



McGovern and the Left: Time for a Stand

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by David Kolodney

NOW THAT GEORGE MCGOVERN has captured the presidential nomination for the November election, the challenge of his candidacy is more than ever inescapable for all those whose political identity draws upon the movement and the outrage of the Vietnam decade. Our perception of this challenge should be complex, our response independent and critical, but all these admirable sophistications turn craven if we use them to evade. Therefore, if we are serious about our commitments, we must first be willing to confront a simple question with a straight answer. "Should we use our votes and urge others to use theirs to help McGovern get elected?" There is much we need to say to this, but before anything else we must first answer "Yes." Everything else must address itself to this answer and the actions it implies.

We answer "Yes" because we know what Nixon's doctrine is doing to Vietnam and we have reason to believe that his defeat by McGovern would bring an end to the war on a basis consistent with the objectives of the PRG. McGovern's pledge in this regard is specific, straightforward, and unequivocal. He says that within 90 days of his inauguration he will withdraw all American troops from Indochina, halt the bombing of the area, stop aid to the Thieu regime, and negotiate the return of American POWs. To be sure, politicians have a way of breaking their promises, but McGovern's pledge to end the war is not a casual sop to an interest group. It is the linchpin of his campaign, the premise which unites the varying elements of the McGovern coalition, and without it his support would disintegrate. It is thus unlikely that McGovern could afford to go back on this promise after his election. Even if he could, we would still be impelled to support his candidacy. For a McGovern victory would constitute a clear mandate to terminate the war. His failure to do so would provide the basis for an unprecedented resurgence of the anti-war movement—a result hardly imaginable in the wake of Nixon's re-election.

Some no doubt would dismiss all this as credulous reformism that, as radicals, we ought to transcend. Un-

Photograph by Roy Zalesky/Black Star

der the circumstances, however, "transcend" is just a fancy word for the betrayal of the Vietnamese, ourselves, and the politics we represent.

It is a betrayal among other things of the politics of 1968, which led us rightly to rejecting Humphrey, either in the form of boycott or third party vote. That was a political act carrying at its heart a message that was well understood, that we cared too much about Vietnam to vote for Humphrey, who stood before us with the blood of Vietnam on his hands, offering the promise of continuing the murderous destruction. People got the message: We could not vote for Humphrey; we cared too much about the war in Vietnam. Shall this year's message be that we care too little about Vietnam to vote for George McGovern?

This much at a minimum would have to be agreed, that we have no right to be frivolous in our decision. If radicals choose to hold back from McGovern, it cannot be merely in order to maintain an avant-garde pose ahead of fashion. It may appear that to hold back from McGovern has the virtue of a consistent abstention from electoral politics. But it is foolish to think one is acting out of principle when one merely acts by rote. Serious politics begins with an approach that is conditional, that looks at the context of choice and not merely its abstract reverberations. In 1968 there was a political basis for the electoral boycott rooted in two related issues: Humphrey's commitment to the war, and the heavy-handed imposition of his nomination against the will of the party rank and file and the primary electorate. These were decisive issues and both pointed in the direction of a boycott. The point was not that, having decided to oppose Humphrey, one looked for the most vulnerable points against him, and then tried to *make* them decisive. It had to be the other way around, to see what issues, at that particular time, both in the society and in the movement, actually were looked upon as central, overriding concerns, and then to see how their influence, the fundamental lines of cleavage that they represented, were arrayed in the electoral arena. We did not simply decide to push the Vietnam issue because it served our purpose; it was

understood to be the issue on which, more than any other, the nation's politics must turn, and it was recognized to be the central impetus behind our own politics as a movement.

Likewise, the widespread concern over the openly dictatorial frustration of popular will by the Democratic Convention was not something we dreamed up. The shock waves those events set off, the embittered activated constituencies of the earlier, thwarted campaigns, the people angered and appalled by the resort to a police state in Chicago that was bound up in the process—all this provided a strong basis for refusal to turn the other cheek for the sake of Humphrey's election. But while one could then argue strongly that a boycott was a way to strike back at Humphrey and vindicate the people, this year the tables have been turned inasmuch as this time the people won with McGovern's nomination. To boycott him, far from a vindication of the people, would appear to be a repudiation of their efforts. The force of this issue, like the other, is not something for us to turn on and off at will, and this year the political vector has been reversed.

NEVERTHELESS WE WOULD BE very mistaken if we gave our support to McGovern's candidacy on the premise that he personifies the pure imperatives of justice and the requirements of change, just as we would be wrong to turn the same mistake on its head by withholding our support on the premise that he does not. The problem is that in both cases we tend to see our vote or support as creating a complete moral identification between ourselves and the candidate, so that we partake of the pride and shame of the totality of his acts as if they were our own. We tend to look on the option of support as a religious submission or an existential leap rather than as a political act.

