

'Characters Trapped By Circumstances'

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Until George McGovern called Tom Eagleton that Thursday afternoon last summer, their longest previous conversation had taken place three years earlier. They had inadvertently met in the Senate steam room.

Their next conversation was hardly as casual and insignificant. Shortly before 4 o'clock on July 13 the phone

The Eagleton Case—I

rang in Tom Eagleton's two-bedroom suite in Miami Beach. Eagleton, who had been waiting and hoping for that call all day, was in the bedroom adjacent to the phone. As he recalls the moment:

"There was the phone. . . . Somebody came in and said in a hushed voice, 'George McGovern's on the line.' So I

came into the room. There were about six or eight of our staff people, plus my wife. I got on the phone. 'Tom, this is George McGovern. I'd like you to be my running mate on this ticket this year.' And I paused, and I said, 'George, I'm flabbergasted.' Well, he said, 'No this is on the square. This is sincere.' Some such words as that. 'And I want you to be on the ticket with me this fall. Will you be my running mate?'"

Eagleton instantly responded; "George before you change your mind, I hasten to say yes."

From that moment, the names of McGovern and Eagleton became inseparably linked in the history of American politics. Depending on the individual point of view, they always will be associated either fatefully, tragically, bitterly or sadly.

See EAGLETON, A4, Col. 1

EAGLETON, From A1

Whether the Eagleton Affair, as it now is known, was the decisive factor in McGovern's defeat; whether it was, in Eagleton's own phrase, only "one rock in the landslide," or whether it was always the Republicans' year, never will be satisfactorily resolved. The passions, memories, rationalizations, justifications and speculations of the many participants are too personal and tangled for that.

That it was historic politically and tragic personally there is no doubt.

At the least, the Eagleton case is the clearest indication, politically and personally, of the weaknesses of George McGovern's presidential effort. It also helps to explain why that campaign failed so notably.

But the Eagleton affair was many other things. It was a capsule of political ambitions, personal motives, miscalculations, and mistakes; an anatomy of crucial decision-making, and an object lesson of how not to perform; a drama played out at first in utmost privacy and later in the most unrelent-

Certainly, in the history of presidential public view; a story, if truly told, worthy of a major novelist's talents. In the history of presidential politics we have not seen its like.

Looking back on it now, one of the participants likens it to a classic tragedy. "It was absolutely fated," he says, "a perfect example of a Greek tragedy in which each character is trapped by circumstances."

What follows is a reconstruction of that episode based on lengthy interviews with many of the key persons involved. It is not the whole story, and a

number of important points are in dispute. Versions of specific incidents and conversations differ; some, with hindsight and the tricks of memory, appear irreconcilable.

And this reconstruction contains one major omission. The Eagleton medical records, on which the case hinges, are not available at this writing. Indeed, Tom Eagleton himself has never seen them. Neither has George McGovern. Nor has anyone on their respective staffs.

Eagleton's position on that question today, as in the past, is constant. As he said in a tape-recorded interview with The Washington Post in his Senate office:

"The medical records are not under my control. Secondly, medical records contain lots of private communications between doctor and nurse, patient to nurse, patient to doctor, members of the patient's family, etc. I am not going to release those records or give them to anybody."

Another fact is central to the Eagleton case. For years Tom Eagleton had lived with a secret that might jeopardize his political career. After his private problem became public knowledge, Eagleton consistently maintained that his history of being hospitalized three times for mental depression and receiving electro-shock treatment was not a matter of great significance. It was, he said at one point, "like a broken leg or a fractured arm." But he also was keenly aware, as he said, "that there is a stigma attached to any sign of illness that affects the nervous system."

Eagleton consciously chose to remain silent. In Missouri, rumors about his mental health—and drinking—had formed an undercurrent during previous campaigns. These rumors became so serious during his 1968 race for the Senate that discussions were held about the wisdom of publicly disclosing his health record. Eagleton weathered the rumors and won his campaign. He had, it seemed, put the issue behind him.

Yet he always knew he might have to face that question later. In fact, before going to the Democratic National Convention in Florida, he says he made up his mind to disclose it if he became a national candidate. "My wife and I discussed that before I went to Florida," he said. But they did not make that health record known before or during the convention.

Complicating that question was another fact about Tom Eagleton: he was ambitious for higher office. He wanted to be on the national ticket. His own words spell out his ambitions better than anything else.

