The hero of a year ago

by Ted Van Dyk

It won't be long now until Theodore White and the other campaign chroniclers give us their versions of what happened to George McGovern in 1972.

Teddy White, the public's favorite on this sort of thing, will undoubtedly report in his book the conclusions he told me he'd reached last fall: first, that the national mood was more in tune with Nixon than McGovern; and second, that McGovern should have made "the crisis of the American city" the central issue of his campaign.

The campaign alumni, in their books, will unsurprisingly cast themselves as both protagonists and heroes, unconnected with any of the major errors behind the disaster.

We've long since had George McGovern's own explanations: he was too moral; the people were't ready for him; and the press was soft on Nixon.

Dick Dougherty, McGovern's normally-sensible campaign press secretary, has also faulted the press, at least the working press. Most of them personally favored McGovern, he said in an article in *Newsweek*; thus they should have adopted the subjectivity of the "new journalism" and expressed their preference. Joseph Kraft, in his syndicated column, has several times stressed the explanation he developed last October. Too many ex-journalists were involved in the McGovern campaign, he says, and everyone knows that journalists (presumably excepting Joe Kraft) are not qualified to make serious judgments or run a presidential campaign.

Gary Hart, the nominal campaign manager, has offered other reasons for the debacle. They were, in order: Hubert Humphrey (for attacking McGovern's $1,000-per-citizen plan in California); Tom Eagleton (for being Tom Eagleton); and Arthur Bremer (for shooting George Wallace, who might otherwise have run as a third-party candidate and taken votes from Nixon). Sometimes he adds Ed Muskie (for not withdrawing from the Democratic race as early as Hart thinks he should have).

A favorite villain has been Gordon Weil, McGovern's executive assistant and traveling companion, who has been blamed for suggesting the ill-fated $1,000-for-everyone scheme and for inadequately checking out Tom Eagleton in Miami Beach. Political pollsters Richard Scamman and Ben Wattenberg have told us that, despite their warnings, McGovern strayed too far from the ideological center. Al

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Ted Van Dyk was Director of Issues and Research for the McGovern-Shriver campaign.

Barkan of COPE claims McGovern lost because he was anti-labor. The White House strategists now say 'that, because of his overseas triumphs in Peking and Moscow, Nixon would have beaten any Democrat in 1972, although McGovern was the candidate of their dreams.

These explanations remind me of what happened at a campaign staff meeting a few days before the November election. Hart, leaning back in his swivel chair, grandly pronounced for the umpteenth time the Humphrey-Eagleton-Bremer-Muskie Blame Theory: "You know, if George McGovern loses this election, there are several people to blame, etc., etc. And, believe me, we'll settle up with them afterward."

I turned to Lee White who was running Sargent Shriver's vice presidential campaign, and asked: "Lee, did George McGovern or any of us have anything to do with all of this?"

"Apparently not," Lee said. "It must have been all those other guys."

I think I probably had as good a vantage point as anyone for observing the campaign. Having worked for Hubert Humphrey in both the 1964 and 1968 campaigns, and served as his assistant in the period between, I had hoped he would not be a candidate in 1972. A Humphrey candidacy in '72 felt, would only reopen the Democratic Party's '68 wounds. I also felt it would needlessly expose Humphrey to undeserved abuse. In conversation in the spring of 1971, he said he tended to agree.

What the Democratic Party clearly needed was a candidate who could bridge the gap between the 1968 peace activists and regular Democrats. I felt that McGovern, whose peace credentials were good but who also had been the first to join Humphrey after his nomination on the Chicago platform, could best do that. He had, after all, begun his political career as a full-time Party organizer in South Dakota.

Thus, from June, 1971, until July, 1972, I served George McGovern on a volunteer basis—offering counsel, raising money, overseeing his campaigns in several primary states, and, then, at the July convention, managing his efforts at the platform sessions. After the convention, I served as full-time director of issues and research for the McGovern-Shriver general campaign.

From Inattention to Adulation

"Some people have told me that I ought to declare my candidacy right now," McGovern said to me late in 1970, during one brief meeting at his office. What do you think?

