

George McGovern's \$1000 Promissory Note

by Loren Gatch

While the word “flip-flop” has been a part of America’s political lexicon since the early 20th century, as a piece of political invective the term has become widespread only in the last generation. As with most political speech, the more it has been used the less it means. Nowadays, almost any apparent inconsistency—or even the intellectually honest act of changing one’s mind—gets a public figure in hot water. Back in 1972, however, “flip-flop” did most definitely describe the behavior of the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate, George McGovern, towards his running mate, Thomas Eagleton. The fiasco of McGovern’s embrace and then disavowal of his vice-presidential choice not only created the “Eighteen-Day Running Mate” but gave rise to a widely-available example of political scrip, George McGovern’s \$1000 Promissory Note.

The 1972 presidential campaign of George Stanley McGovern (1922-2012) occurred at an important juncture of recent American political history. The Republican Party’s electoral strategy had only just begun to peel away important parts of the Democrats’ New Deal coalition, especially Southerners hostile to the Democrats’ support for civil rights. For their part, the Democrats’ outreach to minority voters as well as to the antiwar movement pulled the party to the left in a way that loosened its ties to working-class whites. Indeed, it was Vice President Spiro Agnew’s slashing rhetorical style that defined an increasingly common Republican campaign trope: Democrats were liberal elitists who had lost touch with the values and interests of what Nixon called the “Silent Majority.”

If anybody could bring the anti-war left into the Democratic Party, it was George McGovern. The senator from South Dakota was a decorated bomber pilot during the Second World War and possessed a reputation for great personal integrity. At first a long shot in the 1972 Democratic primary season, McGovern exploited his grassroots organizational strength among the anti-war movement, civil libertarians, and minorities to gain ground against party stalwarts like Edmund Muskie and Hubert Humphrey. A weak showing by Muskie in the New Hampshire primary in February was followed by McGovern’s victories over Humphrey in Wisconsin and California. The assassination attempt on George Wallace removed yet another challenger, and by June McGovern emerged as the front runner and presumptive nominee at the Democratic convention in Miami Beach in early July.

The Democratic Party establishment did not welcome McGovern’s surge. Organized labor, in the form of George Meany’s AFL-CIO, did not endorse him. In order to both bolster his appeal to white ethnic voters and reassure his party’s establishment, McGovern tried repeatedly to get Teddy Kennedy for the vice presidential slot. Polling suggested that a McGovern-Kennedy ticket had the best shot at beating Nixon. However, smarting from the Chappaquiddick scandal, Kennedy was uninterested, and his own presidential ambitions probably disinclined him from lending his marquee name to the ticket. A Kennedy playing second fiddle was simply improbable. As Hunter S. Thompson put it, “it would be like the Jets trading Joe Namath to the Dallas Cowboys as a sub for Roger Staubach.”

The convention proceedings in Miami Beach stretched on in a way that rushed the selection of McGovern’s vice-presidential candidate. When other alternatives, like Boston’s mayor Kevin White, proved unacceptable, the McGovern forces finally turned to Thomas Francis Eagleton (1929-2007), the junior senator from Missouri. While not as well-known as

Kennedy, Eagleton's Catholicism and his links to organized labor promised to balance the ticket in a similar way. With hardly any vetting of his background, Eagleton was offered a spot on the ticket on July 13 in a phone conversation with McGovern that lasted barely one minute.



Thomas Eagleton (left) and George McGovern (right) at the 1972 Democratic convention

It was only after accepting the nomination that Eagleton confirmed rumors that since 1960 he had been hospitalized three times for depression, and twice undergone electroconvulsive—popularly called “electroshock”—therapy. Not only had Eagleton dissimulated in failing to tell the McGovern campaign about these episodes, he continued to resist explaining his medical record in any detail. Eagleton's stance put the McGovern campaign in a terrible bind. Forcing Eagleton off the ticket would look callous, and destroy McGovern's image as a different, and more principled, type of politician. Yet keeping Eagleton raised enormous doubts about the competence of a man who might be second in line to assume the presidency, as well as about McGovern's own sense of judgment.

