

From South Dakota political revolutionary to Northeast Florida semi-retiree, George McGovern continues to shape the American debate.

# A Man In Full

WALTER COKER

**G**eorge McGovern is 87, with all the wisdom and burdens that such age brings. He's flown harrowing bombing missions as a combat pilot, and campaigned against (and been resoundingly defeated by) one of the most reviled presidents in American political history. He lost a daughter to alcoholism, helped reduce hunger and poverty on a global scale, and for 20 years held the title of U.S. Senator. A life-long resident of rural South Dakota, McGovern also made a late-in-life decision to live part of each year in touristy St. Augustine Beach.

His new home, a spacious four-bedroom in the gated community of Marsh Creek, is neither modest nor extravagant, merely comfortable, decorated with political memorabilia and family photographs. He answers the door himself, wearing a tweed jacket, brown corduroys and white Reeboks. McGovern advances his thin frame at a measured pace, but his mind hasn't slowed with age. He was a spirited critic of the adminis-

By Kara Pound

tration during the Bush years, accusing both the president and vice president of "a variety of impeachable offenses." He's been a vocal opponent of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and appealed to President Obama not to expand troop deployments in the latter. In addition to writing occasional op-eds for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, McGovern is currently at work on his autobiography. One imagines that there's plenty to sift through. McGovern created the Women, Infants, Children (WIC) Program, tripled the size of the federal school lunch program, served in the House and Senate for a quarter-century, was appointed by John F. Kennedy as world-wide director of the Food for Peace program, was appointed U.N. Ambassador on World Hunger in 2001, and was awarded the 2008 World Food Prize Laureate along with Bob

Dole. He's written 14 books (most recently a short biography of Abraham Lincoln), earned a Ph.D. in history from Northwestern University and been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Now a Florida snowbird (he splits his time between here and his home state), McGovern has already made an impact on Northeast Florida, counting some local elected officials and musicians as close friends. He's even done spots for St. Augustine's local (and generally conservative-leaning) AM radio station.

During a recent interview at his home, McGovern offered a glimpse of the person whose bid for the presidency was tagged the "acid, amnesty and abortion" campaign. He revealed a quick wit ("This must be Barack Obama," he tells a reporter when his cell phone rings), a love for the Newfoundland dog breed (he has a slobbery 125-pound puppy named Dakota) and a strong desire to

maintain his family's privacy (I was specifically told not to ask about them). Here's what he shared:

**Folio Weekly:** What brought you to St. Augustine?

**George McGovern:** I have a friend that's lived here for some years who used to live in my hometown, Mitchell, S.D. He talked about it so favorably, I decided to come down and take a look. I think he's been here maybe 20 years now. I've found it very comfortable. The pace seems to me to be relaxed, and I appreciate that. I do quite a bit of reading and also writing. Those are my two main activities in life these days, and this is a great place for that.

**FW.:** What do you read to stay informed?

**G.M.:** I try to read the daily press wherever I'm located — the hometown paper. I also read *The New York Times* every day. That's what I was doing when you arrived. And I read books that are coming out on public affairs, history, international relations. Well, you know, I did a book on Abraham Lincoln that came out about a year ago, and it looks like it's a bestseller, so I'm pleased with that. I read a lot in preparation for that writing. But I'm always reading something. I'm currently reading up on Afghanistan.

**FW.:** Do you think there's a legitimate comparison between what's going on there and the Vietnam War?

**G.M.:** Yes. Yes. Yes. I think that both of them are tiny little countries in terms of population — neither one of them is the slightest threat to us. I don't see the point in sending this marvelous army we have into a place like that. I don't even know how we'll know whether we've won or not. If we've overwhelmed them, does that mean we've won? What have we won, then? Does it mean we're going to be able to kill more of their insurgents than they kill of our soldiers? I don't know.

I believed completely in the Second World War. That's when I volunteered and served as a bomber pilot against the most heavily defended targets in Hitler's Nazi lab. But I've been skeptical of most of the wars since then.

**FW.:** How do you think Pres. Obama's doing with the war and other things?

**G.M.:** Poor. Poor. Poorly in Afghanistan. It makes me sad, because I'm a big supporter of his, and I think he has the intelligence and the integrity to be a great president, but when I hear that 21,000 [troops] were sent in last spring — almost as soon as he arrived at the White House — and then another 30,000 now and the generals say that's not enough, so we'll probably add more in the next six or eight months, which rings like Vietnam to me. ... I didn't think we would ever again go down that road, but it looks to me like we're on that road in Afghanistan.

I still think he's done a lot of good things. He's wise to make a battle on health care. I think his stimulus package has done some good — it may not be as big as it should be. I give him credit for doing the best he can. I just wish he wouldn't listen to the people that have told him it's a good idea to put our army into Afghanistan.

