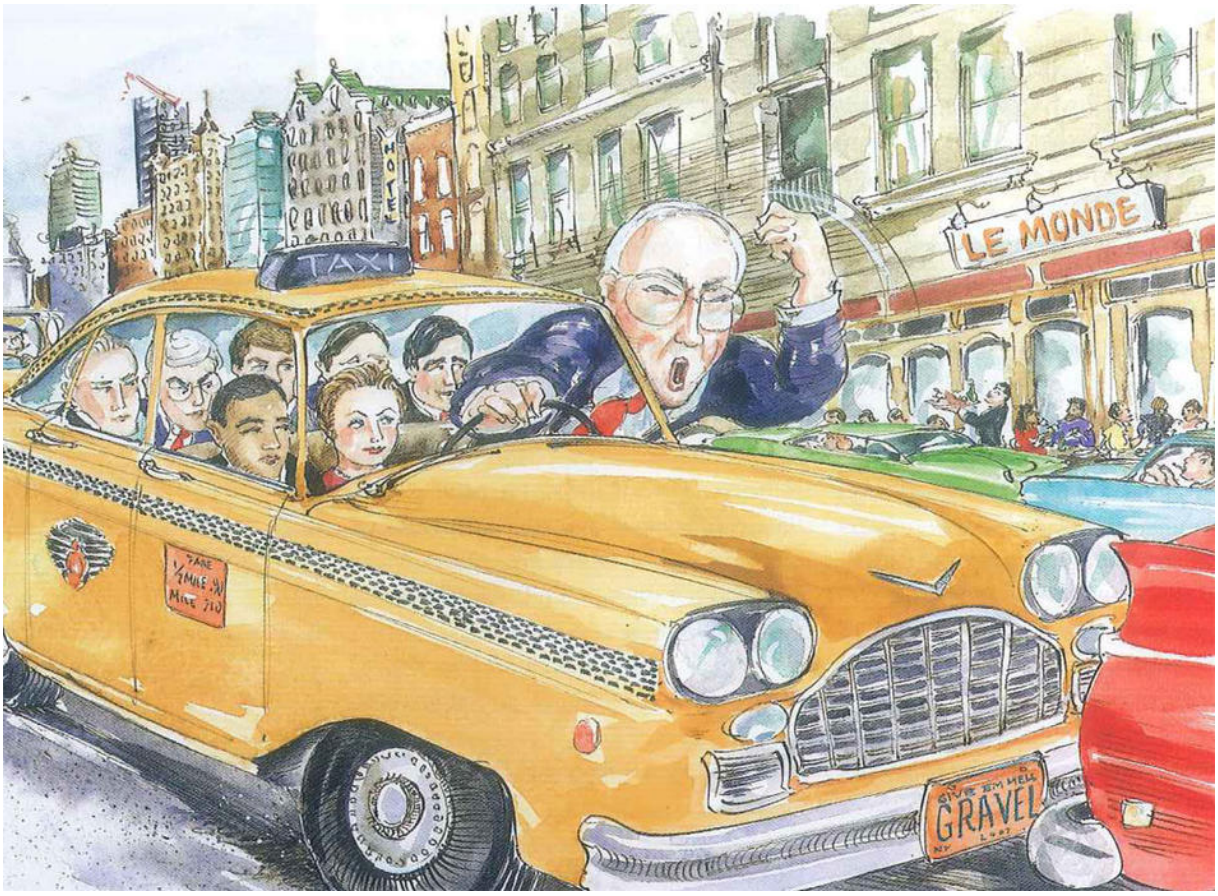
Alumni

Checkered Past

Mike Gravel '56GS, former Democratic senator from Alaska, runs for president.