"I was sitting in my hotel room the whole day both praying and hoping the last hour or so that he (McGovern) hadn't given up on me," he said once, recalling that first day of decision. At another point, he remarked: "By 20 to 4 we'd been there all day with the staff waiting and hoping for a call. In fact,

by the time the call came, we'd almost given up hope.

Even if he didn't know George McGovern well—indeed, he was a Muskie man and had opposed McGovern's candidacy—Eagleton believed he was among those who might be chosen. He knew he had the necessary political qualifications: young, attractive, a good family man, a Catholic from the Midwest, and well regarded by both liberals and party regulars, including the barons of organized labor.

However worthy his credentials or hopeful his prospects, Eagleton was not high on the McGovern vice presi-

dential list that Thursday morning when the final selection process began. From the beginning, one person had dominated McGovern's thinking on the vice presidency—Edward M. (Ted) Kennedy. The last of the Kennedy brothers not only was the heir to the mystique surrounding his family name; he was undeniably the strongest possible vice presidential—and probably presidential—candidate for the Democrats in 1972.

McGovern's private polls clearly showed Kennedy having a dramatic impact on the ticket. No other possible candidate had anything like the potential measured in the private McGovern public opinion surveys. In addition, Kennedy was a special figure to George McGovern. It was McGovern, after all, who picked up the lance when Robert Kennedy was assassinated and continued the effort to win the Democratic nomination in 1968.

And it was John Kennedy to whom McGovern owed a special debt and allegiance. President Kennedy had named him a special assistant and his director of the Food for Peace program after McGovern was defeated in his first bid for the Senate in 1960.

Some who have written about McGovern's vice presidential choice assume McGovern expected Ted Kennedy to accept his offer right up to the last. The truth, as ever, is more complicated. In the period before the Democratic convention, McGovern had every reason to believe that Kennedy would not accept the vice presidency under any conditions or possible circumstances. Some two weeks before the Democrats convened in Florida Kennedy and McGovern had discussed the vice presidential situation at length. In "great detail" Kennedy had explained why it was not possible.

Gary Hart, McGovern's campaign manager, recalls a long conversation with McGovern at the Senators' Washington home on July 1. "I went out to his house to discuss the matter of the vice presidency particularly," he said.

"What I gathered from that and two or three other conversations was that the senator was thinking about his running mate and giving it some very serious thought. From things he said then I think the stuff that's since been



Associated Press

Sens. Eagleton and McGovern wave from podium at Democratic convention in July.

written that very little thought was being given to the vice presidency or that he thought he could talk Ted Kennedy into taking it were wrong. He specifically said to me that morning that he had had a very serious conversation with Kennedy about the vice presidency and Kennedy had turned it down in what he considered final terms."

As Hart sketched the scene at that point:

"We were out on the patio at the senator's house sitting in the sun. We had taken our shirts off and he had to go inside and take some calls. I had written down perhaps as many as 10 or 12 possible names, and I noticed that he had an envelope on the back of which he had written perhaps six or seven names. He came back out and we talked about the running mate question. And he asked me for the names that I had written down and I read them off and he said, 'Well, here are some that I've been thinking about.' And this was about the time he was going through this Woodcock phase . . ." (Leonard Woodcock, president of the United Auto Workers union). "It lasted four or five days."

Three days later, on the fourth of July, McGovern again brought up the vice presidential question with this reporter at his country home in Maryland. As he had with Hart, he told me that he was convinced from a long and recent conversation with Kennedy that

Kennedy would not accept for "very personal reasons." He was intrigued with the idea of Woodcock, who had strongly impressed both McGovern and his wife Eleanor.

In the day immediately preceding the convention, McGovern spoke to a number of people, including Senate colleagues, about the vice presidency.

His handling of this entire question says much about the way McGovern and his staff operated, both then and later during the campaign itself. To quote Hart again: "This was a decision he considered to be very personal and, unlike others in the campaign, not one that he was willing to delegate to the staff as such. He was brooding and he was thinking and he was talking to Eleanor and other people.

"But this was very much a thing that he considered his own personal domain. I don't think he saw it in terms of a systematic staffed-out problem. In retrospect, in thinking about my own role in this, I have always greatly deferred to his judgment on things and anytime I sensed that he was brooding on something himself I tended to sort of await his pleasure, to see if he wanted anything further done. This may not have been the right way to approach it."

The Eagleton affair, as we shall see, was filled with similar moments of brooding and slips in communications between the candidate and his staff.

No matter how convincing and unequivocal Ted Kennedy had been with

George McGovern, apparently the idea of a McGovern-Kennedy ticket never entirely left McGovern's mind. In fact, Kennedy played a critical role in the moves that finally led to the selection of Tom Eagleton.