This kind of a response found an exceptionally clear expression in the editorial position taken by *Rolling Stone* in its June 8 issue:

"We endorse George McGovern for President. It was an easy decision to make, and we do it without qualification. . . . Like Ralph Nader and Jack Anderson, George McGovern has that

communicable quality of integrity. . . . [These men] behave as though there are such things as morality and truth. McGovern has consistently acted on the principle that he would rather be right than be President. He has gone against all professional advice and conventional wisdom to pursue his own view of morality and the truth." In sum: ". . . we support McGovern with unreserved enthusiasm. He is a man of honor and we trust him."

This is quoted merely to illustrate a tendency. It is naturally unfair to play back in this era of post-convention sophistication an enthusiasm that was originally recorded before the California primary. The electoral process leading to November has a built-in rightward pull that was—and is—bound to exert itself upon the McGovern candidacy with an ever more compelling intensity. At that stage it had not yet begun to come fully into play.

McGovern for instance had not yet taken his turn in the pilgrimage to the hospital bed where George Wallace, a sudden political demiurge, curiously martyred from the waist down, was receiving the Democratic pantheon. Hubert Humphrey—who had concluded as early as the Florida primary that this year segregation was an idea whose time had come—had shown up, following his defeat in California the week before, and raised the possibility of a Humphrey-Wallace dream ticket for the November ballot. But the Alabama Governor, who so far had contrived to strike it rich politically by saving his Confederate dollars, by now might be impressed with an offer which, although less than Humphrey's, was in a more redeemable electoral currency. At any rate, McGovern turned up at the hospital and, hoping to occupy the patient's mind, brought him a book to read in bed for the present and the prospect of a "high post in his administration" if elected. It would appear that nothing too concrete will ever come of it, but it was at least a token of respect. And it was obvious that none of the voyagers in the presidential quest could keep themselves from wondering whether the ill wind of Wallace racism might yet blow them some good.

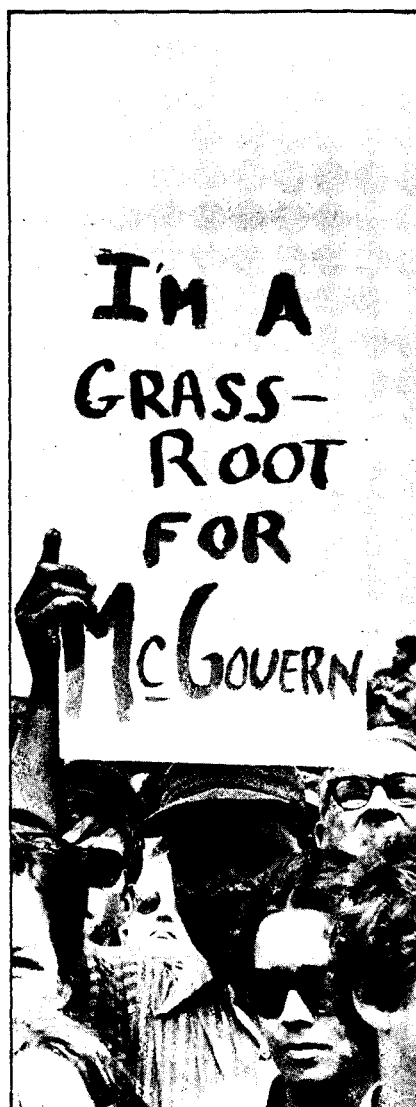
Of course throughout the campaign

McGovern had always managed to keep at least one eye on the prize as he "pursued his own view of morality and the truth." He had backtracked on abortion. He had placed an ad in the *Wall Street Journal* and given an interview to *Business Week* (coverlined "McGovern cools his radicalism"), both of which emphasized that his tax reform and share the wealth programs are merely "proposals" and "suggestions," and not terribly firm or likely ones at that since, after all, it is really up to Congress to decide. This evoked a rather ungrateful, not to say vindictive, reaction from *Business Week*: "A strange attitude for a would be President to take of his own program. McGovern's Delphic language invites a translation something like this: Of course, I don't really believe all this claptrap, but it is a great way to make waves. If I am actually elected, I will simmer down and be practical."

What ever else McGovern would be inclined to say in response to that, he would undoubtedly inquire, after all, what is so wrong with being practical. It is an attribute that he not only admits to, but increasingly insists upon, since the most damaging charge made against him is that he is dangerously deficient in that prerequisite of responsible leadership. (Could he stand up to the Russians? Or is he a nice guy who had better finish last?)

Nor did McGovern first harken to the sirens of compromise only when the strains of "Hail to the Chief" began to come his way. It has been noted that, in 1968, when his campaign for re-election was met with stiff conservative opposition, his liberalism score on the Americans for Democratic Action voting index plummeted from 94 to 43. And again, as early as 1963, McGovern spoke out in the Senate against the war, but then in 1965 announced, "I am against a United States withdrawal from Vietnam. . . . I think President Johnson has conducted the military effort with great restraint. . . . I support the strafing [of North Vietnam.]"

