

Thursday, December 29th, 2005
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Monday, December 26th, 2005
Alexandria, Louisiana

A LOUISIANA STATESMAN IS LAID TO REST

It is difficult to write and eulogize someone who is larger than life. Someone who has touched and influenced thousands of individuals throughout his lifetime. Someone who was admired and respected by presidents, governors, public personalities in numerous fields, the Catholic hierarchy from the Pope down to the simple priest in the smallest Louisiana village. So many people like these had the greatest of admiration and were friends of a Louisiana statesman-Camille Gravel.

Camille passed away this past Friday, after a six month struggle trying to overcome a stroke following bypass surgery. He was 90 years old.

He was buried and eulogized this past Tuesday in one of the most impressive and heavily attended funerals I have ever witnessed. . The Bishop and ten priests presided over the Mass. Six federal judges were in attendance as were members of congress, numerous other judges and public officials, and hundreds of others whose lives were touched by Camille Gravel.

Legal and political figures, both throughout Louisiana and nationally, regularly called on him for counsel and advice. He was the "Governor's lawyer," where he served as executive counsel for three governors during the last half of the 20th century, and called on by all the others when problems arose. Two of his former law partners now serve on the federal bench. He was the mentor to so many others in giving direction for their careers in law, politics and a variety of other fields.

Camille had a history with the Kennedy family that caused him political problems back home with then Governor Earl Long. Let me share an anecdote he passed on to me some years ago. Back in 1956, Illinois senator Adli Stephenson had the democratic nomination for president locked up. But he left the vice presidential nomination wide open for the convention to decide. The two leading nominees were Senator John F. Kennedy and Senator Estes Kefaufer.

Back in those days, delegates to party conventions were "hand picked" by the governor of the home state. Earl Long had picked his delegates, including Camille Gravel, but certainly expected them to abide by his wishes. He left the convention early and told who he thought was his right-hand man, Camille Gravel, to have the Louisiana delegation support Kefaufer for vice president.

As fate would have it, the Louisiana delegation sat right next to the Massachusetts delegates. Camille struck up a friendship with Bobby Kennedy, and eventually John F. Kennedy. When it came time to vote for vice president, Gravel ignored Governor Long's wishes, and supported Kennedy for vice president. Earl Long was incensed, and banned Camille from the State Capitol – at least for a short time, until he really needed him again.

Four years later, Kennedy as we know became President. Camille Gravel was a whisker away from being Attorney General. Those close to the scene then reported that if the President had not picked his brother, Bobby Kennedy for Attorney General, Camille would have been the appointee.

My friendship with Camille developed during the Louisiana Constitutional Convention of 1973. We sat side by side for a year and became close friends.

Camille's effectiveness was never better put on display than during the effort to rewrite Louisiana's obsolete constitution. Camille worked on every major section of the proposed document, perfecting the middle ground and working out compromises when delegates disagreed. I know of no greater influence on the basic law of our state than Camille.

He was in the forefront of the civil rights movement in Louisiana, and went to court fighting for basic voting rights for African Americans. And he was a devout Catholic. Pope Pius VII. honored him by bestowing the Order of St. Gregory for his outstanding service to the Catholic Church. In conversations with Catholic priests throughout the state, it seemed that his name would always come up. I never met a priest that didn't consider Camille Gravel his friend.

Camille had class. Real class. He had an aura of grace in his movement, never raised his voice, and was always a perfect gentleman. His sport coats were from Bullock and Jones in Miami. He was a dapper dresser that caused Earl Long to make fun of some of his outfits. Earl Long didn't know what class was.

I never met anyone who prepaid at nice restaurants. Camille often didn't use credit cards. He just sent checks in advance to some of Louisiana's better eating establishments, and kept credit on file. The restaurateurs loved him.

Louisiana, over the last century, has certainly had its share of scandals, blemishes, and black eyes, but there is always that special cream that rises to the top. When historians review the exceptional figures during the 20th century in our state, Camille Gravel will be pointed to as one of the best.

His was the life to emulate. He will be deeply missed by friends, family, and thousands of admirers from many walks of life, and from locations throughout the country

Strong. Brave. Unafraid of controversy. Unyielding in his convictions. Living every

day of his life to the hilt. One of the largest figures of our time. whose influence will be timeless. This was Camille Gravel. How fortunate for all of us.

“...when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no worship to the garish sun.”

William Shakespeare

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

Jim Brown's weekly column appears each Thursday here at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim's Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus read his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.

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