On Wednesday night, July 12, in the euphoria of his nomination, George McGovern again talked to Ted Kennedy. Before the call to Kennedy came through, McGovern sat down with a memo in front of him. It detailed what arguments to make, and what questions to ask.

As Fred Dutton, a key McGovern aide and former assistant to both John and Robert Kennedy, recalls: "It was assumed Teddy wouldn't take it, but there was so much wishful-thinking. The 'we've gotta have Teddy, gotta have Teddy' kind of thing."

That night the wish was the father to further rationalizing about why, after all, Kennedy might accept: he would help so much, he couldn't turn it down in the moment of the offer, his acceptance would help erase the stigma of Chappaquiddick.

That night, Kennedy again turned it down. But he would still figure prominently in the next day's final decision.

George McGovern had asked his key staff members and advisers to begin meeting at 8 o'clock Thursday morning in the Doral Hotel. They had been told to think of—and discuss—all possible vice presidential candidates.

Earlier, McGovern had asked six or more of his closest, most trusted aides to give him their personal choices. Each was asked to give him their four leading choices, seal them in an envelope, and not talk to anybody about them. They complied with his wishes.

Hart, for example, listed Ted Kennedy first, Sen. Fritz Mondale of Minnesota second, Mayor Kevin White of Boston third, and Rep. Wilbur Mills of Arkansas fourth.

Even as the McGovern advisers were starting to meet that morning in the executive conference room at the Doral, a bizarre incident occurred that bore directly on the later Eagleton problems.

A prominent Democrat who was in Miami Beach for the convention had awakened that morning to read press speculation about the vice presidency. Among the many names mentioned was Tom Eagleton's. The Democrat was alarmed. He had first-hand knowledge that Eagleton had been hospitalized several times for psychiatric treatment. Immediately, he began trying to alert key McGovern aides by phone. No luck. He couldn't get through.

Finally, he contacted one McGovern staffer and insisted on talking. He recounted the Eagleton history; it was critical that the McGovern people know about it. The McGovern staffer remembers the caller expressing "enormous concern" about Eagleton.

The McGovern staffer, someone with

a high responsibility in the campaign, says the message was relayed to yet another aide who in turn was supposed to alert McGovern. What really happened is not clear. The second McGovern aide claims he was never told, the first says apparently the message was "lost in the translation."

In any event, it did not get through. The Democrat who had made the call was confident his urgent warning had been made effectively. (Later that afternoon he was stunned to hear the news that Eagleton was McGovern's choice to be the nominee. Again, he called back the first McGovern aide. "For God's sake's," he said, "didn't you understand what I told you?" When he was told the McGovern forces had been alerted, he exploded: "What in the name of God are you people smoking up there?")

That was not the only mistake that day. Another McGovern aide, Rick Stearns, had been approached the day before by Loye Miller of the Knight newspapers. As Stearns remembers the conversation, he was told that Eagleton either had a record of drinking problems, "instability or a history of mental problems in his family."

Another McGovern aide, Lt. Gov. William Dougherty of South Dakota, had also heard rumors about Eagleton and alcohol. Dougherty, himself a former alcoholic who had survived a whispering campaign in the 1970 election, ran into a doctor from Missouri in the lobby of the Doral. The doctor discounted any drinking problems. "He said all Eagleton did was have nervous exhaustion," Dougherty said. He dismissed the rumors as unfounded.

And even as the vice presidential decision-making began, Time magazine's Chicago office was preparing an internal message on Thursday—the very day of Eagleton's selection—reporting information that Eagleton had been hospitalized, and had received electroshock treatment.

The signals, it seems, were everywhere. They were not picked up.

All this was a prelude to the early-morning meeting at the Doral. As the group of some 20 people began their deliberations, they agreed they would discuss every conceivable—but realistic—vice presidential possibility. Then they would narrow the list down. By noon, a smaller, more select group would present McGovern personally with a list of no more than half a dozen names.

They began their meeting. In the course of the deliberations as many as 35 names were discussed.

Some were far out. Frank Mankiewicz, for instance, mentioned Walter Cronkite. Someone else suggested Mayor Moon Landrieu of New Orleans. "Never work, never work," Ted Van Dyk responded. "I can see the headlines: 'Moon Over Miami.'" That was the end of Moon Landrieu's chances.

