

Why an ex-congressman is living in a ‘safe house’ from Trump

By Elizabeth Becker

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Jim McDermott poses for a portrait at his home in Civrac-en-Médoc, France, on Feb. 14. (Louise Desnos/Agence VU/For The Washington Post) ‘

Elizabeth Becker, a former Post correspondent, began her career covering the war in Cambodia and its aftermath under Pol Pot. She is the author of five books, including “You Don’t Belong Here: How Three Women Rewrote the Story of War.”

CIVRAC-EN-MÉDOC, France — Jim McDermott never intended to become an expatriate. But from his first day in this tiny village near Bordeaux, he felt strangely at home. “I relaxed for the first time in years. My shoulders weren’t all bunched up to my ears.”

He made a radical leap from a comfortable retirement in the United States to a stone cottage in rural France for reasons that are suddenly timely for friends and former colleagues in D.C. who are facing the possibility that a vengeful Donald Trump could win the presidential election.

In private conversations with McDermott, they wonder how to gauge the seriousness of Trump’s increasingly dire threats to the country’s democratic underpinnings and, potentially, to them and their families. “I get calls from my friends now who say they are scared to do what I did but are scared to stay.”

He tells them: “If you can afford it, buy a second home in France, or Spain, or Portugal, wherever ... a second home that could become a safe house,” he said.

These are concerns I first heard decades ago, when I was a reporter living in Cambodia and my friends were unsure what would happen when their nation’s brutal war ended, asking whether they should leave the country and wait from afar. I never expected to hear Americans expressing these same fears. Or express them myself.

McDermott is an unlikely figure to give voice to this dilemma. The 87-year-old psychiatrist turned Democratic lawmaker loved his 28 years in Congress and the 14 years he served in the Washington state legislature before that. His home on Seattle’s Queen Anne Hill has a view of Elliott Bay and the Cascade Mountains. Now he lives in a town of 661 people in the middle of the utterly flat Médoc peninsula.

He disagrees that his move could be considered unpatriotic. He served in the Navy as a psychiatrist during the Vietnam War and wears a veteran’s jacket on our walk to the village’s one restaurant — the excellent L’Auberge du Clocher. He mulls the threat to American

democracy, but mostly he talks about the lessons he has learned in this village about the cruelty of the United States' growing inequality.

Historically, France has been a haven for desperate exiles and expatriates. McDermott isn't one of those. He can come and go as he pleases and has the luxury of keeping his Seattle home for annual visits; he is still American.

His motivations for moving here are political: Universal health care. Respect for women's reproductive rights, including abortion, the issue on which McDermott won his first election in 1970. Serious gun control.

These were his passions during his years in Congress. He didn't realize how deeply he felt about a nation's responsibility for the health of its people until he came to this village, where, under the French system, health care is taken for granted, like clean water and a working sewer system.

"It was like I walked through an invisible door. Now I saw and felt what it's like to live in a community where everyone can go to the doctor. Where children aren't massacred by gun violence. It changes everything."

None of this was on McDermott's mind when, in 2017, he took a vacation in southwest France inspired by Martin Walker's novel "Bruno, Chief of Police." Once here, McDermott did something completely out of character. This man who always plotted his life in five-year increments bought a classic cottage his second day in town, saying it would be his vacation home. Then he bought one hectare of a vineyard in a wine cooperative.

He still considered Seattle his primary home until he was stuck here at the height of the pandemic. A neighbor had to leave the village to help her family and asked the distinguished American lawmaker and doctor to care for her three nanny goats: bring a pail of water every day to the enclosure where they fed on grass and weeds. Nursing those goats endeared him to the village. "From that moment, I belonged."

That is how a slow-motion move to a saner and more humane life became a potential refuge from a second Trump presidency.

So far, McDermott is willing to pay the high price of his move. He miscalculated how difficult it would be to reinvent himself in a community where his past stature and accomplishments in Congress are close to meaningless. As a twice-divorced bachelor living on his own, he has bouts of loneliness. He misses his children and grandchildren. His French is lousy.

Daily conversations with friends and politicians in the United States are his bridge, the contacts who allow him to remain on top of the issues. From his comfortable ground-floor study, he writes emails and sends money to campaigns with a single goal: "Trump can't win." He is a member of Democrats Abroad, pours money into Democratic campaigns and is eager to vote for President Biden in November.

McDermott's experience raises serious questions for Americans, especially those in positions of power. Is the United States facing a situation so dangerous that you would be foolish if you didn't have a backup plan? Or is it hyperbole to imagine the country sliding into authoritarian rule that would unleash violence, retribution and repression?

In his first term, Trump encouraged chaos and shows of violence, as well as undermined basic rights and pillars of American democracy. Now, he has doubled down, openly calling for a presidency with unfettered power. He has said he wants to end long-standing U.S. alliances, use the military to crush protests and ignore election results that don't go his way.

In the face of this, McDermott certainly has the right to live out his remaining years as he pleases. But I hope people with his principles and talents stay in the United States and defend against these threats to democracy.

I'm not the only former war correspondent who watched the violence inspired by Trump in his first term and worried he would push our country toward armed confrontation.

On Jan. 6, 2021, police made a barricade in front of my Capitol Hill home to block a potential breakout of the rampaging mob. I watched a robot move down the sidewalk in search of a pipe bomb planted around the corner. What country was I in?

Trump said those violent insurrectionists were patriots and promised to free them if he becomes president.

I take nothing for granted.

The last shipment of McDermott's belongings arrived in France this month. He now has the paintings, music and books he can't live without. If his worst fears are realized, he has a refuge.