In a joint press conference with McGovern on July 25, Eagleton first publicly confirmed his past hospitalizations, and McGovern famously declared that “I am 1,000 percent for Tom Eagleton and have no intention of dropping him from the ticket.” The statement was, according to Theodore H. White, “possibly the most damaging *faux pas* ever made by a Presidential candidate.”

The pushback against McGovern's decision was intense. The liberal press was against Eagleton; donations to the Democratic Party dried up; and McGovern's own campaign workers were dealt a demoralizing blow. Manufacturers even ceased the production of McGovern-

Eagleton campaign posters, bumper stickers, and buttons. Those Democrats pushing for Eagleton's removal from the ticket contended that it was not his history of mental illness, but how he had misled McGovern that disqualified him—the problem was Eagleton's character, not his sanity. The Nixon White House was already well-informed about Eagleton's medical past, and if he were to remain a candidate the campaign attacks that fall would be predictable.

Facing this pressure, the McGovern campaign sought indirectly to get Eagleton to leave the ticket for the good of the party's chances in November. Eagleton resisted, and even contended that the controversy would make him a stronger candidate. Yet a chasm of distrust had opened up between the staffs of the two candidates, and by July 31 Eagleton bowed to the inevitable and withdrew his name. It remained unclear whether McGovern was hurt more by



Thomas Eagleton, at the news conference announcing his departure from the race.

the way he pushed Eagleton out than by the liability Eagleton might have represented had he stayed on the ticket. After the fiasco, a second, ignominious round of candidate selection produced Sargent Shriver as Eagleton's replacement. In any case, public support for McGovern henceforth collapsed.

McGovern's unfortunate use of the term "1,000 percent" regarding Eagleton also resonated with one of his earlier campaign proposals to reform the country's welfare system. McGovern had proposed to give each American a \$1,000 payment (a "demogrant"); an idea that, linked with a broader tax reform, actually had a certain

academic pedigree and was a forerunner of what later emerged as the Earned Income Tax Credit. On its face, though, the notion was easy to caricature; Humphrey ridiculed it during the California primary, while Nixon's campaign director Clark MacGregor called it a "\$1,000-per-person giveaway program that would split America permanently into a welfare class and a working class." While McGovern had abandoned the proposal by the time of the party convention, the humorist Art Buchwald noted the parallel suggested by the same number. In a column in early August, Buchwald imagined McGovern arguing, "if I'm going to give everyone in this country \$1,000, then my Vice President should get 1,000 percent support from me."

A short time later, during the Republican convention (also in Miami Beach), Scripps-Howard newspapers noted how "funny money—fake \$1,000 bills bearing the face of Democratic presidential nominee George S. McGovern—floods convention hotels." Dispensed over souvenir store counters at the convention, the \$1,000 bills sport a red profile of McGovern, facing to his left, framed by blue scrollwork. The text, also in red, reads "Here's the \$1,000 McGovern promised everyone", "Legal tender to anyone stupid enough to take it at face value", and with the promise that "On Nov. 7, 1972 this bill will self-destruct." The reverse (of which there seem to be two varieties, one printed brown, and another green) is labeled a "promissory note" with a portrait of an agitated and perspiring Eagleton mopping his brow. "McGovern says he's behind me 1,000 percent", "but...he didn't say how far behind!" This side is described as "Payable Nov. 8, 1972, at Credibility Gap, U.S.A."



Crudely printed on the cheapest paper, the parody notes deftly juxtaposed the two lines of attack directed at McGovern's candidacy: that his policy proposals were too radical for the nation and that his treatment of Eagleton reflected poorly on McGovern's character and judgment. Reproduced in facsimile in newspapers across the country, the notes themselves quickly showed up at political events as far away as San Antonio, Texas.

The Democrats never recovered from the Eagleton debacle, and the McGovern-Shriver ticket went on to lose in November 1972 by the widest margin of the popular vote in the history of presidential elections. Spiro Agnew resigned the Vice Presidency hardly a year later, and Nixon himself was brought down by the Watergate scandal by August 1974. After the Eagleton experience, vice presidential nominees were never again selected so casually and without proper background checks.

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