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The Eighteen Day Running Mate: McGovern, Eagleton and A Campaign In Crisis

THE EIGHTEEN-DAY RUNNING MATE

McGovern, Eagleton, and
a Campaign in Crisis



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Reviewed Work(s)

The Eighteen Day Running Mate: McGovern, Eagleton and A Campaign In Crisis. By Joshua M. Glasser. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) pp. 381. Cloth, \$26.00.

One afternoon in the summer of 1972, Senator George McGovern and his staff took a few hours off from their tumultuous presidential campaign in order to see the movie *The Candidate*, starring Robert Redford. The film chronicles the experiences of an idealistic politician who contends with the question of whether he should stay true to his principles or compromise them in order to get elected. To many of McGovern's advisors sitting in the audience that day, the film represented a similar challenge their own candidate was wrestling with. The conflict, as Joshua M. Glasser states in his fine book, *The Eighteen Day Running Mate: McGovern, Eagleton and A Campaign In Crisis*, centered on "McGovern's own internal struggle to balance his sense of righteousness against his sense of prudence and political acuity" (221).

The work is the first full-length account of the issues that led to the selection of Senator Thomas Eagleton as McGovern's running mate, followed eighteen days later by Eagleton's announcement that he was resigning from the ticket. McGovern's decision to release Eagleton from his vice-presidential commitment was due to the discovery that the senator had undergone electro-shock therapy on a number of occasions while being treated for depression. The circumstances of Eagleton's selection, and the crisis that followed, is the driving force of Mr. Glasser's well-written, thoroughly researched, and highly readable book.

While the work serves as a cautionary tale of the pitfalls that can derail a presidential campaign if the vice-presidential nominee is not investigated properly, it is much more a study of the complexities of character and decision-making that come into play in pursuit of the world's most powerful office. The author makes clear that the qualities of moral clarity in McGovern's early views on Vietnam, as well as his sense of empathy towards the poor and disadvantaged, made him such an

attractive figure among young progressives in 1972. But to those democrats who had become “deeply discontented with business as usual politics,” (37) McGovern’s honesty and sense of fair play was another critical trait that drew so many to him. Statements like “I want [the campaign] to be as honest, as straightforward ... and as enlightening as we can make it ...” (27) gave McGovern an authenticity that many felt was in short supply following the death of Robert F. Kennedy four years earlier.

However, while certain aspects of McGovern’s character were clearly responsible for his success, Glasser notes there were others that became liabilities. McGovern’s congenial attitude could at times be problematic. The author notes that the senator had difficulties when it became necessary to criticize or terminate a member of his staff for a strategy that had not been successful. On another point, McGovern’s sense of religiosity, the foundation of so many of his policies, could at times “come across as self righteousness.” That tone of moral superiority was clearly indicated in notes for the 1972 campaign: “We’re going to have a good time because we will be doing God’s work” (28). Qualities of stubbornness and an inability to delegate or weigh critical choices with members of his inner circle also led to an isolated management style that played a prominent role in the crisis regarding the selection and dismissal of Thomas Eagleton (93).

At the time he was selected for the vice presidency, the forty-three year-old Eagleton had already enjoyed a meteoric rise through the ranks of Missouri politics. Elected as the state’s youngest attorney general at thirty-one, Eagleton served as lieutenant governor before being elected to the U.S. Senate in 1968. While he shared McGovern’s progressive, Christian sensibilities, Glasser also portrays Eagleton as “a casting director’s ideal for a running mate,” and one with “a political profile that balanced McGovern’s” (1). Despite having been a supporter of Senator Edmund Muskie’s candidacy that year, Eagleton’s political resume, charismatic personality and attractive family all seemed to make him a strong selection, especially after Edward Kennedy declined McGovern’s repeated offers for the nomination even as the delegates began assembling in Miami.

Despite numerous comments from members of the press and other politicians surrounding Eagleton’s mental health, the author faults both McGovern and his staff for not investigating these rumors with the

thoroughness they deserved or for failing to question Eagleton about the issue at the earliest possible moment. Eagleton is also criticized for allowing himself to be overwhelmed by political ambition rather than being forthright with those who, like McGovern's campaign strategist Frank Mankiewicz, asked Eagleton if he had any "skeletons rattling in his closet" (116).

There is no question that a number of problematic circumstances distracted the campaign's search for a running mate. The recent reforms created by a commission that had been chaired by McGovern to make the party's presidential nominating process more democratic caused unintended difficulties, when party strategists, unhappy with McGovern's candidacy, chose to challenge the results of the winner-take-all primary in California (a contest that according to the rules McGovern clearly won). The tedious legal proceedings and the lengthy negotiations conducted to settle the issue led McGovern's brain trust to delay the vice-presidential selection process. By the time the issue was settled, the deadline imposed by the party for the naming of the vice-presidential candidate was rapidly approaching. "We have three hours to choose the deputy commander of the free world," Mankiewicz said (106). Since the selection of a vice president is such a critical decision, the author rightly asks the question why McGovern did not ask the convention for more time to make his choice. The fact that McGovern did not think more about following the rules of the convention—rather than taking additional time to consider his choice—was yet another case of his poor decision-making. The chaos of the nomination process, the time-pressure of vice-presidential selection, combined with the relative inexperience of the McGovern-campaign team as well as poor management by the candidate himself, all played a role in the subsequent crisis arising after Eagleton was selected to be McGovern's running mate.

While the book is a solid history of the 1972 campaign, it covers much of the same material and utilizes many of the same sources as James Giglio's study of the Eagleton affair that appeared in the December 2009 edition of the *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. However, Mr. Glasser is a good writer and he does a thorough job of portraying the colorful personalities involved.

As with all great dramas, the crisis that plagued the vice-presidential selection of Thomas Eagleton has its ironies. In exchange for Eagleton's resignation, McGovern promised to simply tell the public that Eagleton's health was not an issue and that the reason for the decision was purely based on "the need of the campaign to return to the issues and the desire for party unity" (268). McGovern's decision to agree to that condition not only prevented further turmoil in the Democratic Party but also in all probability preserved Eagleton's political career, allowing him to remain in the Senate until 1987. In private, McGovern's gesture of putting the party and a man's livelihood above his own desires for the presidency showed to intimates like Gary Hart and others the great spirit of Christian virtue they had admired in McGovern all along. Ironically, since the public had no idea of the sacrifice McGovern had made they subsequently viewed him as a political opportunist, unable to make the difficult decisions that a president must make on a daily basis. A further irony is that a month before the election, in October of 1972, the public viewed President Nixon as more trustworthy than George McGovern. That perhaps is the biggest irony of all.

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