**FW.:** In WWII, you flew about three-dozen high-risk missions over enemy territory. How do you feel about politicians who don't serve in the military?



**"Everybody seems to love you after you leave office," says the former senator (shown here speaking in Syracuse, N.Y., on Oct. 31, 1972), who unsuccessfully challenged Richard Nixon for president.**

**G.M.:** Well, I've sometimes thought — this is partly a tongue-in-cheek answer — that we ought to have a law that says, "Those who vote for a war ought to have to spend some time on the frontlines themselves." Some people might say, "Well, some members of Congress are probably too old." But they could walk ahead of the troops and set off the land mines. At least they could do that. You know, carry those minesweepers. You know, even I could do that. And you know if I was gung-ho about going to war in Afghanistan, I'd volunteer — even at my age.

**FW.:** You never exploited your decorated military record when it came to campaigning. Why not?

**G.M.:** If I had it to do over, I would have exploited it more than I did. I have a rather strong military record, and it was probably a political mistake not to exploit it. The reason [I didn't] was I always felt a little bit foolish telling people that I'm a big hero. So I told people I was a bomber pilot, but I didn't tell them any of the stories. ... Many of the bombers didn't make it through the war, and I should have made that clearer.

**FW.:** When you were stationed in Italy in '44, you were faced with a starving Italian population. Was that the beginning of your passion for helping the hungry?

**G.M.:** Today, Italy is probably the best-fed country on the planet. It's hard to find a bad cook anywhere in Italy. It's hard to find a bad restaurant or a bad market. But not so in World War II.

It began with our troop ship coming into Naples harbor. It was lined with 300 or 400

little kids, shouting to us in broken English: "Hey Joe! Baby Ruths, Butterfingers, Hershey bars!" The commander of the ship came on over the loudspeaker and said, "Do not throw anything to those children!" Those youngsters [were] at the edge of starvation, and [the day before] an American ship came in and the GIs started throwing candy bars and some of it fell in the water. Twenty-five little children drowned.

That's where it began, and it's stayed with me until this afternoon. I still think we can end hunger on this planet at rather reasonable costs — a tiny fraction of what it costs to run this war in Afghanistan.

**FW.:** Are you still troubled by memories of your time in the war?

**G.M.:** Yes. I thought it was possibly the worst tragedy in our history.

**FW.:** Are you in contact with any of your old war buddies?

**G.M.:** Well, most of my crew is gone. I've always stayed in touch with my own bomber crew, but most of them are now gone.

**FW.:** Your father was a reverend. How has religion shaped your politics?

**G.M.:** It gave me a respect for truthfulness. I'm not arguing that the clergy always speaks the truth, but they try to say what they think is the truth. My father was incapable of telling a lie, and I knew that. I knew that my mother and father were just incapable of lying to us about anything. They had great integrity. They were conservative Republicans. I'm not against conservatives. Particularly the ones that want to conserve life —

young soldiers — that want to conserve this beautiful environment. That's the kind of conservatives I like. I even like conservatives that say the debt's too big — the national debt — they call us Democrats "big spenders," but we're pikers compared to what has happened under Bush/Cheney.

**FW.:** How do you think the world would be different if you had won the presidency?

**G.M.:** Well, the Cold War would have ended a lot earlier than it did. I give Reagan credit for cutting a deal with Gorbachev. I would have pressed that years earlier, because that Cold War dragged on long after it served any useful purpose. The Russians never wanted to go to war with us. We never wanted to go to war with them, yet each country almost bankrupted itself piling up arms. We got enough nuclear weapons on each side to kill every human being on this planet a hundred times over. That's how much foolishness was invested in that Cold War. So I would have ended the Cold War, and I would have, of course, ended the Vietnam War the day after I was inaugurated. We would not have gone to war in Iraq, we would not have gone to war in Afghanistan. I would have reduced military spending steadily so much each year and provided jobs for the people who lost their jobs, doing useful things like improving our national parks, our national forests, our overall environmental program. I would have urged Congress to authorize the building of the world's fastest, cleanest, safest railway network in the world. I would have tried to upgrade the quality of teaching and the schools. I would have pressed hard for universal health care for all Americans. All of this could have been easily financed by what we would have saved on unnecessary wars and what we would have saved from excessive military spending.

**FW.:** Do you think today's youth have a sense of entitlement?

**G.M.:** I don't think so. I have faith in these young people today. You know, they have a different view of things than my generation, but it doesn't necessarily mean we were any superior to them. They are saturated by television, they are saturated with what I call second-rate music, but in spite of that, I think you can trust the average young person to make a worthwhile contribution.

