

A PATRIOT: ERNEST L. CUNEO

by M. Cordell Hart

In describing Machiavelli, Bergen Evans once wrote: “he undertook 23 missions abroad, but he was never the top man, not one of those who sit on the lawn and have their pictures taken, but just next to that, one of the top men behind the scenes, one of those who have to do the practical work and achieve the real ends for which the fine public utterances of the men at the top are often merely a smokescreen.” Ernest L. Cuneo played a similar role for Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in New York, for the Roosevelt White House, the OSS, and the CIA. Also like Machiavelli, Cuneo died without receiving any formal recognition for his many fine contributions to the United States of America.

In mid-1986, several men in the intelligence and military communities of US government vowed to correct the oversight while Cuneo still lived. They called their group “Ernie’s Gang”, and themselves “handy guys”, terms taken from a piece of writing by Cuneo discussing his 1920’s career as a professional football player for the Orange Tornadoes (corporate predecessor of the Washington Redskins). Cuneo had written “Like the other teams, we weren’t great, but we weren’t slouches, either. We were, in the Damon Runyan vernacular, ‘handy guys’.” And so this modern group of “handy guys” set to work, not at Cuneo’s request, or even with his specific approval, but solely to satisfy an ideal.

Below is their petition, taken partly from a tribute to Cuneo in the “Congressional Record” (Proceedings and Debates of the 100th Congress, First Session, Volume 133, No. 82, May 20, 1987), prepared after two years of additional research and presented to both a Democratic and a Republican President:

A PETITION FOR THE POSTHUMOUS AWARD OF THE PRESIDENTIAL MEDAL OF FREEDOM TO ERNEST L. CUNEO

As patriot and scholar, as athlete and public servant, Ernest L. Cuneo contributed to the United States of America in marvelous measure. Throughout his life, his application of intellect and energy for his country won him the respect and admiration of a multitude of Americans of several generations. Despite increased physical debility, he remained a prolific writer and an untiring teacher. In addressing groups from the Central Intelligence Agency to the Pentagon to the Press, and in his frequent consultations with officials of various ranks from all branches of government, Ernest Cuneo continued his contribution to America. It is therefore appropriate--as we, the undersigned, urge--that he posthumously be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

His achievements and experiences were several and varied: B.A., LL.B., LL.D., and D.H.L. from Columbia University; All-American football player at the same school; professional football player of the Orange (New Jersey) Tornadoes (corporate predecessor of the Washington Redskins); admitted to the New York bar, District of Columbia bar, and the U.S. Supreme Court Bar;

associate counsel to the Democratic National Committee; President of the North American Newspaper Alliance; Director of Freedom House, Woodrow Wilson Institute of International Scholars; author of The Dynamics of World History, and Life with Fiorello; Executive Editor-at-Large of the Saturday Evening Post; decorated by Italy, Britain, and the City of Genoa.

Ivar Bryce, in detailing his memories of mutual friends Ian Fleming and Ernest Cuneo, wrote, ". . . Late in the war (World War II), a most interesting figure had entered my life, and now he came to the fore once again. Ernest Cuneo is my contemporary, give or take a few months, and I should become intolerably conceited if I had a fraction of his attainments. The Cuneos came from Chiavari, and one Michael Cuneo of Savona in fact sailed with Columbus. Following the Risorgimento, in which the Cuneos backed Garibaldi, there was a grand exodus of the clan: one branch (Ernie's) went to New York, where they founded a ship repair/marine hardware business and eventually invested in real estate; another branch went to Chicago, where they started the now substantial Cuneo Press; and yet another branch went to San Francisco, where they became co-founders of the Bank of America. Ernie's parents, however, arrived in the United States as infants and, because he only heard English at home, Ernie does not speak a word of Italian and is an American par excellence.

"Over the years, as a lawyer, Ernie raised hell against Mussolini, Franco, Hitler and Stalin, with a group putting into effect the policies of the President, by acting as counsel to the Republic of Poland on the brink of war, and by running with the famous columnist Walter Winchell the propaganda campaign against Hitler, before the United States entered the Second World War. It is now also part of the public record that a line of intelligence information between Churchill and Roosevelt was established during the war using the OSS and BSC, outside official communications channels. This consisted of a chain of five men, of whom the third was Ernie . . ."