By
Paul Hond
|
Summer 2007



Mark Steele

Last November, Maurice “Mike” Gravel (rhymes with Maurice Ravel), former Democratic senator from Alaska, stopped for lunch at Le Monde, a brasserie at West 112th Street and Broadway. Seven months earlier Gravel ’56GS had become the first Democrat to formally announce his campaign for president in 2008. Hardly

anyone noticed at the time, and even by November, Gravel could spend the better part of an afternoon in a busy New York restaurant without being recognized. He had no personal wealth, no war chest, no constituency, no media presence. And yet, in a clue to his personality, and between bites of mesclun salad, Gravel expressed perfect confidence that in January 2009, he and his wife, Whitney, would be moving into the White House.

The audacity of hope, indeed.

At 77, Gravel is a big, friendly, talkative, passionate, energetic, calculating, and singularly ambitious man who performed daredevil feats of conscience on the Senate floor while Barack Obama was still in knee socks. Those acts have particular resonance today and give Gravel serious street cred when it comes to exposing malfeasance and ending unpopular wars. Battle-tested, battle-ready, Gravel exudes the husky virility of a man who loves a good filibuster, mixing strains of firebrand populism with a forceful candor that has set him apart from his more cautious Democratic counterparts.

Born to French-Canadian immigrants in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1930, Gravel, who is dyslexic, struggled in school and was held back in third grade, even as he dreamed of becoming president. Later, he attended American International College in Springfield. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Gravel decided “in a burst of patriotism” to leave school and enlist. “I wanted to be a spy,” he said. “You know — romantic, tough.”

After serving for four years in the Counter Intelligence Corps, Gravel moved to New York to finish college. He was accepted into Columbia’s School of General Studies, where he studied economics with Victor Fuchs and Boris Stanfield. “I became good friends with Stanfield,” Gravel says, his voice swelling with admiration. “I went to his apartment and we’d talk about Russia and the Soviet Union and Communism — the whole thing. It was awesome. He was a great, great teacher. I never had to study history: I just absorbed it through my capillaries.”

To support himself while studying, Gravel tried different jobs, none of which he liked. Then he read that Jonas Salk had worked his way through med school driving a cab. Inspired, Gravel bought a street map, took a test, and became a New York City cabbie.

After graduating in 1956, Gravel set his sights on the U.S. Senate. He figured that Alaska, with its tiny population, would be one of the easier places to win a seat. The strategy worked; after serving two terms in the Alaska House of Representatives, Gravel was elected to the Senate in 1968. But few suspected that the tall Alaskan with the New England accent would go to Washington and do what freshman legislators do in the movies — risk his career to force dramatic political change.

In June of 1971, Gravel was in the midst of his historic five-month filibuster against a bill to renew the military draft, a high-wire maneuver that compelled President Richard M. Nixon to cut a deal allowing the draft to expire. One night during that same month, Gravel received a strange phone call from a man he didn't know. The man identified himself as Daniel Ellsberg, and he wanted to ask Gravel a favor.

Ellsberg was a disillusioned ex–military analyst and Vietnam combat veteran who had access to what would become known as the Pentagon Papers, thousands of pages of top-secret materials detailing how the U.S. government ensnared itself in Vietnam. Wanting to make the information public without exposing himself to legal jeopardy, Ellsberg had taken the papers to several congressional leaders, including J. William Fulbright and George McGovern, in hopes that someone would read the classified pages into the Senate record. Such an act would presumably be protected under the Speech or Debate Clause found in Article 1 of the U.S. Constitution, which shields members of Congress from arrest during their attendance of a House or Senate session, except in cases of "Treason, Felony, and Breach of the Peace." But the legal territory was murky, the political risks enormous, and Ellsberg found no takers on Capitol Hill. Instead, he leaked the papers to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. The latter began publishing them on June 13. An outraged Nixon got an injunction to halt publication, and the case made its way up the courts. That's when Gravel's phone rang.

"What happened," said Gravel, "is that someone told Ellsberg that there was this young guy out there trying to filibuster the draft. So I get a call from Ellsberg, and he said, 'Will you read the Pentagon Papers into your filibuster?' And I said, 'Yes, and let's hang up.' My view was simple; if former Secretary of Defense McNamara felt it was important to know how we got into Vietnam, I felt it was a thousand times more important for the American people to know how we made this colossal mistake."

