Controversy
dogs Korean War
memorial booster

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This is a story about Myron McKee, a heretofore little-known Minnesota educator who became the driving force behind national fund-raising efforts to build a Korean War Memorial and in the process, according to his critics, left a trail of ill will, questionable financial dealings and raucous personal relationships.

Primarily under McKee's guidance, nearly $700,000 was raised for the war memorial in less than three years, much of it from war veterans and war widows. But almost none of that money will ever be used to build the monument.

That's because the contributions were used to pay for a professional fund-raiser, telephone calls back home to Minnesota and the utility bills of a dilapidated Washington townhouse known as the Officer's Service Club, which served at various times as McKee's home and fund-raising headquarters.

Ninety-seven cents of every $1 contributed went toward administrative and fund-raising costs. By comparison, organizers of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund collected approximately $9 million in less than 2 years and spend only about one-fourth of that amount on fund-raising costs.

McKee's critics have alleged that some of the funds were diverted for McKee's personal use, including an unsuccessful 1984 bid for Congress in Minnesota's First District. Records of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) show that McKee attempted to finance that race with a $93,300 loan. When the FEC raised questions about the source of the loan, McKee withdrew it.

McKee denies that and other accusations spawned by his activities and blames much of the criticism on a disgruntled Korean national who founded the National Committee for a Korean War Memorial (NCKWM) and was later fired by McKee after he became the organization's president.

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home near Rollingstone. In April of that year, McKee filed his first campaign finance report, which revealed a $93,300 personal loan from himself.

McKee denies allegations that the funds were from the Korean War memorial effort. He said last week that the loan represented a second mortgage which he and his family intended to take out on real estate that they owned. When he found out that such a loan would be in violation of contribution limits for family members, the idea was dropped, and the campaign was financed primarily on a $5,300 loan from McKee. The last campaign finance report filed by McKee listed debts of $18,900.

The campaign finance report and records of the National Committee for a Korean War Memorial also show that one of the NCKWM employees was contacting delegates for McKee's campaign at the same time she was making telephone solicitations for the war memorial committee. That employee, Lori Saxon, received $800 from McKee's campaign committee and $700 from the war memorial committee during the same payroll period before the congressional endorsing convention in Minnesota. McKee said Saxon received payment for two different jobs that did not overlap.

McKee has denied any impropriety.

"All the money used in my campaign is traceable to the bank account and contributors," he said.

McKee is no stranger to controversy. It has followed him to nearly every job or post he's held.

He was fired from a principal's job in La Crosse, Wis., in 1977 because of his controversial disciplinary methods which the school board felt were excessive.

In 1980, the school board in MacGregor, Minn., declined to renew his contract as superintendent after he had a hallway scuffle with a 15-year-old girl and transferred $450,000 in school funds from local banks to a Chicago bank.

"The board was happy to get rid of him, the teachers moreso," said board president Robert Laajala.

McKee takes such comments in stride. "If you're going to make any difference, you're going to have criticism."

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McKee

The committee's founder, Clayon Kim, alleged in a lawsuit filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia that, "McKee has abandoned and embezzled NCKWM funds, has diverted funds of NCKWM to his personal use, and has endorsed and otherwise personally taken for himself funds which were solicited by NCKWM for NCKWM purposes." In response to the charges, McKee said in an interview last week: "It's like somebody once told me. If you do something to an Oriental that causes them to lose face, they never forget."

McKee says he resigned from the NCKWM, which changed its name to Korean War Memorial Inc., last fall, when it was decided by the organization's board that only Korean veterans should be officers. Nonetheless, during his tenure as committee director, 80 percent of its funds were raised and spent.

"All the result of infighting between the rival groups, Congress is beginning to question the committee's decisions giving fund-raising responsibilities for the war memorial to any private organization. Instead, he said, NCKWM should have taken the funding from the military and used it for construction to the American Battle Monument Commission, an independent government agency. Passage is expected.

