

The Myths of McGovern

Thirty-five years later, what the 1972 campaign can—and can't—teach liberals today.

WHY THE DEMOCRATS ARE BLUE: HOW SECULAR LIBERALS HIJACKED THE PEOPLE'S PARTY BY MARK STRICHERZ • ENCOUNTER BOOKS • 2007 • 350 PAGES • \$29.95

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If you happen to find yourself listening to Conversation 62 of Tape 33 of the new Nixon documents released this summer, this is what you will hear: On Election Night 1972, Richard M. Nixon, having served George McGovern the biggest electoral college defeat in history, took a congratulatory phone call from Hubert H. Humphrey, who all but admitted he had wanted McGovern to lose, and that he had tried to keep him from winning.

It is oblique, as the wink-wink, nudge-nudge understandings of backroom politics so often are. Nixon had earlier dispatched Henry Kissinger to convey to Humphrey the (false) message that the Vietnam peace deal he would sign after the election was perfectly marvelous. On the tape, Humphrey agrees that, yes, Nixon was better for peace than McGovern. Nixon grants Humphrey absolution

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for having nonetheless campaigned for the Democratic nominee (“you had to fight for your man”), and Humphrey’s voice turns conspiratorial: “Well, I’ll have a talk with you some time... I did what I had to do. If not, Mr. President, this whole defeat would have been blamed on me and on some of my associates.” They both share a hearty laugh. Nixon, delighted to confirm that the man he shivved to get to the Oval Office preferred to keep him there for four more years, waxes effusive, reminding him that Winston Churchill returned to the prime minister’s chair at age 68—“so what the hell, you’re still in your sixties!” Then he rings off, thanking Humphrey “for being such a statesman.”

This astonishing conversation condenses so much about that strangest of American presidential elections, 1972: its battle for the soul of the Democratic Party, fought by an antiwar insurgency far to the left of the Cold War consensus

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and an ossified, go-along-to-get-along establishment; the dishonest and dishonorable way Nixon settled Vietnam to secure reelection; the crashing irony that the nation delivered a 60.7 percent popular majority to a man they claimed to trust more than the antiwar insurgent, but who had already directed a

criminal coverup. Dwell, however, on Humphrey’s line—“this whole defeat would have been blamed on me and some of my associates.” For condensed in *that* is an entire subsequent history that, like Faulkner said of the South’s, isn’t even past: It is the battle for the meaning of 1972.

Losing campaigns—especially thumpingly, head-spinningly losing campaigns—are objects of talismanic power in the minds of politicians. Their response is almost pre-rational. No wonder partisans of the center and right still invoke McGovern whenever they can to scare Democrats who would stray from their preferred ideological course. In 2003, Al From and Bruce Reed wrote, “What activists like [Howard] Dean call the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party is an aberration: the McGovern-Mondale wing, defined principally by weakness abroad and elitist, interest-group liberalism at home.” A Democrat was quoted in the *New York Times* the next year worrying that John Kerry was veering left on Iraq—“[c]oming off like George McGovern.” When Ned Lamont won the 2006 Connecticut Democratic primary, Jacob Weisberg recalled in the *Financial Times* how McGovern lost 49 states because of “his tendency toward isolationism and ambivalence about the use of American power in general.”

The warnings turned out to be of limited portent; politicians who called for Iraq withdrawal in 2004 now look more like political prophets than harbingers of

