



No Apologies, No Regrets

Pete McCloskey admits he has been insensitive to the Jewish community. But he stands by his anti-Israel — some say anti-Semitic — record as he tests the waters for a return to Congress.

by Hal Plotkin

In 1972, then-Congressman Paul N. "Pete" McCloskey catapulted himself into national prominence by mounting an aggressive, spirited anti-Vietnam War longshot campaign to wrest the Republican presidential nomination from incumbent President Richard Nixon. Before withdrawing from that year's presidential contest—just in time to run again for his peninsula congressional seat—McCloskey had won nearly 20 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire primary and had quickly become a hero to peace and environmental activists around the country.

Now, 15 years later, many of those same people are wondering what has become of the intelligent idealist who—at the height of the Vietnam War—actually succeeded in increasing the numbers of locally registered young Republicans at a time when the national Republican Party was in increasing disfavor among most youthful Americans.

What has dismayed so many former McCloskey supporters is the steady drumbeat of criticism he has directed at Israel and at Jewish-Americans' support of the tiny, besieged Mideast democracy. In the past few years—and once again in the interview that follows—McCloskey challenges Israeli policies and touches on his controversial view that Jewish Americans may lack loyalty to America because of their religious ties.

The controversy surrounding McCloskey's relations with the American Jewish community can be traced to the days before he became a candidate for the US Senate seat now held by former San Diego Mayor Pete Wilson, who defeated McCloskey for the 1982 Republican Senate nomination. The fat was thrown into the fire a few months before that campaign when, shortly after the Arab oil embargo of the 1970s—which helped cause the nightmarish gas lines most of us cannot forget—McCloskey began to speak out for what he called a more "even-handed" approach in the Middle East.

At first, many local Jewish leaders—the late Fairmont Hotel magnate Ben Swig, among others, had been important McCloskey financial contributors—did not know what to make of McCloskey's remarks. A decade-and-a-half later, however, McCloskey now finds himself fending off heated accusations of anti-Semitism that spring from a pattern of behavior that has alienated large numbers of his former supporters.

Among many actions and statements, two events stand out in the recent memory of supporters of Israel who are not at all happy about having their loyalty to America questioned. McCloskey's 1982 visit to Beirut—where he met with, and lent credibility to, PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat—remains a singular outrage to most of Israel's US supporters.

At the time, McCloskey obtained Arafat's signature on a piece of paper that McCloskey publicly claimed recognized Israel's right to exist. When, hours later, an Arafat

spokesperson at the UN said that the vaguely worded, one-sentence document prepared by McCloskey meant nothing of the sort, McCloskey was roasted in the national press for being "naive" and "gullible."

Nevertheless, McCloskey remains publicly supportive of Arafat's PLO organization, which still pledges in its bylaws to destroy the State of Israel, and claimed as recently as last winter (in an article penned for the *San Jose Mercury News*) that the PLO is a moderate force in the Mideast and that the more extreme Abu Nidal faction of Palestinians—and not the PLO—are responsible for continuing terrorist acts directed against Israel, American travellers and Jews around the globe.

"The State Department states unequivocally that Abu Nidal broke away from Arafat 11 years ago precisely because of Arafat's order to his followers—in 1974—to cease all violence outside Palestine itself," McCloskey wrote in the *Mercury News* in defense of his support for Arafat.

At the heart of the controversy is what appears to be a pattern of selective indignation directed at human rights abuses in Israel but not in the Arab world. Why should one small and imperfect democracy be singled out for criticism while abuses by surrounding tribal monarchies, fiefdoms and dictatorships are ignored? The application of one standard for the Jewish nation and another for other countries of the world has caused many Jewish leaders to charge that anti-Israel rhetoric is often a thinly veiled form of anti-Semitism.

Now a private citizen and attorney, McCloskey has not contented himself with criticisms of Israel alone. In more recent years he has become a legal lightning-rod attracting clients like controversial Poland scholar Norman Davies, who was denied a permanent faculty post at Stanford and later—with McCloskey's help—unsuccessfully sued the University claiming that a Jewish conspiracy was responsible for the faculty decision to deny him tenure.

These factors—McCloskey's consistent support of PLO Chairman Arafat, his selective indignation aimed almost exclusively at Israel and his lawsuits against individual American Jews in academia, the arts and elsewhere—promise to make the prospect of a McCloskey political comeback one of the most controversial events on next year's political horizon.

His likely opponent, freshman Republican Congressman Ernest Konnyu, whom McCloskey has called "an embarrassment to the district," has already tried to capitalize on McCloskey's estranged relationship with the Jewish community by alleging—in a fundraising pitch to local Jews—that McCloskey once called *Peninsula Times Tribune* journalist Mark Simon "that Jew," a charge McCloskey heatedly denies.