

Stevenson came home to stump on Independence Day in '56



Adlai Stevenson is seen here getting out of Larry Yeast's 1956 Chevrolet for the July 4, 1956 Democratic Party picnic at Miller Park. Yeast, a local union leader, is in the drivers side.

“The American people have been fed a diet of sweet complacency that can lead only to fatty degeneration,” declared Democratic presidential candidate Adlai E. Stevenson II at a July 4, 1956, picnic at Bloomington’s Miller Park.

The odds on favorite to win his party’s nomination in the upcoming convention in Chicago, Stevenson had returned to his hometown for a two-day stopover. He visited with family and friends, and then attended an Independence Day picnic organized by the McLean County Democratic Central Committee. His “sweet complacency” remark was aimed at Republican Dwight Eisenhower, the current occupant of the White House.

Stevenson grew up in Bloomington, enjoying the comforts of an upper middle-class boyhood. His family lived on Washington St. between Kreitzer and Vale, in what was then the eastern reaches of the city. Young Adlai attended nearby Washington School and later the Model School at Illinois State Normal University (today University High).

In the 1930s and early 1940s, he split time between a law career in Chicago and government service. A lifelong Democrat, Stevenson won the 1948 governor’s race, rising to national prominence as a smart reformer in a state noted for governmental

inefficiency and political corruption. In 1952, he captured his party's presidential nomination, but lost handily to World War II hero Eisenhower.

From his earliest years, Stevenson was no stranger to politics. His father, Lewis Green Stevenson, served briefly as Illinois secretary of state, and his paternal grandfather, Adlai E. Stevenson I (the name skipped a generation), served as vice president during Grover Cleveland's second administration. His maternal grandmother was Eliza Fell, daughter of Normal founder and Abraham Lincoln associate Jesse Fell. "I have a bad case of hereditary politics," Adlai II once confessed.

In 1956, Stevenson faced an uphill battle in the rematch with the still-popular Eisenhower, who claimed credit for a humming economy and peace (or at least a truce) on the Korean peninsula.

Looming over the coming campaign, however, was Eisenhower's uncertain health. In 1955, the then-64-year-old former general experienced a serious heart attack, and in June of the following year, he underwent an operation for inflammation of the small intestine. Eisenhower's health not only limited his ability to campaign, but led to greater scrutiny of Vice President Richard Nixon. Although there was no love lost between Stevenson and Eisenhower, Stevenson despised Nixon. "He is the kind of politician who would cut down a redwood tree, then mount the stump and make a speech for conservation," Stevenson famously said of Nixon.

Although polls showed Eisenhower beating Stevenson a second time, most political observers believed the nation would tilt Democratic if the Republican nomination fell to Nixon.

The Cold War and the nuclear arms race also weighed heavily on Stevenson's mind. In late June, early July 1956, Soviet-backed troops smashed the "Bread and Freedom" workers' revolt in Poznan, a city in central Poland.

At the Independence Day picnic, Stevenson delivered a speech from the old Miller Park bandstand before a crowd of some 1,500. Sounding one of his principal campaign themes, he said the U.S. was "adrift, leaderless in a troubled and anxious world." He argued that the Eisenhower administration had given the people of Eastern Europe a false sense of hope that the U.S. would support democratic movements behind the Iron Curtain. "The demand for bread and freedom by the oppressed peoples of Eastern Europe is irrepressible," he told the hometown crowd. "The tragedy is that at this hour the Western nations lack leadership."

During the final days of the campaign, Eisenhower received an unexpected boost when Israel, with the support of France and England, moved on the Egyptian-controlled Suez Canal, and the Soviets violently put down another drive for independence, this time in Hungary. Although both crises were a blow to U.S. policy interests, the American people rallied behind Eisenhower, who they believed better suited to navigate the ship of state through troubled waters.

In the November 6 election, Stevenson received 42 percent of the national vote, 3 points worse than his 1952 showing. He won just 7 of 48 states (this was before Alaska and Hawaii attained statehood, and before Washington, D.C. residents could vote in national elections).

Favorite son or not, Stevenson fared even worse in his home state, garnering only 40 percent of the vote. In McLean County, his take was a dismal 32 percent (12,332 votes to Eisenhower's 25,758). This neighborly rejection is less startling when one considers that McLean County has backed the GOP candidate in 34 of the 38 presidential contests going back to the formation of the Republican Party in the mid-1850s.

With the election of Democrat John F. Kennedy in 1960, Stevenson became ambassador to the United Nations, a position he held until his death on July 14, 1965 in London. He is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery on Bloomington's south side.