landslide defeats. But the M-word short-circuits thought. McGovern lost because he was an isolationist? If you had said that in 1972, people might have looked at you funny. Whatever his preference for deep cuts in the defense budget, Republican surrogates who hauled out the isolationist charge were labeled “silly” by no less an honest broker than the *New York Times*’ Scotty Reston. Over the following six years—according to my ProQuest search—the words “McGovern” and some variant of “isolation” were mentioned in the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Chicago Tribune* a mere six times. If McGovern campaigned as an “isolationist,” then Richard Nixon—whose main appeal was that he could better end the war, whose “Nixon doctrine” was a promise to the American people not to send troops to more foreign countries, and who literally blamed America’s financial woes on “international money speculators”—campaigned as one, too, only more effectively. As for From and Reed, they’re the silliest of all: Walter Mondale was handpicked for the 1984 Democratic nomination by the leadership of the AFL-CIO, while George McGovern was persona non grata to those same leaders. Mondale and McGovern are more like oil and water than a “wing.” But that’s the way it goes. The McGovern epithet has become so handy that it can be stuck to anyone you want to label a “loser,” whatever your claim’s relation to the complexities of history. McGovern explains everything, precisely because no one seems to know what McGovern and 1972 actually meant.

The monomania of the latest entrant into the Battle of ’72 is abortion. *Why the Democrats Are Blue: How Secular Liberals Hijacked the People’s Party*, by conservative journalist Mark Stricherz, tells a familiar story that in its broad outlines is, if incomplete, not false: The forces that brought George McGovern the nomination did so by wresting the Democratic presidential nominating process from the de facto control of Catholic urban machine bosses. But Stricherz claims McGovernism somehow disenfranchised “the Catholic wing of the party” with malice aforethought, and in doing so sabotaged Democratic electoral fortunes to this day.

Stricherz, who has embraced Ramesh Ponnuru’s “Party of Death” designation for supporters of abortion rights, wraps his reductionism inside a set piece: interviews with Catholic residents of Westmoreland County, a formerly Democratic redoubt in western Pennsylvania, devotees of the late Robert P. Casey Sr., the culturally conservative Democratic Pennsylvania governor (strangely enough, his account of a party in secular liberalism’s death grip never mentions the name of Robert P. Casey Jr., the governor’s equally pro-life son, now a Democratic senator). They love their unions but hate sexual iniquity (though Stricherz can’t spare a single word of opprobrium for the Republicans’ role in devastating

those same unions). Stricherz claims them as emblems of a reality that we are to believe makes him disconsolate. “Support for a once-great national party has dwindled to ‘blue’ states on the coasts and Great Lakes region”—a solecism on which Governors Schweitzer, Blanco, Sibelius, Beebe, Ritter, Napolitano, Culver, Easley, Richardson, Henry, Bredesen, Kaine, Manchin, and Freudenthal might have more to say than I.

Stricherz’s historical account begins with, as it were, the first Caseykrat: David Lawrence, the Pittsburgh political boss who fought for a civil rights plank at the 1948 convention. Stricherz wants Lawrence to stand in for his cohort as a whole: “The post-war Catholic bosses [who] produced good and equitable Democratic results, which reflected the values of the party’s working-class and Judeo-Christian constituents.” He labels their ideology “Christian humanism.” That’s a bit fantastic. Among other “Christian humanists,” Stricherz singles out Frank Hague of Jersey City, who also brought his delegation into line for the plank. Hague reportedly died with \$10 million in the bank, though his mayoral salary never exceeded \$8,000, and you can still see his old desk at City Hall, with its specially designed reverse-drawer that he would push forth to demand a bribe.

The transformation dates to 1968. Mayor Richard Daley—whom Stricherz singles out as one of the bosses “more ethical and less sectarian than their predecessors,” and I dare him to read that howler aloud in my hometown of Chicago—presided over the police riot in the streets outside the Democratic National Convention, as well as the machine riot inside the hall, from which people questioning procedural irregularities by the Humphrey and pro-war forces were dragged by helmeted cops. One result of the convention was the appointment of a party commission to reform the nominating structure. You didn’t have to be an antiwar activist to reasonably fear that a party that settled ineluctable divisions via fisticuffs and billy clubs might go the way of the Whigs. But it is crucial to the structure of Stricherz’s argument to show the reform contingent as mere usurpers.

