

The McGovern Campaigners: Their Dirty Little Secret

by Walter Shapiro

In the last few months I have read perhaps a half dozen books resurrecting and reassessing the McGovern campaign. Generally lacking in insight, they serve as depressing reminders of the palace intrigues, threatened resignations, and general egomania which were the norm at the campaign's highest levels. What is particularly galling is that these books never really discuss the volunteers and the \$50-a-week staffers who actually powered the campaign, especially in the primaries. From New Hampshire to California, McGovern's momentum came from the willingness of tens of thousands of people to canvass, make

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phone calls, and turn out the right voters on primary day.

When mentioned at all, these volunteers are usually described by such impersonal phrases as "the McGovern army." None of these campaign memoirs makes even a rudimentary effort to explain why McGovern was so successful in attracting dedicated workers, while Muskie and Humphrey couldn't arouse the enthusiasm of the "hacks." The easy answer is, of course, "Vietnam," but it is just not convincing to regard the McGovern campaign as simply another manifestation of the peace movement. The prevailing attitudes of the Democratic Party toward the war had changed markedly from 1968 to 1972. It was

apparent to all but the most cynical that any Democrat elected President last year—except Scoop Jackson—would have quickly ended the fighting in Southeast Asia.

There are no foolproof theories about why people volunteer to work in political campaigns. For example, back in the early sixties Helen Gurley Brown advised in her best-selling *Sex and the Single Girl* that political campaigns are just wonderful places to meet attractive, eligible men. But sex aside, the motivation of campaign workers is worth some consideration. It is striking that the majority of McGovern campaign workers were members of those groups in our society that have been the most troubled by the vast chasm separating their aspirations for interesting work and the realities of our semi-depressed economy. More than most political efforts, the McGovern campaign attracted two basic types of volunteers—those under 30 and housewives.

McGovern's appeal to those in

their twenties was directly related to the job problems of recent college graduates. Here we are dealing with realities and perceptions far more subtle than those measured on unemployment charts. The attitudes of these volunteers were shaped during the late 1960s, which was, despite the dark cloud of Vietnam, a period of almost boundless optimism on our college campuses. Students who came to college from the reputed "emptiness" of suburbia were confident that, if they chose, they could equal, if not surpass, the affluence of their parents. It was this collective self-confidence that gave rise to the widespread fantasy of an America brought to its knees when they all said "no" to the desperate recruiters from General Motors and Chase Manhattan. During this halcyon period, the question was not simply finding a job; rather it was locating work which meshed with their finely tuned moral sense, desire for self-expression, and general feeling of self-importance. Only in a period when virtually all are convinced that they can become conventional "successes" does the act of rebellion in "dropping out" take on any real meaning.

All this changed with the Nixon recession. Suddenly, these bright-eyed college graduates discovered that they no longer had the option of "selling out" because no one was buying. The crisis was accentuated by the sheer number of college graduates jockeying for position in the job market. Although the campus revolts of the 1960s were chronicled in excruciating detail, generally these post-graduation disillusionments have been shrouded in silence.

The desperate job-hunting at academic conventions has become something of a cliché. But the problems extend far beyond the world of colleges and universities. Take the 200 college graduates who show up the morning *The New York Times* runs an ad announcing an opening for one social worker on Staten Island. Take the fledgling journalists who dream of

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emulating Woodward and Bernstein but can't even find jobs on suburban weeklies. Take all those who have settled for jobs they hate because they fear unemployment more. Scattered across the country are countless young people forced to come to grips with thwarted aspirations.

Housewives, the other major component of the McGovern campaign forces, share many of these frustrations. Politics has been traditionally an outlet for over-educated and under-utilized women needing a sense of purpose outside family life. For some, the women's movement has opened up entirely new possibilities. But for others, it merely accentuated the "might-have-beens" of abandoned careers and long-forgotten plans. No matter to what level her consciousness has been raised, it is often difficult for a woman who has been out of the job market for 10 or 15 years to find work more rewarding than ringing doorbells as an Avon lady.

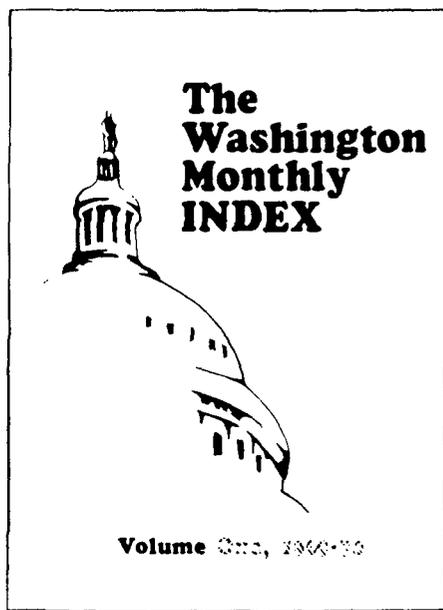
The appeal of the McGovern campaign to career-frustrated people is not difficult to fathom. In a sense, the effort was a vast "make-work" program, rivaling Roosevelt's WPA in its scope. The campaign's inherently frenetic pace and unalterable deadline generated an excitement no graduate seminar or PTA meeting could hope to match. Working for McGovern provided a sense of community which is difficult to find, especially in the urban areas, where those in their twenties tend to congregate. It also became the outlet for an idealism which had remained dormant since the failure of the McCarthy crusade and the anti-war movement. Not only was the campaign open-ended, with a voracious appetite for volunteers, but in its early days promotions came as rapidly as they do under battlefield conditions in the Army. McGovern lost, but for its duration the campaign helped to obscure the sticky question of what happens in a country where there just aren't enough satisfying jobs to go around.

