Stevens' Failings His Best Defense

By John G. Norris
Staff Reporter

WHEN ARMY SECRETARY Robert T. Stevens and Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (R-Wis.) first tangled over the latter's investigation methods, the new Army civilian chief looked like a perfect set-up for the veteran Red-hunter.

As an Army aide put it later, it was a rank amateur going up against a professional who was well versed in rough-and-tumble, no-holds-barred combat. Some veteran Washington newsmen wondered if the Wisconsin Senator hadn't deliberately picked on this political novice as a soft spot in the Eisenhower Administration.

When Stevens backed away after his first two clashes with the Senator and was pushed into a third by seconds, his chances seemed very slim.

Today the odds are shifting. It is possible that conscientious, sincere, trusting Bob Stevens may prove the instrument that will give McCarthy his first big licking. The very traits that appear to be weaknesses in a political fight—naivete, high-mindedness and a distaste for brawling—may win Stevens the public support necessary for victory in the final showdown.

Question of Truth

STEVENS HIMSELF seems calmly confident. When asked if he felt the Army side of the case would be borne out, he replied:

"It is no case. It is a question of telling the truth. Anyone with the truth on his side has nothing to fear. I have complete confidence in the outcome."

This faith in the right-always-wins tradition is revealing of Stevens' character and personality. The Army Secretary complains, with some justice, that the public knows him only as a multi-millionaire textile manufacturer who is a dope at politics. Little more has been told about him in the reams of words written on the McCarthy-Stevens row.

No one, his friends say, mentions Stevens' rather extensive public service, what the people back home think about him, his family life, or what he is like as a man.

The 54-year-old Army Secretary takes great pride and real satisfaction in his public service record. He says he has never refused a request to serve his country or his community. Many big business men have taken on similar obligations, though both Presidents Truman and Eisenhower have complained that too many decline.

Before he came to Washington last year, Stevens was an elder of the Presbyterian Church in Plainfield, N. J., a hard-working member of the executive committee of New York City's Roosevelt Hospital, a trustee of Yale University and a member of the visiting committee to Harvard Business School; a civilian aide to former Army Secretary Frank Pace, a member of the board of the Rockefeller Foundation, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board in New York, member of the board of directors of a mutual life insurance company, and chairman of the Commerce Department's Business Advisory Council.

Like 'Call to Clergy'

MOST OF THESE were unpaid posts to which he devoted considerable time. Some men accept such duties as stepping-stones to political or business advancement. But Stevens obviously is sincere when he speaks of "obligations," of "welcoming" such "opportunities to serve," and of his "pride" in being "chosen." He talks of a "call" to public service in somewhat the same tone as a man of the church refers to a call to the clergy. And he takes all such posts very seriously.

When Stevens headed a delegation to an international textile conference in England in 1952, he called its members together en route and told them: "We are going not just as textile men but as representatives of the United States of America. We must represent our country in a dignified and proper manner."

His present assignment is not Stevens' first in the Federal Government. He was an Army second lieutenant in World War I, though he didn't get overseas. Later he served here with the NRA and the OPM before Pearl Harbor. He was a colonel during World War II and won the Distinguished Service Medal, the Army's highest non-combat award, for his work as head of the Quartermaster textile purchasing section and as deputy Assistant Quartermaster General.

Diligent and Temperate

AT THE PENTAGON TODAY, Stevens is in his office by 8 a.m., and when he leaves about 6 p.m., he usually takes a briefcase home. Associates consider his chief faults are an unwillingness to delegate responsibility to others, overseriousness, a tendency to worry and an inability to relax.

Stevens likes a social drink or two, but he doesn't smoke and he dislikes off-color stories. His restraint in speech is evident from his denial of McCarthy's charge that he had suggested that Senate investigators turn their attention from the Army to the Navy and the Air Force, on the basis of data the Army could provide. Stevens resisted urgings to brand the charge as a "damned lie." Instead, he called it "utterly untrue."

When asked if it were possible he might facetiously have suggested at any time that McCarthy "pick on someone else for a change," Stevens replied with a flat "no." He added, "I am never facetious about Government business."

Such remarks bear a suggestion of stuffiness. But Stevens avoids that by a real thoughtfulness of others. He makes a point of looking up the sons of friends, usually servicemen, when he is abroad, and he enjoys such visits. When the first atomic shell was fired, Stevens insisted on being in the foremost trench with the troops taking part in the test.

Wives of Pentagon officials describe him as "that nice Mr. Stevens." The most common adjective applied to him by associates is "very decent."

Officers Like Him

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE of opinion in the Pentagon about Stevens which is entirely apart from the clash with McCarthy.

Army officers consider him a very good Secretary. He stands as a buffer between them and civilian agencies of the Government. Not all of his predecessors have done that. And Stevens generally accepts policies and programs worked out by the General Staff and goes to bat for them. Some of his predecessors have tried to mix in what the generals consider their business.

Pentagon civilian officials think Stevens is a bit too uncritical of General Staff proposals; some consider him a "captive of the brass." But they concede he has done a good job of installing a new property accounting system that was essential to badly needed Army organizational reforms. The reforms themselves have not made much progress, partly because of Stevens' occupation with the McCarthy issue these past several months.

It is commonly agreed, however, that he has kept politics largely out of Army decisions, despite his efforts to cooperate with McCarthy.

Besides his home in Plainfield, Stevens has a ranch in Montana, his one hobby.

(OVER)

The Stevenses at a Christmas party at Fort McNair here last December. Left to right: Granddaughter, Melanie Stevens; son, Robert T. Stevens, jr.; Secretary Stevens, Mrs. Stevens and little Marney Bruce, a guest.

He is popular with his neighbors there. One of them commented: "Nothing flashy about him. He drives a Chevrolet when out here."

Stevens, a religious man, has a feeling for history and for his own place in it. In Washington, he attends the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, where President Lincoln worshiped. Last year, he and his family were invited to sit in the Lincoln pew when the one-hundred fiftieth anniversary of the church was celebrated.

"It was a great thrill," he says, "to sit there and turn over in one's mind the problems that President Lincoln had faced and the ones that I faced."

ONE OF STEVENS' strongest characteristics is his feeling for his family. He likes to tell stories about his father, the founder of the Stevens Mills, and he always wanted to follow in his footsteps. After Phillips Andover, Yale and the Army, he entered the mills and took over at his father's death. His own five children and three grandchildren are an unusually close-knit family.

When the papers headlined Stevens' "surrender" to McCarthy six weeks ago, his elder sons immediately came to Washington to be with him.

The eldest, Robert Ten Broeck, Jr., 29, is married to the daughter of Author Louis Bromfield and recently bought a cattle farm near Leesburg, Va. Whitney, 27, like his brother, was a Navy ensign in World War II. Now he is a salesman for the Stevens mills in New York. Daughter Joan, 25, who took shorthand and typing at finishing school, is a secretary here with the CIA. Son Bill, 22, is an Army corporal in Germany. He refused a college deferment and got a physical waiver to enlist two years ago.