



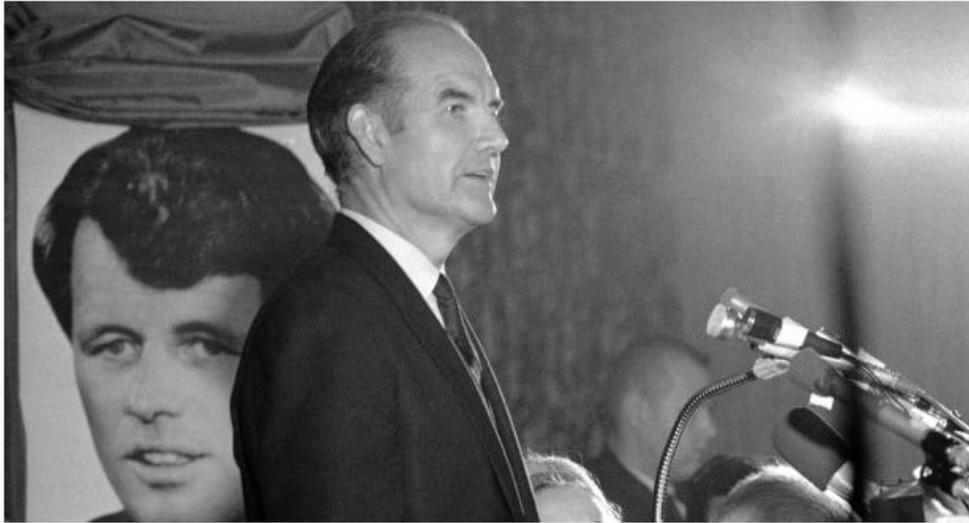
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## The Gallant Idealism of George McGovern

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.

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*In the summer of 1972, I went to work for the late senator with the profound hope that he would carry on the spirit of Robert F. Kennedy.*



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People now remember McGovern as going down in one of the biggest defeats in history, losing every state but Massachusetts (and the District of Columbia) to Richard Nixon. But many forget that he made a gallant effort to present Kennedy's idealism -- and anti-war and domestic reform policies -- to an increasingly tired, racially divided, and increasingly conservative electorate.

I arrived at the campaign post-Eagleton. When the Vice Presidential nominee revealed that he had suffered from depression and been treated with electroshock, McGovern first said he was "1000 percent" behind Eagleton and then, under pressure, dumped him from the ticket on August 1st. The election was probably decided definitively then. But young people, like me, had been inspired by John Kennedy, grown up during the civil rights revolution and anti-Vietnam war turbulence of the sixties, and were deeply attracted to Robert Kennedy in 1968. The steepness of the hill McGovern had to climb

after the Eagleton fiasco didn't matter. I pocketed a handful of "McGovern-Eagleton" buttons (soon to be replaced ones emblazoned with "McGovern-Shriver"), and in my mid-twenties became a "senior" person on the issues staff.

At the national campaign headquarters (1972 K Street in Washington), the youth corps admired McGovern for his solid personality, his great record in WWII as a bomber pilot, his outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War, and his position as heir to Kennedy's legacy (because Teddy wouldn't run). But we knew that he lacked essential qualities of the Robert Kennedy of 1968: charisma and the ability to inspire. The much-discussed flat, "reedy" mid-Western accent would not excite crowds. We knew that his policies on both foreign and domestic matters were strong statements of sixties liberalism, lacking in balance that would appeal to the great middle of American politics, which had been chastened by events and was removed in time from the aura of the Kennedys. We could feel that he wasn't connecting with the electorate.

But we also felt that the issues, in the broad, were right: stopping the war; completing the civil rights revolution; extending that revolution to other groups in society, especially women; starting to focus on environmental protection. Although the Democratic presidents who followed, Carter and Clinton, were much more centrist than McGovern, his articulation of the aspirations of the 1960s in the doomed campaign of 1972 remain important not just for the Democratic party but for the nation. Somehow, we knew that would happen, even as we felt the weight of impending defeat every day.

Increasingly, the really "senior" people on the staff -- those in their 30s and 40s who had been through presidential campaigns -- could not hide from younger colleagues their intuitive sense that the national polls could not be turned around. By Labor Day, we knew we could fight the good fight, but to no avail.

The inevitable gallows humor began to affect K Street. "Did you hear about the great result of the new poll?" "No, what was it?" "We're only behind 55-45 at headquarters."

The campaign also gave birth to one of the great campaign one-liners of all time. Late in the campaign, outside a plant early one morning, McGovern was heckled by a Nixon supporter. Tired and frustrated, he shot back, "Kiss my ass." Soon this comment ricocheted across the nation, and the media was pressing for a comment.

A few hours later, Frank Mankiewicz, communications director, went before the cameras. "McGovern's a Democrat. What did you expect him to say, 'Kiss my elephant?'" That quote, of course, led the evening news, leavening an otherwise grim campaign.

Ironically, one of my most vivid memories of that presidential contest came from an elderly, moderate Republican who was a friend and mentor. He told me that he was glad I was working for McGovern. In fact, he told me he was going to vote for McGovern. I asked him why.

He answered: "Richard Nixon has no moral compass. If he wins an electoral landslide it will be bad for the country. The famous dictum applies here: 'Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.'"

We had this conversation just a few days after a break-in at the Democratic Headquarters in the Watergate. It was given modest press coverage.

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