A FIRST CONCLUSION is obvious: to accept McGovern on his own terms would be naive. We have been asked to believe in McGovern the selfless and untainted, the truth and



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soul candidate, not only "right from the start," but presumably to the finish. But he has found it in him to be unprincipled in the past, when the stakes were lower, the issues easier to dodge, and the constituency of more tractable dimensions. He will find it in him again, not only in this campaign but, if he should win, as president as well. He will be confronted with much greater pressures, more power and, in a sense, fewer options. And the consequences of subordinating the imperatives of principle to those of power become far more grave in the White House than in the Senate chamber. The obsequious speech becomes the arrogant ultimatum; the expedient vote is replaced by the convenient *cou d'état*.

In an article in *New York* magazine entitled "Will Ambition Spoil S. George?" Richard Reeves observed "The impression that he alone is seeking and speaking the truth is exaggerated. These things don't happen in political campaigns; the political system doesn't produce anti-politicians even if the best campaigns produce the illusion of anti-politics." Some month before we might have read this as hostile accusation. But in the same article McGovern says of himself, "I'm a politician; that's my business and don't regard it as a discrediting label at all," and, he observes, "politics is a compromising business . . . they talk about my ideologically fanatical supporters, but I have faith that the kids will understand when I have to make a political accommodation and will stick with me. This idealistic constituency of mine is a lot more pragmatic than they get credit for."

A chronicle of McGovern's expediency turns out to be a peculiarly pointless exercise. In a sense it reveals nothing because nothing is hidden and nothing needs to be. What began in the early days as the presumptive nobility of a lost cause has proved remarkably impervious to victory. For many it is a curiously starry-eyed and trustful sort of pragmatism that has taken hold—as if, in the face of expediency and success, naiveté had risen to the occasion; it is expressed in the untroubled complacency with which one would take compromise in stride.

Indeed, many seemed to feel a new

ambivalence towards expediency, the dread of selling out being offset by a longing to play safe. People who normally would cringe to hear the politicians telling their convenient lies, now found they cringed when McGovern exposed himself by clarifying an inconvenient truth.

On the other hand, when McGovern backtracks a position he is often able to do so with such a charming impression of candor as to invite presumptions of reluctance or regret, and, in his best form, almost evokes our sympathy. Stylistically, McGovern carries off both principle and compromise very well, with an extraordinarily engaging manner that appeals not only to Americans' delusions of rural nostalgia but also to a more modish taste. It seems that we can enjoy his successes all the better because we can sit back and let him make the compromises for us. And there is a source of satisfaction in each tough decision. If it doesn't confirm his idealism it demonstrates his effectiveness. So don't worry, you can't lose. As *Rolling Stone* observed, You can trust McGovern.

What is not so clear is trust him to do what? Trust his good intentions? His earnest efforts? His shrewdness? His success? Trust him to produce a just society within the next four years? Imperialism, racism and sexism wiped out? Too much to expect, no doubt. But what then? Simply that he will do his best? Perhaps the deal is simply that if we trust McGovern to do his best he will do his best to justify our trust.

This is not a mandate of political support: it is an ecstasy of faith devoid of expectations. Because it sets no limits, it cannot be betrayed, but neither can it be fulfilled; that is the emptiness of political certitude. It is more than naïveté, it is abdication. The *Rolling Stone* editorial said it this way: "George McGovern is a wise man to whom we should entrust the stewardship of our society."

The *Rolling Stone* editorial reinforces the contrast between our capacity for fruitless gestures and real political power. "Ten years of protest, anger and outrage on the streets have been unable to end the war." But George McGovern can. George McGovern, an actual presidential nominee, has finally

arrived *deus ex machina*, prepared to set things straight. In his strong arms he will carry us to citadels of power that our sore marching feet could never touch. There is a message in this that is well expressed in the Simon and Garfunkle song which *Time* magazine recognized as a kind of anthem for the McGovern campaign.

When you're down and out,
When you're on the street,
When evening falls so hard
I will comfort you.

I'll take your part. . . .

Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind.

"I will ease your mind." It is an appealing offer after these ten years. The exhilarating iconoclasm of political independence in time gives way to a profound fatigue. It is tempting to relax from the weariness of an active political consciousness, tempting — whether out of cynicism or naïveté—to let the critical tension go slack, to let McGovern ease your mind.

We see our own criteria of political propriety as so utterly divorced from the real potentialities of power that, when we cross from one over to the other, no matter how firmly moored we had been in our position within the left, in relation to McGovern suddenly we are completely at sea. The point is not merely that we are reluctant to transport our ideological guidelines wholesale from one context into a different one, but that we feel there is no point of contact at all between our politics and McGovern's, so that in reference to him we have no way to take our bearings, no sense of political criteria at all. We simply do not feel we are in a position to take our politics our ourselves very seriously here, and there is no point in playing out our games when after all this is the real thing, the big time.