**FW.:** You were really close with Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary. Will you tell me about that relationship?

**G.M.:** I first got acquainted with her in the 1960s — shortly after she and Peter and Paul got together. They came up to South Dakota every time I ran for office and did a benefit for me. Right up until a couple of months before Mary died. I spoke at her funeral — that's the way it ended — but it began with these benefit concerts. They did this big one at Madison Square Garden when I was running for president [1972] — 22,000 people were at that one. We made a lot of money. I always loved the way they sang.

**FW.:** You were an early advocate of the legalization of pot.

**G.M.:** No. I never advocated that. I said that I thought that we ought to change the first possession of marijuana to a misdemeanor rather than a felony, but of course the Nixon people said I wanted to legalize drugs. I didn't want to legalize anything. In most

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states, a first possession of marijuana was a felony — you went to the state penitentiary. And I thought that was wrong. Every kid ought to get one break. Everybody experimented with marijuana, including one of my daughters who — But, anyway, that is all I ever said about drugs.

**FW.:** How do you feel about legalizing it now, and taxing it to help relieve some of the national debt?

**G.M.:** I don't know whether I advocate that

thought we all had enough knowledge of the Vietnam War.

**FW.:** We don't learn much from history, do we?

**G.M.:** I think that's true. Why, after more than a decade of floundering around in Vietnam, are we doing the same thing in another Third World country? Two of them! There might have been a justification for sending a small search party into Afghanistan right after 9/11 — maybe the next day, but we

**I don't see the point in sending this marvelous army we have into a place like [Afghanistan]. I don't even know how we'll know whether we've won or not.**

or not. It can be pretty treacherous; of course, so can alcohol. But I don't think I favor legalizing it.

**FW.:** Bill and Hillary Clinton worked on your campaign in the early '70s. Are you still in touch with them?

**G.M.:** Yeah, I've been in contact with them over the years.

**FW.:** How do you think Hillary's doing as Secretary of State?

**G.M.:** I think she's doing very well. I'm really proud of her. And I think every time Bill speaks now about the world situation, I think he makes a lot of sense. He's a brilliant guy. I backed Hillary to begin with — I had not even met Barack Obama at that time. And I knew Hillary from the '72 [presidential] campaign, so I endorsed her candidacy, but I felt that he [Obama] was maybe holding out the hope for more change in our policies. That's one of the reasons why I'm sad about this expansion of the war [in Afghanistan]. I never thought he would do that. I didn't think Hillary would, either. I

didn't do that. We let several weeks go by before we made a move and, meanwhile, it's believed that Osama bin Laden moved across the frontier into Pakistan. You know, if you knew where he was, I wouldn't mind pulling the trigger if we knew where the guy was, but we don't.

**FW.:** Do you keep up with local politics?

**G.M.:** Somewhat. I just follow it in your paper. I guess you could say I'm pretty well-informed on local politics.

**FW.:** If you could make changes locally, what changes would you make?

**G.M.:** Not very many. I'm very pleased with life here. One thing I don't know about is the level of education. I know that Flagler is a first-rate college, but I don't know about the elementary and secondary schools. If I were in office, I would make it a point to [address] the quality of education.

**FW.:** Would you ever run for local office?

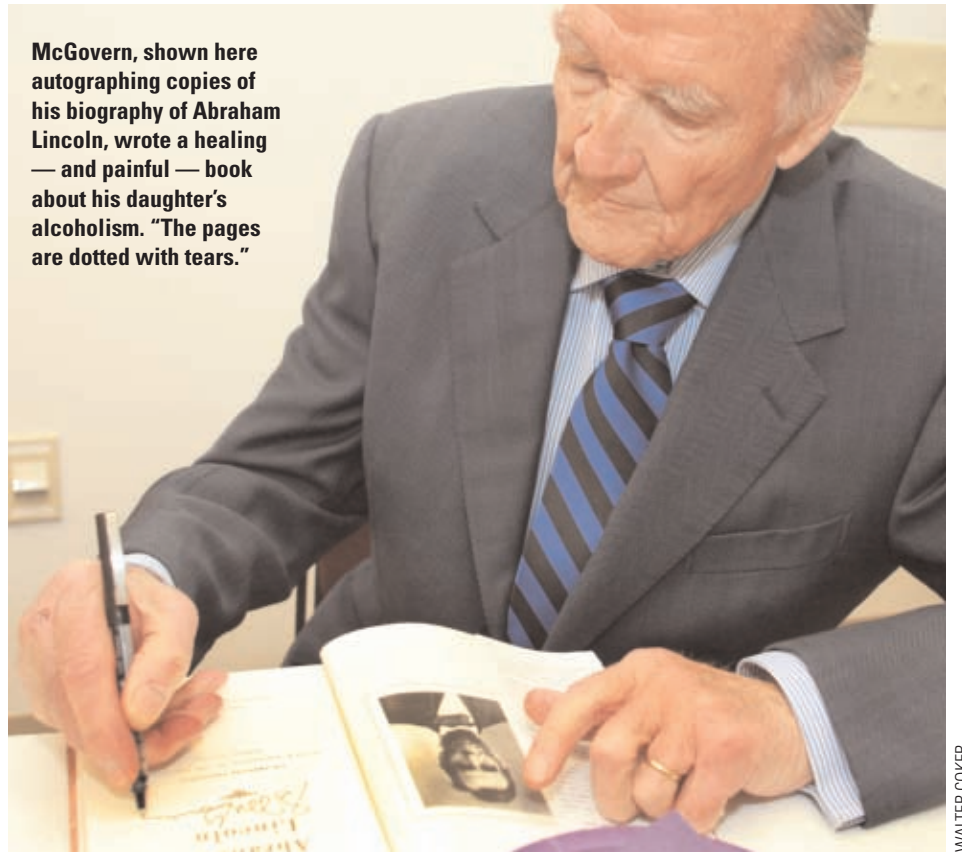
**G.M.:** No, no. [Laughs] I've had enough of holding office. You can't serve in the United