The storm around McKee's handling of the Korean War Memorial drive is not surprising to those who have followed his career. McKee came to Washington in 1981 to serve as an unpaid volunteer for the Reagan transition team. A new right Republican, he attempted to promote the modern conservative ideology to maximum advantage, building a list of political references — some with their approval and some without. McKee then used that list to open doors that otherwise might not have opened for a small-town school administrator.

He sought a variety of government jobs and listed as references such Minnesota Republicans as Sen. Dave Durenberger — who wrote in a letter of reference that McKee "is not only a highly respected managerial professional but also considered an articulate spokesman for a variety of conservative causes" — and Rep. Vin Weber, who stated flatly in an interview that "I did not know that my name was being used as a reference." McKee currently works at Action, the federal agency which oversees volunteer programs.

McKee joined the National Committee for the Korean War Memorial in the middle of 1982 at the request of Kim, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Korea who had founded the organization in 1981.

McKee says Kim asked for his help because of his revitalization of a private Washington, D.C., club called the Observers, called the Officers' Service Club. McKee, who said he had become the club's salaried manager once it was back on its feet, found a financial backer to help pull the club out of bankruptcy.

That backer was Gen. C.M. Talbot, whose conservative organization, the Military Order of the World Wars, negotiated a loan through McKee for the club. But Talbot, whose group's commitment to the club eventually grew to $400,000, says he would not enter such an agreement again.

By December, 1982, McKee and Kim were at odds over running the Korean war memorial committee and McKee persuaded the committee's directors to remove her from their payroll. McKee is now alleging that this was for allegedly making a false public assertion of expenditures — an allegation that Kim denies.

At McKee's urging, the war memorial committee embarked on an aggressive fund-raising effort at the beginning of 1983 and entered into a contract with Bruce W. Eberle & Associates, a northern Virginia fund-raising firm that specializes in mass mail solicitation.

McKee said the idea of hiring Eberle was to build a mailing list of at least 20,000 names for the committee to use throughout its fund-raising drive. He said initial costs were expected to be high, since the committee had no mailing list and was forced to rent lists compiled by other organizations.

Financial records filed by the committee with the IRS indicate that the cost of buying those lists, plus postage and consultants fees took 97 cents of every $1 contributed to the committee.

From July 1, 1982, through Aug. 31, 1985, the committee raised $683,925, according to financial statements; the fund-raiser's expenses totaled $661,580. Other expenses incurred by the committee left it with a balance of $2,781.

Kim said she was against the idea of hiring a professional fund-raiser because she had already begun discussions with several veteran organizations to use their mailing lists free of charge.

The fund-raising campaign, as directed by McKee, was not subtle in its approach to contributors. Many mailings included a reply card that had a number of boxes which the contributor could check. Those cards typically contained language such as the following: "Yes, please place my name on your honor roll in tribute to General Douglas MacArthur... . I'll help you build this memorial... . No, do not place my name on your Honor Roll in tribute to General Douglas MacArthur... . I cannot make even a small contribution honoring our veterans of Korea...."

Meanwhile, the war memorial committee was coming under increasing criticism for its tactics and some of its early backers, including Gen. John K. Singlaub and the nephew of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, ended their support of legislation sought by McKee's group authorizing the construction of a memorial with no public funds because of the committee's internal problems.

The name of Rep. Bruce Vento, D-Minn., on the other hand, still appears on the committee's letterhead as a member of its "National Sponsoring Committee" even though Vento told McKee two years ago that he didn't want to be included on that list. He later said that Sen. Rudy Boschwitz, R-Minn., is on the committee's list but was at the request of another organization that favors its approach to contributors.

McKee blames Kim for spreading negative information about him and the committee's fund-raising efforts. But an aide for Hammerschmidt said that isn't the case. Ray Reid, the congressman's administrative assistant, said Hammerschmidt received negative reports about the committee "from more than one source."

In early 1984, while still on the war memorial board of directors, McKee decided to seek the Republican nomination for Congress in southeastern Minnesota, where he had a