The reformers were hardly flawless. They presumed that voter rejection of a war started and sustained by Democrats, the rise of the youth insurgency, the crisis of black misery and militancy, and the sociological shifts in the modal Democratic voter (from blue-collar urbanite to educated suburbanite) must also entail a stem-to-stern revision in how the party did business, casting out babies with bath water rather recklessly. Their maximalist assumptions were surely flawed. And any account of this cohort must take account of a certain elite arrogance to which they could succumb. My favorite example is the Harvard antiwar leader who said, after Nixon’s famous “silent majority” speech unveiling his “Vietnamization” plan, “What Nixon has tried to show is that there is a

silent majority behind him. We know better.” Actually, after that speech, Nixon’s approval rating shot up to 68 percent.

But any account must consider the political exhaustion of the old Democratic order—that the bosses’ cities provided 21 percent of votes in 1960, but only 14 percent in 1968; that union members voted 66 percent for John F. Kennedy, but only 51 percent for Humphrey; that in those same years the number of students in college almost doubled. It also must consider the regulars’ moral decrepitude. AFL-CIO chief George Meany was by then a bitter old man, who told John Ehrlichman in the White House, “When I was a plumber, it never occurred to me to have niggers in the union.” In 1966, he specifically gave leave to McGovern, facing a tough reelection fight in a conservative state, to vote against cloture on banning right-to-work laws. In 1971, he explicitly signed off on McGovern as an acceptable Democratic candidate, and then, in 1972, ruthlessly sabotaged him in a fit of cultural pique for turning over the Democratic Party, as Meany claimed from the dais at a Steelworkers’ convention, to “people who look like Jacks, acted like Jills, and had the odors of Johns about them.”

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Stricherz writes as if the reformers were simply a new breed of dictator—that “Gloria Steinem, for all her feminine pulchritude was more imperious than any old-school boss.” Incredibly, he never mentions that under the reforms, the number of Democratic primary elections more than doubled, to 23. If you were reading this book as a history major from Mars, you might literally come away thinking that, post-’68, Democratic presidential candidates were chosen merely in different back rooms—by plutocrats smoking pot instead of cigars. “They worked to create a presidential nomination process in which the issue of economic inequality took a backseat to that of opposing the war,” he writes. It’s a pretty surreal way to describe a process that produced a presidential nominee whose most controversial proposal was a guaranteed minimum income.

It all ends with abortion. Stricherz neatly elides the inconvenient fact that the 1972 convention resoundingly voted down a pro-choice plank and that McGovern’s own position—he was personally opposed, though he wanted it left legislatively up to the states—was also Nixon’s. But no matter. We learn that the born-again Christian Jimmy Carter managed to squeak through to victory despite being the captive of secular liberalism, that he sealed the party’s fate in 1980 by refusing to back a constitutional amendment to overturn *Roe* and his

inability to control the feminists (who finally formalized a 50–50 gender balance at the convention). At that, “the Christian right followed the lead of Reverend Jerry Falwell and aligned with the Republicans.”

You could write several books about what this leaves out; the killer rabbit probably had more to do with Carter’s downfall. But the real problem, as with so many critiques of “McGovernism,” is Stricherz’s utter lack of historical nuance. Take, for example, the compensating electoral tradeoffs that breaking up old-white-man bossism brought. You wouldn’t know that by 1981, while men were identifying 46 percent to 42 as Republicans, women were identifying 53 to 35 as Democrats. Indeed, the entire foundation of his argument—wholesale Catholic abandonment of the Democrats, because all Catholics are lockstep social conservatives—is farcical. Catholics are in fact among the most volatile of presidential voting blocks—Democratic by seven points in 1996; Republican by seven points in 2000. According to Ruy Teixeira, white Catholics are actually more moderate than other voters “on homosexuality and openness to stem cell research,” while a 2004 CBS news poll found that 34 percent of Catholics compared with 36 percent of all respondents believe “abortion should be generally available to those who want it,” and only 28 percent of Catholics compared with 25 percent to all respondents thought “abortion should not be permitted.” Never mind that. In the mind of Stricherz—and, sadly, too many Democrats as well—if Democrats could only somehow revive the corpses of Daley, Hague, and Casey Sr., “the presidential wing of the Democratic Party could once again boast of being a real people’s party.” The Battle for 1972 has reached another *reductio ad absurdum*.

