 3A/3/3; Primary and General Election Results for United States Senator for Missouri (1974), Missouri State Archives, Shelves 3A/3/9, 3B/3/9; Primary and General Election Results for United States Senator for Missouri (1980), Missouri State Archives, Shelves 3A/4/6, 3A/4/8.

first re-election following that tumultuous Miami summer of 1972.² But it was after the Senator retired from public office that I came to know him best. We both started new jobs at the same time at the same law firm, known then as Thompson Mitchell.

You see, he and Barbara did something that in today's Washington is almost unheard of for those retiring from public life . . . they returned home . . . home to their beloved St. Louis.

Eagleton had no interest in being a Washington lobbyist. None. Instead, he was ready to begin the next chapter in his life: teaching, writing, practicing law, speaking, advising, badgering—some might even say obsessing—about the important issues of the day.

So our lives touched—his after spending thirty years in public service, mine after three years in law school. Feeling that my education was incomplete, he immediately took me under his wing. And it didn't take me long to appreciate the energy and sheer "life force" that Eagleton brought to whatever task he undertook. He had exuberance for everything around him and a great curiosity about what was taking place in the world.

Being well-versed in so many topics (and with strong feelings about most of them) made him a treasured resource and a great teacher. The Senator took great delight in introducing me, the country girl from Rolla, to some of his favorite big-city, worldly indulgences, like lunch at Beffa's cafeteria or his latest acquisition of German expressionist art. No matter what the topic, he was never too busy to listen and give wise counsel. So, like many others, I turned to the Senator often for advice and guidance.

Barbara, Terry, and Christy, I'm sure you've heard many, many stories during the past week from people who loved this extraordinary man. In the days ahead, I hope you can take some measure of comfort in knowing how much he brightened our lives.

Of all my dealings with the Senator, though, there were two encounters in particular that both had a profound impact on my life and also showed what Eagleton felt was important.

The first happened after I'd been practicing law for several years and was becoming a little restless. I asked the Senator for advice. I told him that I was thinking about leaving the private practice and getting involved in public, not-for-profit work. He said, without a moment's hesitation, "Good idea. Do it now. If you wait too long, you'll never be able to walk away from such a high-paying job." Then, when I mentioned my interest in working with a particular group that promoted democracy around the world, that's when he really got

2. *Compare* General Election Results for United States Senator for Missouri (1974), Missouri State Archives, Shelf 3B/3/9 *with* General Election Results for United States Senator for Missouri (1968), Missouri State Archives, Shelf 3A/3/3 *and* General Election Results for United States Senator for Missouri, (1980), Missouri State Archives, Shelf 3A/4/8.

excited . . . and much louder . . . and more animated . . . just as he always did when something appealed to him. “They do great work!” he exclaimed. “I’m on the board of that outfit! The guy in charge used to be my foreign policy advisor. Go see him.”

Well, after that there was no turning back. And within a few months, my career in public service began. It was a transforming experience, and I had the Senator to thank for it. But I wasn’t the only person in my family to be adopted by Senator Eagleton. He helped in my father’s campaigns, and, when Mom went to the Senate, Eagleton adopted her too. In fact, he made his first trip back to the floor of the U.S. Senate after fourteen years in retirement to accompany my mother the day she was sworn in to office.

And during the months that followed, Eagleton did what constituents often do. He wrote to Mom, as our new Senator, about things going on in Washington that he didn’t like. One memorable example of this happened when Mom started receiving, literally every other day, those famously scrawled Eagleton notes. The subject of his wrath was the Chairman of the SEC, Harvey Pitt. Eagleton was convinced Pitt had too many conflicts of interest to serve in that position. And as you know, the Chairman finally resigned.³ I don’t know if it had anything to do with the volume of letters that Eagleton sent to Capitol Hill, or not. But afterwards, Mom and her staff sent Eagleton a note saying that, in a way, they hated to see Pitt go, because now they wouldn’t be hearing from Eagleton as often. Eagleton quickly responded: “Don’t worry! You’ll still hear from me. Now, I intend to start on Wolfowitz.” And he did.

There is no doubt that Tom Eagleton possessed a profound sense of moral clarity. He had high expectations for himself and for others in positions of public trust. And he had no patience — none at all — for anyone who failed to meet those same standards.

The next time I turned to the Senator for advice was after my father was gone and my mother had lost her election. I was considering whether to run for public office myself. Not surprisingly, the Senator was enthusiastic. He reminded me of something he said at the time of my father’s funeral. “Politics is the art of self-government,” he said. “If good people do not study politics, and learn it, and practice it, then government will be abandoned to those of lesser motives.”

Yes, Eagleton loved politics and he was never ashamed to call himself a politician. To him public office was a sacred trust and a worthy pursuit for a young person. Holding office was never about power and perks and privilege. For him, it was about finding solutions and creating good policy that would make a difference in people’s lives. In his heart, Eagleton was always a public

3. Jeanne Cummings et al., *Rapid Exit: SEC’s Pitt Resigns Amid Controversy Over Webster Job*, WALL ST. J., Nov. 6, 2002, at A1.

servant. Politics wasn't his job, it was his calling, and he devoted himself to it wholeheartedly.

I am sure the Senator was familiar with the prayer of St. Augustine—"Let it be in Thy service that I speak and write and reckon." By all accounts, that prayer guided Tom Eagleton's life. In office or out, he continued to combat the old foes of mankind: ignorance, intolerance, injustice, and human suffering. Because of his example, and now because of his absence, it is up to us to take up these tasks with new resolve.

Of all the words written about Tom Eagleton this past week, those of his friend, former Vice President Walter Mondale, captured the Eagleton that I most remember. Mondale wrote:

Tom Eagleton was one of the most important public men of our time. Brilliant, gutsy, funny, serious, loyal, progressive, and impatient, he was a central figure in our nation's high tide of civic reform and social justice. If you wonder whether it is possible for a public official to be honest, caring and selfless and worthy of your trust, just look at the life of Tom Eagleton; Tom was that way every day of his life.⁴

We are saddened today because Tom Eagleton's booming voice will no longer ring out against wrongdoing, his good humor and wise counsel will no longer brighten our days, and his notes of encouragement will no longer appear in our mailboxes. But when I think about Tom Eagleton's life, I'll try to remember what the children's book writer, Theodor Geisel (you may know him as Dr. Seuss) said: "Don't cry because it's over; smile because it happened."

Thank you, Tom, for your life of service and for once again leaving us with a smile.

4. Email from Walter Mondale, Vice President, to Roy Temple, commentator on Fired Up! Missouri (March 5, 2007) (on file with author). See also Jean Carnahan, Editorial, *Remembering Tom Eagleton: His Notes Sparkled with Wit and Wisdom*, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, Mar. 8, 2007, at B9.