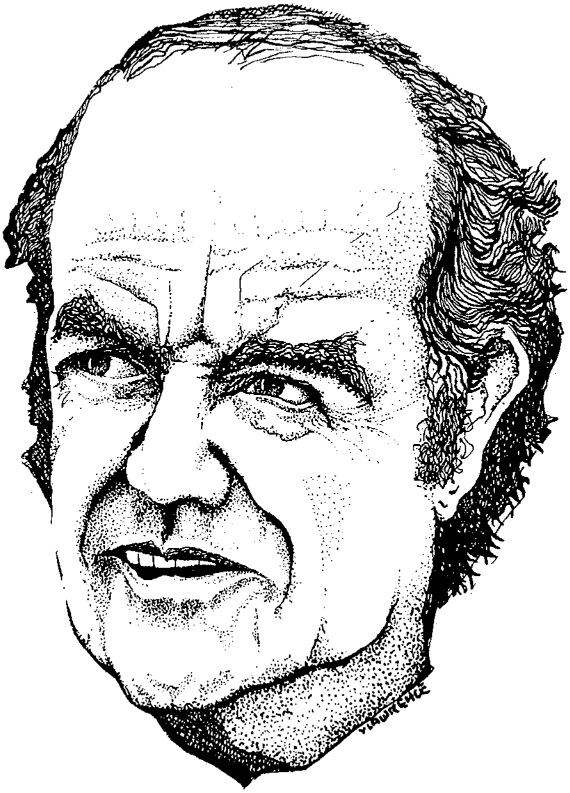
I told him I thought it was a bad idea. If he wanted to run, certainly he ought to be the first liberal candidate to declare—thereby preempting money and support that might go to other liberals. But, I said, he could still do that many months hence. Why not conduct the "unannounced" campaign usual at such an early stage?

A month later, 15 months before the first 1972 primary, McGovern formally declared his candidacy. He was probably right to do so.

The Senator personally wrote a long letter of declaration and sent it to the hundreds of thousands of people on the mailing list left over from fund appeals for the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment to end the war. (There was some question as to whether the list was McGovern's or belonged equally to all the Amendment's sponsors, but McGovern solved that simply by using it as his own.)

The result was phenomenal. The receipts from that letter and subsequent mailings to the same list kept the McGovern campaign alive throughout all of 1971.

It's forgotten now, but back in mid- and late-1971, Harold Hughes, Birch Bayh, Fred Harris, William Proxmire, John Lindsay, and Shirley Chisholm (not to mention Edmund Muskie or Hubert Humphrey) were running ahead, close behind, or even with George McGovern in the national political polls. The difference was that



they didn't have the mailing list and the money it brought in. One by one they dropped out, leaving only Lindsay and Chisholm to compete with McGovern and the "serious" candidates in the primaries.

Then came the New Hampshire primary, which the pundits would later call a masterstroke of McGovern political strategy. The fact is we were there because we had no choice.

Florida was expensive, inhospitable, and had too many candidates. Prospects in Illinois also looked bad. Wisconsin, on April 7, offered us our best chance. But, to do decently there, we would have to make a good showing somewhere else. Everyone with the exception of Gary Hart (who, after traveling through the primary states, suggested all-out efforts in both Florida and Illinois) agreed that we should begin in New Hampshire.

On Sunday, January 9, we convened a last-ditch meeting of major financial contributors at McGovern's home in Washington. Would they see us through New Hampshire? The mailing-list money was no longer enough. Several of us, and then McGovern himself, painted bright pictures of the victories ahead—if only we could finance the next two months.

At the end of the meeting, McGovern, standing at the head of the room, made a direct appeal for funds. There was a long moment of silence as each of the potential donors watched the others for some sign of commitment. After several moments of nervous shifting and throat-clearing by all present, Max Palevsky of Los Angeles pledged $150,000, almost half the amount finally raised that day. Later, Palevsky was to abandon the campaign over a policy dispute. But on that January Sunday, at least, he had kept it alive.

Crying for Joy

In New Hampshire itself, both Joseph Grandmaison, the state campaign manager, and Hart said the only chance for votes lay with the Boston commuters living in the southern part of the state and the remnants of the 1968 McCarthy peace activists. But McGovern kept insisting that these two groups couldn't produce enough votes for a victory. Finally, in mid-February, he overruled the advisers and plunged handshaking into the shoe factories of Manchester. Grandmaison's young canvassers covered every household—talking with the families, writing personal follow-up notes, then calling back again.