**"I believed completely in the Second World War," says McGovern, who flew 35 combat missions in that conflict, including several in this B-24 bomber. "But I've been skeptical of most of the wars since then."**

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**McGovern, shown here autographing copies of his biography of Abraham Lincoln, wrote a healing — and painful — book about his daughter's alcoholism. "The pages are dotted with tears."**



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States Congress for 22 years and then start over in a small town somewhere. It just doesn't work that way.

**FW.:** Is it easier to be a politician or a former politician?

**G.M.:** A former politician. That's lovely because everybody seems to love you after you leave office. People come up to me and say, "Well, I didn't vote for you when you ran for president, but now I wish I had." I've heard that a dozen times — people in this town. That's always encouraging. Will Rogers once said, "I never met a man I didn't like." That's another way of saying, "Once you look at somebody, and you grasp their hand in a handshake or you pat them on the back, you can't say, 'I hate that guy.'" I can't think of anybody I hate, and I don't want to hate anybody.

**FW.:** Who are you supporting in the governor's race?

**G.M.:** I'm not supporting anybody because I can't vote here. I vote in South Dakota.

**FW.:** Are you troubled by partisan trends in the current political debate? Do you propose any solutions?

**G.M.:** There's too much partisanship in the Congress right now and you know — I hope this doesn't sound too biased — I think it comes largely from the Republicans because they're on the outs now. We've [Democrats] got the White House, we've got both the Senate and the House, and they seem to be playing the role of a blocker — to oppose everything that the president proposes. And I think that that's unfortunate. You ask what the answer is. The answer is to get to know people on the other side as individuals.

**FW.:** You're good friends with Bob Dole, a staunch Republican. Can you talk about that a bit?

**G.M.:** He and I have become longtime friends. Do we agree? No. There are lots of things we disagree about. He thought the war in Vietnam was wonderful and he knew a lot about it, I thought it was a disaster, so

we don't talk about that. But we agree on agriculture, we agree on food stamps, we agree on school lunches, we agree on the WIC program that he and I are the co-authors of. And we got almost everything we wanted through the Senate and the House because when people saw a bill come up with the McGovern/Dole name at the top, they figured, "Well, it can't be all bad." And we're still working together on this International School Lunch Program. That's my current passion.

**FW.:** We were told not to ask about your family, but is there anything you would like to say in regard to them?

**G.M.:** I'm very proud of my family. We had four daughters and one son. And they are all doing well, but in 1994, we lost a middle daughter named Terry, and she died of alcoholism.

**FW.:** I'm sure you still think about that every day.

**G.M.:** Yes. I do. I wrote a book about it. It's simply called, "Terry: My Daughter's Life-and-Death Struggle with Alcoholism" and that became a bestseller. I get constant comments from alcoholics who say the book strengthened their resolve to stop drinking.

**FW.:** Does that help ease the pain?

**G.M.:** Yes. It was a painful thing to write that book, and the pages of the manuscript are dotted with tears. I'm glad, though, that it's helped so many people.

**FW.:** Do you plan on writing any more books?

**G.M.:** I'm going to write my memoirs, and then we'll see what I haven't said there that might justify a separate book.

**FW.:** What would you like to be remembered for?

**G.M.:** Two things. I helped end the war in Vietnam ... and then, secondly, I probably fed more hungry people around the world than anybody else. That means a lot to me. □