Getting beyond such opportunistic reductionism would require a more mature account of why McGovern lost in the first place. Nixon’s evil, frankly, played a role; it’s easy to forget that Watergate was an election scandal, that much of what Nixon’s dirty tricksters spent 1972 doing, quite effectively, was running “false flag” operations to ratchet up the level of distrust within an already badly divided Democratic party. There were also, of course, unrecoverable mistakes: McGovern’s choice of Senator Thomas Eagleton as his running mate, who had received electroshock therapy for depression and hid the fact, and his subsequent reversal on whether to keep him on the ticket, was by far the worst. But even the act of unpacking this one crucial moment really would require an entire book—a wide-ranging, fair-minded, and scholarly one at that. This is what Bruce Miroff, a political scientist at SUNY-Albany, has accomplished. And in doing so, he shows that McGovern lost within a context about as foreign to our current political debates as the French Revolution.

What to make, for example, of a campaign that hired a 19-year-old to pull together the candidate's issue book, or whose chief pollster only recently worked out of his Harvard dorm room? What to make of a campaign that presumes, as its transcendent appeal to voters, the healing of the national epidemic of "alienation"? Greek to us—but so ubiquitous then that Scotty Reston began the year predicting that America might end it with a five-party political system. What to make of a presidential campaign down some 20 points in October, but full of "experts" who still thought they could pull it out? Crazy to us. But after the late '60s, the notion that no previous rule held sway seemed more reasonable. In the words of another of those arrogant New Politics activists, a young Harvard instructor named Martin Peretz, "These are times of moral enormity, when cool reasonableness is a more pathological and unrealistic state than hysteria."

In stepped George McGovern. The plan, Miroff shows, was to rely on McGovern's shimmering idealism, his incorruptibility, his utter straightforwardness—not to mention his early and morally uncompromising antiwar stance—to draw brand-new strands into the Democratic coalition: the under-21 voters newly enfranchised by the 26th Amendment, the new social movements, the conscience-stricken idealists of a baffled nation. The process was supposed to be additive. That, after all, was how the Democratic coalition had always worked—new groups braided into the whole, which bodies forth ever stronger into the future.

The plan was doomed from the start. A candidate who claims an identity apart from conventional politics must have a very deft touch once he pivots back to the regulars. Otherwise he just looks like a sellout, erasing the very foundation of the original appeal. Miroff tells one heartbreaking story about Vermont's popular gubernatorial candidate, a party regular, meeting with the leaders of McGovern's state campaign to work out the details of the mutual endorsement. In marched the entire volunteer staff, enraged at the "backroom deal" being cut in their midst.

Not that the regulars proved much more tolerant—all those stout-hearted "Christian humanists" of Mark Stricherz's who sandbagged McGovern left and right—about including any new threads in the tapestry. Humphrey himself, backed by Meany, ran a stupendously vicious primary campaign against McGovern in the late innings. Edmund Muskie, Scoop Jackson, and Humphrey even cast aspersions against McGovern on "Meet the Press" segments during the

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convention. Others were more casual—like the Catholic Missouri senator, one of the few up and comers associated with the regulars' old order, who gave a blind quote to Rowland Evans and Robert Novak at the height of the primary season, when McGovern looked to be clinching the nomination: "The people don't know McGovern is for amnesty, abortion, and legalization of pot. Once Middle America—Catholic Middle America, in particular—finds this out, he's dead."

Well, like I said, his position on abortion was the same as Nixon's. His position on pot followed the President's National Commission on Marihuana and Drug Abuse. And amnesty was enacted, in limited form, by Gerald Ford. And the person who cast the false aspersion, Novak has recently revealed in his memoirs, was... Thomas Eagleton. While the meaning of McGovern may change, clearly one thing remains: the unfair abuse of George McGovern by shameless opportunists. **D**