The race was settled when Ed Muskie hired a flatbed truck and set it up outside William Loeb's newspaper office.

Looking back, it's hard to say whether McGovern's surprisingly strong showing in New Hampshire was due to his personal campaigning in regular-Democratic, blue-collar areas and to the thorough canvass, or to Muskie's tears. Probably some of both. There were many sighs of relief that, when Muskie's campaign collapsed in New Hampshire, George Wallace, Scoop Jackson, Hubert Humphrey, and John Lindsay were not on the ballot to share in the

windfall.

Our sole objective in Florida was to head off John Lindsay, which we did, running (at a meager six per cent) less than a percentage point behind him. We also fared miserably in Illinois, losing heavily to Muskie in the delegate contest. But New Hampshire was still enough to keep the campaign alive.

Then came Wisconsin, where everything worked.

Gene Pokorny, who coordinated our primary campaign in Wisconsin, had been intensely organizing the state for months. Humphrey, after Florida the odds-on front-runner, unaccountably spent more time in California, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and other states than he did in Wisconsin. A new wave of fighting broke out in Vietnam just one week before the primary, pushing the peace issue forward. McGovern struck a receptive chord with his pledge to lower property taxes, and Republican crossover votes went to him in large numbers.

And the press, increasingly bored with the primaries, had a good story. Suddenly, the obscure man whose chances could not be taken seriously, became the fresh Prairie Populist, moving from news magazine covers into the hearts of the people in his quest for a more decent and moral politics. From Wisconsin until the California primary, the press treated McGovern to an uncritical free ride and the financial and organizational advantages that flowed from it—the likes of which presidential politics had never seen, except, perhaps, in Eisenhower's 1952 honeymoon period.

And with the tidal wave of publicity came a tidal wave of money. After Wisconsin, we were able to outspend each of the remaining Democratic contenders by as much as 5 to 1.

Some of this reward from press and public was deserved. McGovern had worked his heart out for 16 months, earning little but derision from politicians and commentators. But in Wisconsin, he had become the "Candidate in Full Voice and Stride." attaining that state-of-being a candidate so seldom reaches, in which he is confidently and fully in tune with the electorate. With its talent for hyperbole, the press transformed this performance into a New Messiah version of McGovern that bore little relation to the facts. He was, essentially, a man on a hot streak.

One had to sympathize with the complaints of Ed Muskie, whom the press all but counted out after Wisconsin. And how, in reality, had Muskie done? He'd finished 10 percentage points ahead of McGovern in New

Hampshire, and 3 points ahead of McGovern in Florida; he had won the Illinois delegate contest, 59 to 4. Wisconsin was, in fact, the first primary in four where Muskie had not made a better showing than McGovern.

Shaky on the Issues

Muskie's decline was generally viewed as the result of his vague stands on the issues: who could say what Muskie thought about the war, or how he would change the welfare system? McGovern, by contrast, was in these early days building a reputation as *the* issue-oriented candidate. In the press reports, his slow rise was linked to shifting public attitudes—on the war, on moral standards, on the tax and welfare systems. And so, when McGovern's policy stands turned out to be only slightly better researched or thought out than those of, say, Sam Yorty, the shock was greater than it would have been for other candidates.

Most of these policy stands were in the form of position papers issued early in the campaign. These papers were directed primarily toward the 1968 Kennedy and McCarthy supporters, whom we expected to be the base of any McGovern organizational and financial effort. Their main purpose was to dispel the impression that he was a "one-issue" candidate.

One booklet, "McGovern on the Issues," was widely distributed; it looked quite authoritative but consisted largely of McGovern quotations and lists of bills the Senator had co-sponsored. The policy papers themselves, with the exception of an "Alternate Defense Budget," prepared under the direction of McGovern's legislative assistant, John Holum, were largely rehashes of long-standing Democratic doctrine, quickly put together by Holum and Gordon Weil. One paper, dealing with income redistribution and tax reform, was drafted entirely by Weil. It offered a number of policy alternatives, including the oft-proposed idea of "an annual federal payment to every citizen." One possibility, it said, might involve a $1,000-per-person payment. Then it examined other suggestions.