Thomas G. Corcoran wrote of Ernest L. Cuneo, ". . . Born (1905) in New Jersey, educated in New York's Columbia University--where a high school and college athlete and (All-American) member of the Columbia football team, later one of the first professional football players--Cuneo was a kind of-Renaissance man in the mold of his Genoese ancestors. From Columbia Law School he went on to be law secretary to Congressman Fiorella LaGuardia. Defeated as a Republican from New York in the Roosevelt landslide of 1932, in 1933 LaGuardia emerged as the liberal Mayor of New York and Roosevelt's ally. All this Cuneo saw.

"And Cuneo also saw the liberal investigative press working on the 'New York Daily News' . . . but the News had more than this to do with the education of Ernest Cuneo . . . Its night city editor was Lowell Limpus, former editor of the 'Infantry Journal.' He instructed Cuneo in the teachings of Clausewitz. And Cuneo always looked at politics through the eyes of Limpus who saw through the eyes of Clausewitz the employment of force.

"During (a part of the Roosevelt era) there formed associations of liberal lawyers throughout the United States to do what they could for the President. In New York its members met informally in the Hotel Lafayette. That group included Ernest Cuneo, by far the junior of the group . . . was the most valuable member of it. He was the only one of the group with wide knowledge of the media work. Also being free of concern about money and in control of his time, he could 'operate' full-time . . . His most spectacular achievement, which Mr. Roosevelt most appreciated, came

in . . . 1938. From his newspaper experience Ernie suggested a way to assist the President by seeking out the lowest common denominator to reach over the heads of the political professionals the masses of the nation.

"The unique instrument he suggested was Walter Winchell. Commonly called a gossip columnist, Winchell's political virtue was that at that time circulation of his daily newspaper column was 27 million; his readership approached 50 million daily. Also importantly, his weekly radio broadcast on Sunday night reached 89 out of every 100 adults in the country. It was Cuneo's Clausewitz idea that Winchell be converted into journalistic heavy artillery for the President. Cuneo volunteered to write for Winchell; and for Winchell, Cuneo wrote his comments on the national and international aspects of the President's policies. Winchell's ratings (thereupon) catapulted to number one throughout the nation.

"At Columbia in 1925, Drew Pearson was Cuneo's instructor in Economics and Geography. He and Robert S. Allen's 'Washington Merry-Go-Round' was the only circulation comparable to Winchell's. They had long been ardent supporters of the New Deal and supporters of the small group who met at the Hotel Lafayette. Their 'Washington Merry-Go-Round's' circulation approximated that of Winchell's but was of course of much deeper intellectual penetration.

"The net result of Cuneo's manipulation of these combined resources was that Winchell would break the headlines of a story. Pearson and Allen would then follow -up the Roosevelt approach in fullest detail compelling the competition, including the wire services, to follow suit.

"What Cuneo contributed to his success, Roosevelt did appreciate most signally. At his inauguration, he offered Mr. Cuneo a place in his personal box. Mr. Cuneo, a discreet 'operator', carefully avoided this honor.

"But from then on, Cuneo was an insider in the Roosevelt entourage. In his own 'loner' imaginative way, he went on to be an assistant to General Donovan in the OSS and one of the most effective men in the war . . ."

Sir William Stephenson of World War II intelligence fame, better known by his codeword "Intrepid," commented on that portion of Ernest Cuneo's career by writing, in February 1987, as follows: "Of my many vivid memories of World War II, those of Ernie Cuneo are among the most gratifying. I admired him then, as I do now, for his brilliant intellect, but even more impressive over all these years has been his extraordinary sense of patriotism to the United States of America. He, as 'CRUSADER', and I, as 'INTREPID', cooperated in many British and American intelligence operations during the war. I have long believed that Ernie's efforts for the O.S.S. during that time were not sufficiently understood by the American side. So much of what he did--that I am aware of--was clearly 'above and beyond the call of duty.' Yet to my knowledge, he has never received an appreciable award. That is most unfortunate. Perhaps it is not too late, for person and principle, to set things right . . ."