Thus if McGovern's politics lead him to weakening a position which our politics would lead us to keep strong, we are not inclined to measure his decision against our own, because his we consider serious but ours we don't. It would be like insisting on pie in preference to beans, without regard to the fact that the beans are on the table and the pie is in the sky.

The attitude towards real politics is something like this: you wish for the

ideal, hope for the best, expect the worst, and take what you can get. This spirit of acceptance of McGovern may tend to be so passive, so complacent and relaxed, because we have a sense that, however far he may fall short of the ideal, he is still better than we have any right to expect. Compared to what the rigged wheel of political fortune usually turns up, McGovern's ascendancy seems quite a stroke of luck. And if you are smart, you don't press your luck.

But McGovern did not just fall from the sky and land on top of the Democratic ticket. That result was brought about by a political process and it is impossible to appreciate its significance and absorb its implications if we look at the event in the customary way.

We say that George McGovern captured the nomination. We also say that Henry Ford III builds cars. In fact we say that he builds millions of them every year. Truly an astounding accomplishment if it were true and quite a big surprise to the people working on the factory line.

AS THE PENTAGON PAPERS revealed, anti-war protest in the 1960s was taken with the utmost seriousness and had a substantial influence on major decisions at the highest levels—even while government officials assured us that we were wasting our time. From their statements, one would have thought it pure coincidence that Johnson's critical decisions against calling up the reserves and Nixon's reduced reliance on conscripted combat troops were preceded by rising tides of disaffection and resistance.

So now we have yet another "coincidence"—ten years of angry protest followed by McGovern's candidacy. Someone who believes that might wish we could have known beforehand, saved ourselves a decade of futile effort and waited for McGovern to come along and end the war for us.

It is, in fact, manifestly clear by now that the decade of "futile gestures" fashioned a new political force—a force that McGovern's campaign has proved to be very serious politics indeed. That does not mean that George

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IT WAS A TIME FOR getting down, and the people turned out to get down together. A crowd 5000 strong streamed into the Oakland Auditorium on June 24, where they watched a Black Panther political revival, dubbed Survival Conference, climaxed by Chairman Bobby Seale throwing his hat into the political arena.

huey newton's revival meeting in oakland

a representative of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam addressed the gathering. "Our people greatly admire," he said, "the great cause of Dr. Martin Luther King, the sacrifice of George Jackson, the indomitable will of Angela Davis, as well as appreciate the contributions of tens of millions of black people in the Uni-



Chairman Bobby, who left a promising career as a stand-up comedian to help found the Black Panther Party, is now running for Mayor of Oakland, California. Politician though he may be, the hat he tossed into the ring was no gangster Borsalino or soft brown fedora, but one of those big, broad-brimmed, badass jobs, and the people received it with cheers.

Two years ago, it would have been difficult to imagine Chairman Bobby running for Mayor. But then again, two years ago it would have been difficult to imagine the Black Panther Party sponsoring a virtually all-black rally.

This Survival Conference was unquestionably a *soul* spectacular, with music that would put a "glide in your stride and a dip in your hip." The crowd—95 percent black—warmed up to the tunes of the Tower of Power, a "name" group from the West Coast. After a brief speech by Minister of In-

formation Elaine Brown, a local quintet called Original Passion took the stage to sing a soul hit with the refrain

As long as I have shoes

to put on my feet

And food

for my brother to eat,

Everything's

gonna be all right.

As it happened, the Black Panther Party was distributing some 2500 free pairs of shoes, as well as 10,000 bags of groceries, at the conference. Later in the program, the Sisters Love rocked out "The mean old landlord, he don't care/ If I freeze or not" and John Lee Hooker wailed them ol' Black Panther Party Anti-War African Liberation Voter Registration Survival Conference blues.

The conference did in fact focus its attention on opposition to the war in Vietnam, and it may well rank as the first black anti-war rally ever held in America. Via trans-Pacific telephone,

ted States, for peace and justice." When he finished, the crowd gave him an ovation.

Not long ago, had the Panthers called such a conference, they would have announced it on Pacifica radio station KPFA and would have invited various white left-wing luminaries to address it. The Panther newspaper would have reported that "the people" attended by the thousands — failing to observe that the "people" included mainly young, white, long-haired radicals.

In August 1969, for instance, the Party held its United Front Against Fascism conference (UFAF) in this same Oakland Auditorium. Featured as keynote speaker was none other than Herbert Aptheker of the Communist Party. The student movement—then in its most sectarian phase—turned out in force, and the tension of impending violence hung heavy in the air. Participants were frisked as they