The general assignment reporters—who during the early stages are the *only* reporters covering a presidential campaign—paid little attention to what was in the policy papers. Instead, they began propagating the idea that, as it usually was expressed, "McGovern proposed an unprecedented number of detailed and specific programs to meet the nation's needs."

In fact, the policy papers were thin, and McGovern's first-hand expertise was largely limited to Vietnam and the hunger issue. His background, even his Senate committee assignments, had simply not given him much exposure to the subtle problems of economics, race, and urban affairs.

Few presidential candidates, in-

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cluding John Kennedy in 1960, have really known all the issues as they entered a campaign. I, for one, had no question of McGovern's instincts or his ability to ultimately master what he didn't already know. But the gaps were there.

We were getting our free ride in the media largely because McGovern was good copy–the nice-guy underdog coming out of nowhere–and the familiar Humphrey and Muskie were dull. And we were getting our hearty organizational and financial support from 1968 McCarthy and Kennedy supporters rallying to the flag of the unfinished peace cause.

But the campaign's strength with the voters lay in its sense, if you will, of anti-politics.

The Middle Americans who gave McGovern their votes in places like New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Southern California certainly were not doing so because they shared his affection for long-haired students or his mildly progressive views on amnesty, abortion, or marijuana. Our private polls told us that few, in fact, knew those views. (In Florida, for instance, voters surveyed rated McGovern "more conservative" than any of the candidates except Wallace and Jackson.) Rather, they saw and heard him as an honest man who, whatever his views on the issues, could be *trusted.*

In personal appearances and in television commercials produced by Charles Guggenheim, George McGovern *listened* as much as he talked. If you watched the Guggenheim commercials and turned the sound off, you saw factory workers, housewives, farmers, old people–all with their lips moving. You saw George McGovern nodding, agreeing, giving the camera an earnest profile–his lips not moving until the very end. If you turned on the sound, you heard the citizens complaining about their problems; then, you heard McGovern briefly telling them that they were right. When you spoke about unfair taxes, he *heard* you. When you worried about drug problems in your children's high school, you saw the worry in his face. As he campaigned, McGovern always stopped to ask a few questions of each voter, looking him straight in the eye, instead of grasping his hand and looking ahead to the next man with a *pro forma* "How are you?"

He was not a George Wallace, who was different from the others because he angrily shouted his brand of Poujadist "truth." George McGovern was different because he appeared not to be identified with the old programs, promises, and failures, and because he really seemed to respond to the individual's concerns. Each voter, in a sense, was being offered an empty canvas on which he could create the McGovern portrait of his choice. The appeal was calculated and manipulative. But it was also a relatively accurate portrayal of McGovern's candidacy.

There were position papers for the few who cared about such things. But even if the Senator didn't know all the answers, he did sincerely want to listen to the homely problems of ordinary people (like those he'd grown up with). Exhausted by a generation of overblown speeches and promises, those people didn't necessarily expect him to have the answers. The caring was something in itself.

If George McGovern could have faced Richard Nixon sometime between the Wisconsin and California primaries, he might well have won. But then the honeymoon began to end.

The Fall From Grace

First, Scoop Jackson, moving through Nebraska a week before the primary there, raised and distorted the "acid, amnesty, and abortion" issues.

Then came the Humphrey-McGovern showdown in California. On the morning of the first TV debate between them in Los Angeles, McGovern sent Humphrey flowers (it was his birthday) and then phoned him. "I called Hubert," McGovern said with a sly grin, "and he told me he'd have to be nice to me after all that kindness." A few hours later I saw one of the McGovern children in tears (the Humphreys and McGoverns had been next-door neighbors in Chevy Chase, Maryland, for several years) after watching Humphrey's all-out attack on the $1,000 plan and the Alternate Defense Budget. Humphrey's uncharacteristic assault took McGovern by surprise, and McGovern counterattacked on Humphrey's Vietnam record. The exchange marked a change in the way the public, led by the press, viewed McGovern's campaign. Many of the gaps and improvisations that had seemed insignificant before would now be examined more closely.

