

This interview with PCI board member, Pete McCloskey, appeared in *the Raw Story* on Tuesday, February 1, 2021.

## Political legend Pete McCloskey compares 'psychopath' Trump to Hitler -- and traces the GOP's demise to Newt Gingrich

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Screenshot from PBS documentary "Leading From the Front"

If anyone ought to have a perspective about the troubled state of American democracy, it's Pete McCloskey.

Now 93, McCloskey had more than a front-row seat during the turbulent Vietnam era and the fall of President Richard Nixon. As a renegade Republican congressman, McCloskey called for Nixon's impeachment over the Vietnam War in 1971, opposed him in the Republican primary in 1972 and was the first to demand his resignation during Watergate.

So McCloskey knows an outlaw president when he sees one. With the benefit of that experience and the wisdom of his years, does he see the need to view the reign of Donald Trump

dispassionately as just a case of history repeating itself? Are people overreacting to the turmoil of recent times?

Nope.

McCloskey describes the current climate as "much worse" than the Vietnam era. And he sees Trump -- "a narcissistic psychopath incapable of the truth" -- on an entirely different level than his old nemesis from the 70s. Indeed, McCloskey likened Trump's impact on the Republican Party to that of Adolf Hitler. And he continues to worry about the safety of U.S. politicians.

Highly decorated as a Marine combat veteran in the Korean War, only to become the first Republican elected to Congress opposing the one in Vietnam, McCloskey hasn't lost any of the passion that set him apart as a renegade Republican in his heyday. Nor has any of the idealism faded that spurred him to work across the aisle as co-founder of the first Earth Day and as co-author of the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

McCloskey says Congress should go full bore in its investigations of Trump, with "every committee and subcommittee" focused on getting to the bottom of what happened to the government during his reign. And he continues to bemoan what's happened to his former political party, a decay he traces back to former colleague Newt Gingrich's election as Speaker of the House in 1994.

McCloskey does see President Joe Biden as having "as much chance as anyone" in restoring some of the relative civility that existed during his 15-year Congressional career spanning 1967 to 1982. And he drew inspiration from how democracy prevailed in the wake of the Capitol insurrection.

Through it all, Congressman Paul Norton (Pete) McCloskey Jr. has kept his sense of humor.

Raw Story spoke to McCloskey last week. What follows is a lightly edited version of that interview.

***Q. What has happened to American politics?***

A: Who knows? It's a mystery to all of us. How can some Republicans get up and say, oh yes, we think the election was rigged when they know that it wasn't?

I mean, the closest you can come to it is *Kristallnacht* in 1938 when Hitler's stormtroopers dragged the Jews out of their house and broke all the windows and he had convinced the German people that the Jews were responsible for having lost World War One. And the stormtroopers, coupled with his concept of the Aryan race: that Germans were a special race and that Jews were tainting the blood of the chosen people. He gradually convinced the Germans of the untruth, and they accepted that the Jews were responsible, and the Holocaust was justified.

***Q. That's quite a comparison.***

A. That's the only way I can explain what Trump has done in these last four years. for Republicans to all stand-up and say something that they don't believe yet saying that they believe it. I don't know that anyone could explain that except as a sort of a mass herd of sheep mentality or buffaloes thundering across the plains. The madness on the faces of those who raided the Capitol reflects almost an insanity, a cult a faith, a religion that goes all the way back to the Bible that to wipe out all the enemies and kill their sheep and sow their grounds with salt. These people believe they're right. And it isn't a matter of rationally discussing it with them. It's a matter of challenging their faith when you say it's not true, that the elections weren't rigged. I don't know how to explain that though. If anything, my inability to explain should come through.

***Q. That's a long way from where you were as an idealistic young 40-year-old running for his first office in 1967. How did you get into all this?***

A. Our congressman suddenly announced that he had leukemia and a cousin of mine said that means he's going to die within a week, which he did. The expectation was that Shirley Temple would be our Congresswoman. She was very conservative, and the odds-on favorite to win. Something snapped in me. I thought if you're going to gripe about the system, you ought to be

willing to serve in it. I never wanted to be in politics. I'd seen local government corrupted and state government wasn't anything I wanted to have anything to do with. But with the Congress of the United States, I thought was a worthwhile thing.

***Q. So your first race for public office was against Shirley Temple? That must have been interesting.***

A. There was no way you run against a child movie star. You couldn't criticize her. You couldn't say anything. But luckily, she talked herself out of it. A lot of people over 60 loved her, since they remembered her from the Good Ship Lollipop. But the Good Ship Lollipop girl wanted to nuke Hanoi. She wouldn't debate anybody. She could have been the Congresswoman if she had even the slightest sensitivity to the public, even though she was probably a nice person underneath it all.

***Q. So you managed to defeat Shirley Temple without attacking the Good Ship Lollipop?***

A. A guy wrote a book called "The Sinking of the Lollipop" about that election. It was a surprise I was elected, especially since I'd come out against the Vietnam War and majority opinion at that time still favored the war. But I had a Marine Corps background so people really couldn't say I was a communist sympathizer. (Arguably, McCloskey's having been awarded the Navy Cross and Silver Star decorations for heroism in combat and two Purple Hearts while leading his Marine platoon in combat in Korea might have had something to do with it.)

***Q. You never thought much of Nixon even as a member of his party, did you?***

A. I had no real love for Richard Nixon going back to the 1940s when he was my congressman when I was in high school. But it wasn't until the tapes came out recently and have been declassified that the true evil of Nixon became apparent.