But for many on the paid staff, the

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experience was more than a fulfilling antidote to boredom. For those in its middle and upper echelons—press assistants, schedulers, and what-not—the presidential race provided an entirely new, and rather useful, set of contacts. Leading politicians and some of the nation’s foremost journalists were accessible, often on a first-name basis. If careers in contemporary America are still furthered by connections, then working on the McGovern campaign provided membership in a rather potent old-boy network.

One night about a year ago I remember sitting up with two friends who were receiving subsistence salaries from the Connecticut McGovern campaign—Bob was an advance man, Sara a staff photographer. Before the primaries Bob had been working as a janitor for the university where he had been a campus leader in the late 1960s. He wasn’t sure what he’d be doing after the election. Sara, who had recently graduated from college, was a photographer of demonstrated talent who had been frustrated in her efforts to obtain a job on a major newspaper.

Their involvement in the McGovern campaign was qualitatively different from that of Gary Hart or Rick Stearns. They had no visions of going on the White House payroll if McGovern were elected, but in a

strange sense their faith in the campaign was far stronger than that of many campaign “insiders.” It wasn’t that their naivete sheltered them from the disaster that was taking shape around them. Three weeks before election day, they knew Connecticut—one of the states McGovern unquestionably had to carry—was hopeless. Yet they continued to work their 16-hour days, almost oblivious to the futility of it all. I saw Bob once more during the campaign. He was too busy to do more than nod as he prepared frantically for a Sargent Shriver appearance at a sad and ragged little rally in Warsaw Park in Ansonia, Connecticut.

I didn’t work for McGovern, but, toward the end, I, too, developed a kind of kinship with the campaign. I was broke and jobless as America went to the polls, and I spent election day fantasizing what the job market might be like if McGovern pulled off the upset of the century. New programs would sprout in Washington, again making government seem like a challenging place to work. Research would flourish, providing a bonanza for consulting firms and academic social scientists. New social welfare programs—aid to the handicapped or prison reform, perhaps—would absorb the glut of social workers. Even our surplus of Ph.Ds would be delivered from driving cabs and working as hospital orderlies. If colleges couldn’t hire more teachers, then the government probably would, with programs like federal sponsorship of adult education.

But this doesn’t really explain my bond to McGovern. What I sensed about a possible McGovern Administration—and this is perhaps what attracted people like Bob and Sara to the campaign, even in its darkest hour—was that here, at least, was one place where I would be valued. Here, what I had to offer would be marketable, in part because of the jobs that would be created, but also in part because of a shared community of beliefs and attitudes. ■

Answers to September Political Puzzle:

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BOOKS:

The Great Stagflation Machine

by James Fallows

In its treatment of economists is this nation's true compassion revealed. Five centuries ago physicians were put to death when pestilence persisted. Today we coddle our economists, call them forth in swollen ranks to confront our economic plagues. Only strangers to the laws of supply and demand can be surprised to learn that the experts have done more describing than solving. In a world of economic perfection, could nearly a dozen books about inflation make their way onto the publishers' fall lists?

Of the current harvest, Robert Lekachman's *Inflation: The Permanent Problem of Boom and Bust** is one of the most appealing. Not only is Lekachman that rare academic who can write without resort to jargon (or except when necessary even to numbers), but also his book is modestly priced. While it has a few regrettable defects, *Inflation* is an excellent brief summary of why President Nixon's Phases may come and go but inflation is with us forever.

Like others of his brethren who have taken to print, Lekachman makes excuses for his craft. Economists, he tells us, are no more responsible for inflation than priests are for

**Inflation: The Permanent Problem of Boom and Bust*. Robert Lekachman. Random House, \$5.95/\$1.95.

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sin. They know the answers, but can't convince others to listen. But unlike Irving Friedman, who in *Inflation: A Worldwide Disaster* heaps the blame on a race (presumably human) grown too fond of material possessions, Lekachman chooses a more attractive target: the politicians.

Lekachman makes his case against the nation's leaders in the course of presenting a solid historical explanation of the inflationary process. Ten years ago we had relatively full employment with stable prices; now we have neither. In describing the transition, Lekachman has produced one of the best popular accounts of the two theories of inflation: "demand-pull" and "cost-push."

The descent from what Lekachman portrays as the Garden of Eden—the happy boom times of the early sixties—began with the onset of the Vietnam war. By trying to pay for his soldiers without raising taxes or sacrificing the Great Society, Lyndon Johnson created the classic demand-pull situation. People were being paid to produce goods (rocketry) and services (craters) that could not be consumed on the market. More money was chasing a static amount of goods; naturally, prices rose.

So far this theory could have been taken whole from the pages of any standard economics text. From there, the process became less conventional.