One of the most serious deficiencies was, of course, the choice of a vice-presidential candidate. In early April, riding in his car in Philadelphia, McGovern had asked me what I thought about a possible running mate. I gave him two names and the reasons why. I supposed he was asking others the same question. It was encouraging, in any case, to know that he was thinking seriously about it, although his own candidacy, at that point, was still a long shot.

Then, in mid-June, when McGovern seemed an almost-certain nominee, I went to New Orleans to represent him at the National Conference of Mayors. On the final day of the conference McGovern flew down to deliver a speech on urban affairs. Both Muskie and Humphrey, speaking earlier in the day, had received far warmer receptions from the mayors. But that was to be expected—Muskie had served for years on the Intergovernmental Relations Commission and Humphrey, formerly a mayor himself, had been the Johnson Administration's principal champion of urban interests. Despite the cool reception, McGovern was enthusiastically confident as he left the conference that day—most of all, he told me, because "I'm absolutely sure that, if I'm nominated, I'll get Teddy. I know it. And, if he's on the ticket, I'm certain I can beat Nixon." He slapped his fist into his palm for emphasis. Then he moved on to talk about the platform and post-convention campaign organization.

I was encouraged. I was surprised to hear that Kennedy was available—everything flowing from his friends had indicated to the contrary—but I assumed McGovern had good reason to know that it was so.

Then came the chaos of Miami Beach. Ted Kennedy, it turned out, would not serve after all. Nor would others. With only an hour left until a name had to be formally placed on the nominating petitions, McGovern suddenly turned to Tom Eagleton, one of a half-dozen people submitted to him for consideration earlier in the day. The rest we know. (I, for one, have no idea whether McGovern was simply pipe-dreaming about Kennedy's availability, or whether he had good reason to think it was real. In any case, the idea served to block consideration of alternatives from his mind.)

Even at the convention, where Middle America saw its Richard Daley ousted and its deepest moral beliefs challenged, a McGovern victory in November still seemed possible. A month later, it did not.

Within a few days it all came apart. In rapid succession there were the Eagleton disclosures; "1,000 per cent"; the tragicomic search for a new running mate; Pierre Salinger, the diplomat-negotiator and the confusion of explanations about his role; McGovern's comparison of Nixon to Hitler; his prediction in a press conference of a probable Vietcong victory; and, with everything else going wrong, the petty fights within the campaign organization.

Worn thin from months of campaigning, still off balance from the convention credentials challenge and the Eagleton episode, McGovern lurched from one crisis of credibility to another.

By late August, a majority of Americans polled reported that they considered Nixon, trickster of yore, the far more trustworthy of the two candidates.

It was about then that Pat Caddell, the campaign's young pollster, burst into my office with the news that "we're only behind by four points in Ohio!" "Where was the poll taken," asked Salinger, who'd just returned from an Ohio speaking date, "in our Ohio campaign headquarters?" (We finished, finally, 21 points behind Nixon in Ohio.)

What Did It All Mean?

I knew it was over for sure the first week in October, when the letters and phone calls to headquarters abruptly dropped off.

Yet the campaign was, I am convinced, of some lasting value.

McGovern proved, in both primary and non-primary states, that individual citizens can still make a great deal of difference in the electoral process. I expect that in 1976 the nominating procedure will be much more open because of McGovern's campaign.

But perhaps the greatest contribution will prove to be the cathartic the campaign has provided to the Democratic Party. I have no doubt that if a more traditional Democrat had been nominated and then defeated, the cries would have gone up blaming the loss on our abandonment of "new politics" for the old. Between 1968 and 1972, all elements of the Party have had their chance—and all have lost. There is hardly any need for further mutual recrimination.

But there is a danger that Democratic officeholders and candidates will misread 1972 as a public rejection not of the person of George McGovern, temporarily overwhelmed by circumstance and events, but of the very premise that men and political parties should actively attempt to redress social injustice.

