

Senator McGovern at Oxford Post 1/23/73

On the page opposite today, the columnist Joseph Kraft has analyzed the unfortunate and rather embarrassing speech Senator McGovern delivered Sunday at St. Catherine's College, Oxford. We think Mr. Kraft's appraisal is correct. It is incredible that Senator McGovern should have chosen this occasion to flail about at the "so-called liberals," the U.S. Congress, the two political parties and the press, and it is equally incredible that he should have chosen to indulge his penchant for casual and damaging overstatement, speaking so glibly of the "elective dictatorship" the presidency is supposedly becoming and blandly asserting that "the exhaustion of American institutions is matched by an exhaustion of the American spirit." For our part, we have no objections to an American politician letting his countrymen have it in a speech overseas. After all—why not? Our objection is to the petulant, self-pitying tone and the inaccurate and misleading conclusions that flowed from it. Can Senator McGovern really believe that his defeat at the polls in November was largely a product of the malefactions of the press? Can he really believe that it represents some larger decline of the national spirit reflected in the decline of our institutions?

Apparently the answer is yes. And the resentment is truly deep. Thus: "some liberal intellectuals . . . seem to draw a curious personal consolation from the evidence that my appeals to the idealism and morality of America were rejected by the majority of Americans." And again: "I was subjected to the close, critical reporting that is a tradition in American politics . . . Mr. Nixon escaped a

similar scrutiny . . . Much of this can be blamed on the incestuous character of the White House press corps itself." Believing as we do, that Senator McGovern's problem with the electorate scarcely proceeded from an overdose of idealism or morality, and recalling as we do the prodigious reportorial effort that went into disclosures concerning campaign spending, the Watergate affair and the rest, all this seems to us more appropriate for a letting-off-of-steam in the immediate wake of defeat than for a speech that is meant to produce something more reflective. Indeed the self-righteousness, the sanctimony, the comprehensive resentments and the pervasive suspicion and bad motive and foul play put us in mind of something else. They put us in mind of Mr. Nixon on a bad day, Mr. Nixon at his speech-making worst.

What is so distressing about all this is what it may portend in the future role Senator McGovern intends to play in his party. For his speech struck us as a model of what a Democratic Party leader should be thinking or saying at the moment—which is not to deny his God-given right to do both nor to suggest that such remarks are wrong on tactical grounds. They are wrong because they are wrong headed. We do not draw much "consolation"—"curious," "personal" or otherwise—from the fact that the Democratic candidate evidently perceives the meaning of the 1972 election this way, evidently believes that the liberal resurgence of which he speaks so eloquently toward the end of his address can be built on such a perception of events.