The petition was signed by all members of Ernie's Gang: Frank J. Aurelio, Mark S. Boerner, Brian M. Bruh, Douglas L. Englund, M. Cordell Hart, Robert B. Kaiman, Ronald K. Kirkpatrick, Theodorus F.M. Klemann, Ernest E. Lane, William M. Maury, H. David O'Malie, Theodore M. Pasca, H. Grant Taylor, Thomas F. Troy, Russell P. Vaughan, and Wade J. Williams.

Ernie's Gang was ultimately unsuccessful. Essentially, they lacked the money and skill needed in Washington to obtain a civilian award. Here is the final letter, dated March 17, 1988, sent to members by the group's informal leader:

"Two weeks and two days ago, Ernie died. This past Monday his ashes were interred in the columbarium at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. 'Well, there you have it', as Ernie liked to say. It is quite beyond my skills to provide here a summary of his life or any final comment on what he meant to the world. There are a few incidental notes, however, that may be appropriate for this last note to the group.

"First, we can all be thankful that a presidential exception was granted to allow Ernie's remains to be placed in Arlington National Cemetery. He was given a direct commission in 1958 as a Major in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, but he never served a day on active duty. Notes and telephone calls to the White House from Senator Pell, Mr. Justice Arthur Goldberg, Sir William Stephenson and other of Ernie's close friends had a lot to do with the exception being granted. However, Ernie's son, Jonathan, told me the other night that quite a number of congressmen had sent messages to the White House indicating their support for the exception. Jonathan learned of this from the Navy chaplain who attended the ceremony at Arlington. According to the chaplain, when he went to the cemetery administrative building early that morning to check over his schedule for the week, an Army general was waiting for him. The general discussed the exception and explained that because of the unusual amount of congressional interest in Ernie's case, he had been sent over (by whom?) to make sure that all was in order. So, all of you who made calls and sent notes in this matter can take definite satisfaction in knowing that your efforts had an effect.

"The ceremony at the cemetery was quite colorful and impressive. For all the criticism that the military establishment receives, and sometimes deserves, it is clear that the services do a marvelous job in honoring their dead. The military honors accorded Ernie's remains made for a most fitting end. As importantly, they provided a great uplift to grieving family members and friends. Ernie's son told me last night that even trying times can have highpoints, and the ceremony at Arlington was, for him, just such a highpoint. For myself, I couldn't help thinking throughout the ceremony that Ernie would surely like to see the glorious and colorful ritual taking place around him.

"Miss Lucille France, Ernie's companion and long-time friend of the Cuneo family, is still quite distraught over Ernie's death. I've gotten to know her much better in these last two weeks. She stayed pretty much in the background at Ernie's dinner parties, if you recall, but she has a lively mind and a thousand stories to tell. She is a remarkable woman in her own right.

"Jonathan Cuneo, Ernie's son, is an attorney in the Washington area. He is married and has one daughter who is Ernie's only grandchild. Ernie was so very happy to have become a grandfather.

"Sandra Cuneo DePury, Ernie's daughter is also an attorney. She works for a law firm in New York and was married to a Swiss diplomat who shuttles frequently between Switzerland and this country.

“Enclosed is a copy of one of Ernie's articles. You may have already seen the typescript. Miss France has offered to give our group some of Ernie's books. I will ask for only one book for each of us. The book will be mailed to you when it becomes available.

“Ernie had been working again on his biography when he died. There is some hope for getting the work finished. Ernie's family and Miss France are tending to that. His many papers, I understand, are to be given over to the Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Texas, per Ernie's specific wish. Sending them there, instead of Colombia University or some other place in the east, seems odd, but that is what he signed off on a year or so ago. (Editor's note: the Cuneo papers are rather located at Hyde Park, New York, with the papers of FDR.)

“Ernie was such a wonderful bridge to so many people of different backgrounds. He put all of us in touch. I have certainly enjoyed knowing each of you, and I hope that there will be some opportunity in the future to see you again.”

It is ironic that Ernest L. Cuneo was laid to rest by a Marine burial party. He treasured his commission in the Marine Corps, and he always kept his uniform ready, properly set with polished insignia, but he never served on active duty. In the end, after all the variety and glory of Ernie's life as a civilian and as a member of OSS, it was the U.S. Marine Corps that honored him. Thank God for the Marines.