The McGovern disaster, after all, did *not* bury many of the non-incumbent liberal Democrats who shared the ticket with him. In Colorado Nixon defeated McGovern by 28 percentage points, but Floyd Haskell unseated Republican Senator Gordon Allott. In Delaware Nixon beat McGovern by more than 20 points, but unknown Democrat Joseph Biden upset Senator J. Caleb Boggs. In Illinois Nixon won by 19 points, but Dan Walker nonetheless defeated Republican Governor Richard Ogilvie. In Iowa it was Nixon by 17 points, yet Dick Clark turned out incumbent Senator Jack Miller by 11 points. And so on, at all levels of the ballot.

It seems to me that Richard Nixon won in 1972 because people thought he offered competence while they thought McGovern did not. And what the people wanted in 1972, in my judgment, is what they still want and do not have: political leadership which not only will make government more responsive to the needs of the individual citizen, but will devise a more satisfactory relationship between the two.

Senator William Fulbright, discussing McGovern's misfortunes with a half-dozen fellow Democrats one evening late in the campaign, said he wanted a McGovern presidency "because George is such an *ordinary man*. . . . I don't mean ordinary in any negative sense, but the presidency was *designed* for ordinary men—not for a succession of so many larger-than-life men on horseback. If George McGovern were President he wouldn't stand for a CIA or FBI pushing people around the way they do now, or the Pentagon building and buying what it pleased. He wouldn't stand for price-fixing or these outrages against people who work for wages and pay their taxes. And you can be damned sure he wouldn't try to prove his manhood by prolonging a war that shouldn't have been started in the first place. It's a damned shame all this has happened to George, because I don't know how long it will be until we have a President who feels like that." ■

MEANWHILE THE REALITIES

"I don't walk around with jobs in my pocket"

We use the term "Meanwhile the Realities" to describe a certain type of article, one focusing on what is really happening down at the grass-roots level, below the 18 administrative layers of federal agencies, down where people pick up their food stamps and pay their taxes. In our book, Inside the System, *we gave this introduction to a section entitled "Meanwhile the Realities":*

> *The study of government almost exclusively concerns itself with how people have given or lent their power to their elected representatives and how those chosen few have dealt, shuffled, and redealt that power among themselves. The disparity between government and those it affects is perpetuated in the way we learn about government and compounded when the products of this type of education become bureaucrats or politicians and ignore in practice what they were taught to ignore in theory.*
>
> *The purpose of "Meanwhile the Realities" lies not only in its subject matter, but in its point of view as well. Looking up from below (for example, from a coal miner's position rather than that of a GS-18 in the Bureau of Mines) is not a very comfortable posture, but it is a necessary one for scholars and officials. Government will never be improved by rearranging its brain cells while the nerve endings remain numb.*

And that is why we are beginning "Meanwhile the Realities" as a regular feature.

by Polly Toynbee

In one corner of a big, airlessly-hot, open-plan office, Myer Waxler, a shambling man in his late thirties, sits hunched in his chair, sleepy-looking, like the other occupants of the room. On the third floor of the District of Columbia Manpower Administration is the room marked Student Services Division, a place with no character and no windows where there are many desks, no privacy, an air of boredom, nail filing, and paper shuffling. Some of the desks are empty a good deal of the time, but Myer Waxler is always sitting in his corner, looking deceptively bored, until galvanized into a sudden bout of energy by the appearance of a client.

The function of the office is to find jobs for young people under 18. In fact, a good many of the clients are well over that age. The others in the room avoid interviewing the kids; Waxler avoids doing anything else. He keeps few work files and hasn't much idea how many people he sees in a year. He is supposed to be a job placement officer, fitting each kid into a slot, filling out forms, trying to make the employment figures for the District look a little better. But he is a maverick, a freak in the system, and he is pretty sure that the higher authorities have no idea what he really does.

As Waxler and I were talking, a tall, dapper black youth came in and leaned across Waxler's desk, but didn't say anything.

"Well, what are you doing here?" Waxler asked angrily. With one finger the boy pulled at the bright-white, woolly hat that came down to his eyes. He was wearing a tight-fitting velvet jacket, exquisitely cut, matching his dark brushed-cotton trousers, not a mark or a seam or a crease out of place.

"I couldn't make it Wednesday, I guess," he said, his finger still picking at the rim of his hat.

"Couldn't make it, huh? You have such a tight schedule you just couldn't fit it in?" Waxler said with a sneer in

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Polly Toynbee is an editor of The Washington Monthly.