Slowly, point by point, names were scratched and the list narrowed. At

mid-morning the name of Tom Eagleton of Missouri came up. Rick Stearns, recalling his conversation with the reporter about Eagleton but getting the reporter's name wrong, brought up his information. Here, again, accounts differ of what exactly was said.

Gary Hart remembers the conversation this way:

"I think everyone agrees that when Eagleton's name came up, Rick said, 'A reporter told me that if Eagleton was to be given consideration, we should know two things: that there was a potential problem of alcoholism and a history of mental illness in the family.' Now Rick also claims that he said, 'and Eagleton supposedly has this problem,'

but there aren't too many people who remember Rick saying that."

Several people present, however, had heard rumors about drinking problems. Gordon Weil asked who the reporter was. It was Tom Ottenad of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Stearns replied. Weil said he would check out the report. He left the room, called Ottenad, and about half an hour later returned. No substantiation of the rumors.

In retrospect, the Eagleton discussions now appear damaging. But at the time, they were not given much weight for one overriding reason—Eagleton was not seriously regarded as the potential nominee.

When the meeting finally ended around noon, a consensus had formed around one name, Mayor Kevin White of Boston. In the next two hours, in the privacy of McGovern's suite, surrounded by his closest advisers, the final choice drew closer and closer to White. McGovern, now playing the traditional role, began trying out his selections before party groups and important Democrats. Phone calls were made around the country. Representatives of the women's caucus, the black caucus, the mayors, trooped into the suite. They were all properly consulted. The 4 o'clock deadline for announcing the selection was nearing, but there was no alarm, no sense of pressure.

Sometime between 2 and 3 o'clock, Kennedy's name came up once more. McGovern said he would give him another call, and did.

What transpired between Ted Kennedy and George McGovern in that phone call is a matter of considerable dispute. The Kennedy version is that McGovern again asked Kennedy to reconsider, and he again said no; that he had no reservations and nothing to fear down the road from White, a fellow politician from Massachusetts; that, indeed, he would fly White down to Miami if he were the nominee; that McGovern urged Kennedy to take 30 minutes and think about reconsidering himself; that Kennedy said okay.

The McGovern version—not from the senator himself, but others present in that hotel suite—has Kennedy "hitting the ceiling" about White; that White was not acceptable; that if it were going to be White, he, Kennedy, would have to reconsider and take it himself; that he would call back in half an hour.

Before Kennedy called again, McGovern received word of a counter-lobby against White emanating from the Massachusetts delegation. Out of this has come the feeling of some participants that Kennedy operated that day with the power of a veto, and that that veto was sustained.

In any event, Kevin White, who already had been called personally by McGovern that afternoon, was ultimately stricken from the list. In the last-minute deliberations, White's name was replaced by that of Tom Eagleton, also a Catholic, also liberal and young, also acceptable to all factions of the Democratic Party.

Eagleton, of course, knew none of this. By that time, he had virtually given up hope. Finally, his phone rang



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Thomas Eagleton and wife, Barbara Ann, just after he was named to the ticket.

and he stepped into history. It was George McGovern, offering what Eagleton wanted. Then it was Frank Mankiewicz, complimentary, congratulatory, asking about any skeletons, and suggesting he begin work on his acceptance speech that night.

Celebration, work, speech, cheering throngs, and after the candidates had posed for the last time flashing V for Victory signs, they left the convention hall and headed back to McGovern's suite for a party.

It was now sometime between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning of Friday, July 14. On the way up to the party, Gordon Weil of McGovern's staff ran into Doug Bennett of Eagleton's. Weil mentioned the rumors about Eagleton's drinking problems; they had come up that day during their meetings, he said. Those rumors were inaccurate, Bennett said. Eagleton had been hospitalized in the past for exhaustion and depression. Nothing was said about electro-shock treatment.

Fine, Frank Mankiewicz might have some ideas about how to deal with this if rumors crop up. Weil briefly told Mankiewicz at the party. His recollection is that he was told Eagleton had been hospitalized for exhaustion after a 1960 campaign. At the door, as the party was ending, Mankiewicz says he stopped Eagleton to say: "We ought to talk about that health problem." Eagleton, he said, readily agreed.

It was not a matter of great consequence. In fact, Mankiewicz thought he had a perfect way to handle it. Eagleton was to appear on "Face the Nation" that Sunday. Mankiewicz would try to plant a question with the panel about Eagleton's stamina during a campaign. Eagleton could handle such a question perfectly: "I am such an energetic campaigner," he could say, "that I once ran myself right into the hospital for exhaustion."

End of question, and end of Eagleton health issue.

Next: A Mood of Apprehension.