***Q. But you certainly were one of his leading critics, during the Vietnam War and through Watergate. So how do you compare him to Donald Trump?***

A. There really isn't any comparison. Next to Nixon, Trump is the antichrist. I think Trump's thinks of himself as almost a god, the Messiah, that's come to save the country. Certainly, his followers treat him like he's the Messiah. Nixon at least preserved the front of being a reasonable person. Trump is a narcissistic psychopath and incapable of the truth. It's not in him. But I'll tell you the President who was more like Trump than Nixon was Lyndon Johnson, who was a skilled diplomat and understood everything about Washington. We honor him for getting through Medicare and civil rights bills and much else. But he also got us into the Vietnam War by lying about what allegedly happened to a destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin. He and Secretary McNamara didn't hesitate to lie to the Congress to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed. Johnson was a terrible man.

***Q. Wow. So you won't be suggesting President Joe Biden emulate Johnson. Who would you suggest as more of a role model for him?***

A. I would say Gerry Ford. He was a good friend of mine, going back to our time together in Congress. Ford was the last of the great moderate Republicans. He believed in a woman's right of choice and other important issues. He was perhaps the most decent man I've ever known in politics, too decent a man to run for president. Most people who run for president don't have that quiet, decent judgment that Gerry had.

***Q. So many people remember him primarily, though, for his having pardoned Nixon.***

A. I can remember the euphoria, that overtook the country when Nixon resigned and finally that period was over. The unfortunate thing was that Congress then went in recess for a month. Had we been in session, had we been around to counsel Gerry, I think we could have talked to him out of the pardon. We'd have said, "Look, Mr. President, he'll plead guilty to two or three counts. or one count of something, he'll get straight probation and it'll be behind us." We knew he hadn't made any deal with Nixon, but it came out looking like he had. Ford had a big heart, and he did what he thought was right for the country. It did cost him the election.

***Q. So you think Biden might have some similarities to Ford?***

A. I think Biden is decent as well. And he knows the legislative process. But it's such an incredible task. For a president to bring us through all of this, he'll need the genius of a Franklin Roosevelt to do it. I think these first six months is so important. By summer they need to get the COVID crisis under control and the economy turning around. But there are so many challenges.

***Q. How did things get so bad?***

A. It's been happening for a long time. But I think you can trace a lot of the bitterness that now exists between the two parties back to Gingrich getting elected speaker in 1994. He had been in the House when I was there. He was a pop-off, and nobody thought of him as anything but a pop-off. But he conceived that for the Republicans to gain power, they needed to treat Democrats as weak and unprincipled and as people who were going to sell the country down the road. That the entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security were bankrupting the country and the Democrats were an evil thing to the country. When Gingrich became speaker, he removed chairmen from any of the 21 House committees if they collaborated with the Democrats in any way. He replaced them with hard heads. From that time on, the contempt Gingrich has felt for Democrats, that concept of regarding them as enemies of the country, has lasted beyond Gingrich's time. We're so far from where we were when I was in Congress, when people were more decent to one another even when they disagreed.

***Q. Do you think there's any hope of getting back to that at this point, given how divided people are, and how they're getting such different information from such different sources in the digital age?***

A. I don't know. I hope we can somehow get back to what we had with John Kennedy at one time: the idea that public service and public office was an honorable thing. I hope we can restore that in the 2022 elections. It's so hard, with 40 percent of the people not believing Biden's the duly elected president.

How do you reach out to those people? You put your finger on it with the question: With knowledge coming from so many different sources and there's so many people out there expressing crazy conspiracy theories, who knows what can be done? Is our educational system strong enough to cause people to go back, to think and challenge and discuss different ideas without all the hatred? These are real questions. But if anybody can do it, it's Joe Biden and I just wish him the best.

***Q. What did it feel like for you to be an elector for Biden at the tender age of 93?***

A. It was a wonderful honor. When my wife wheeled me into the California assembly room in the capitol and I sat behind one of those desks, I thought, my God, I'm going to have the privilege of being an elector for President of the United States. It was a wonderful feeling. But the real feeling-- the real euphoria we haven't had since Nixon resigned -- was the euphoria of watching the members of the House file back into the chamber two hours after it had been ravaged by the Trump people, to count the electoral ballots. Bless the vice president, under all that pressure, for saying, "my job is just to preside over the counting." The only way Biden was going to become president was when those electoral votes were counted, and he got to 270 votes. Trump knew that he had to block that some way, he had to stop the counting of the votes. If they had caught Pence, they would have hung him, if they would have been able to catch any of the Congress people particularly the speaker, they probably would have killed her on the spot. Mob violence is a terrible thing to behold. Every member of Congress was at risk. We should be grateful for their courage to count every vote, including mine.

***Q. So you're not one of the people who think Trump was just venting and using the occasion to raise money off his supporters. You think he was all in for a coup?***

A. Yes, I think, very definitely. He wanted to stop that vote count. I worried right up until the day they were counted that Trump and his people would understand that if they assassinated Joe Biden, Trump would remain president because Trump would have enough to win the electoral college if he had a dead candidate on the other side. I worry now that every Democratic senator

who has a Republican governor has a target on his back-- a bulls' eye on his back --because the people around Trump, those people out in the hinterlands who feel their country has been stolen from them, all they have to do is shoot one democratic senator from a state that has a Republican governor and suddenly the power shifts back to the Republicans in the senate. We see these people all around us that are so crazy that killing is a patriotic act on their part.

*Q. So what now?*

A. After the impeachment trial is over, every committee of Congress, every subcommittee ought to be investigating what happened during the Trump administration. I hope they subpoena everyone who was part of it, I hope they use their contempt power and use the Freedom of Information Act and remove some of the things that have kept the truth from coming out. This is such a challenging period. I wish that I were in Congress for the next two years.