On June 29, 1971, in a voice tight with emotion, Gravel began reading the papers into the record of his Subcommittee on Buildings and Grounds (a parliamentary

misstep prevented him from reading them into his filibuster). The next day, the Supreme Court ruled that the government had failed to prove that publication of the Pentagon Papers would harm national security, but that if the newspapers chose to publish, they did so at their own risk. The newspapers stopped publishing. Gravel found himself alone behind enemy lines.

“I was scared to death,” he said. “Would I go to jail? Would I be impeached? Censured? And where was the courage of the press?”

A few days after the Supreme Court decision, Gravel contacted David Rotberg, an editor who had worked at the Pentagon, and asked him to be his editor for the Pentagon Papers, which Beacon Press had agreed to publish in book form. There was no budget for the project, but Gravel gave Rotberg a dollar, thus placing him on the Senate payroll. The Justice Department quickly stepped in to halt publication, a grand jury was convened in Boston, and Rotberg and Beacon Press were subpoenaed. Gravel fought back. “I had my attorney say, ‘You can’t subpoena them, they’re my employees, they’re on the payroll. You subpoena anyone, you come and subpoena me.’”

The case was promptly bumped up to the U.S. Court of Appeals.

“They said, ‘Senator, you’re safe, but Beacon Press and Rotberg are liable,’” Gravel recalled. “So I tell my attorneys, ‘Lookit. Let’s go to the Supreme Court. I don’t care if I lose, but I can’t let Beacon and Rotberg twist in the wind.’ So we go to the Supreme Court and we lose, 5 to 4. What the Court said was that if I release the papers as a senator within the Senate domain, then no one can touch me. But if I published as a private citizen, then I’m liable. So I was now liable, because I’d published with Beacon Press.”

By then it was June of 1972, and Nixon, who knew Watergate was being uncovered, was no longer in a position to attack a sitting senator. With a little luck, then, Gravel dodged a career-ending bullet. “I could have been indicted,” he said.

Not surprisingly, Gravel deplores those in the current Congress who have failed to throw their bodies in front of the Iraq War freight train, and some of that contempt came out during the first Democratic presidential debate in April 2007. With zingers like “Some of these people frighten me” and “Tell me, Barack, who do you want to nuke?” Gravel became a hot item on the cable news circuit, cast as the salty curmudgeon who eats feckless politicians for lunch. Suddenly, he was everywhere,

lecturing MSNBC host Chris Matthews on media responsibility, yukking it up with Stephen Colbert of The Colbert Report, and getting thousands of hits on YouTube. But for all his newfound popularity, no one seemed very interested in discussing his radical platform, which includes replacing federal income taxes with a national sales tax, recognizing gay marriage, implementing “direct democracy” through federal-level ballot initiatives, and legalizing pot. Then came the forgettable June primary debate in New Hampshire, a two-hour event in which moderator Wolf Blitzer limited Gravel to just five minutes of speaking time. But out in cyberspace, a devoted band of supporters kept the flame alive, posting video clips of Gravel moralizing about everything from the war on drugs to health care. And in July, Gravel appeared on ABC’s *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*, where he told the mystified host, “George, I’ll be president.”

Back at Le Monde last fall, Gravel finished his meal and paid his bill. As a student, he had survived on cheap meals from the old Lion’s Den Grill, which was all he could afford on his cabbie’s salary. “In those days, if you made fifteen bucks a night, boy, that was big money,” he said. “Sometimes I’d work 24 hours. But as luck would have it, I had no accidents during that whole period.”

As Gravel got up to leave, he pulled from his wallet a campaign business card emblazoned with the slogan Let the People Decide, and handed it to the waitress. “I’m Mike Gravel,” he said with a smile, “and I’m going to be president.”

The waitress looked at him with surprise, having no idea who he was. Then she blushed and thanked him and began clearing the table.

Read more from ***Paul Hond***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from ***Paul Hond***