

# Democratic Collision Course

Practical Democratic politicians, while salivating over Watergate, have a rising fear of their own: that the 1974 national party conference will become a bloody arena of ideological assault from the party's left wing.

On the short term, the conference may attempt to reconstitute the Democratic National Committee so as to result in the purge of moderate Robert Strauss as chairman before his term ends in 1976. On the long term, the conference may attempt to lay the groundwork for a radically reformed Democratic Party requiring ideological tests for membership, thus transforming the two-party system.

All this has ominous overtones of four years ago when the McGovern commission quietly revolutionized the rules of Democratic presidential selection while party regulars napped. This time, while the 1974 conference is planned by the party's charter commission, the regulars are again bored by foggy debates over procedure. The old McGovern reformers are in command.

The national party conference to write a party charter is, in fact a legacy of the McGovern-dominated national convention in Miami Beach. Almost unnoticed, the convention required a midterm national conference.

But apprehensions eased when Terry Sanford, former governor of North Carolina and now president of Duke University, was named chairman of the charter commission. Regulars felt that Sanford, no wild-eyed radical, could keep the 1974 conference in order. No practical politician could see any good coming out of a midterm conference, but they felt at least that Sanford would limit any damage.

From the beginning, however, Sanford tangled with Strauss. While Strauss' quest for unity was charming most of the party from Ted Kennedy to George Wallace, his relations with Sanford chilled. Sanford was accused by Strauss' friends of using the charter commission to promote his presidential ambitions.

But in recent months, it has become clear that much more than one man's ambitions is at stake. The charter commission has become the haven for anti-Strauss sentiment.

The brilliant Rick Stearns, architect of the McGovern reforms and the McGovern nomination and now an aide to Sen. George S. McGovern, is deeply influential in the commission's work. Spencer Oliver, whom Strauss has been trying to purge as director of the Democratic state chairmen's group, is not directly involved in the charter commission but is close to both Sanford and Stearns (and, in fact, introduced them). Joe Grandmaison, a hard-boiled McGovern operative who is the commission's director of field operations, is passionately anti-Strauss. The commission's regional staffers do not disguise their disdain for the party's national chairman.

What makes this pertinent is the 1974 party conference's power to change the membership of the national committee—stack it, in effect, to oust Strauss. One plan would reduce Southern votes, moving the committee's power balance leftward.

The commission's activity transcends Bob Strauss, however. If Rick Stearns is the commission's operational godfather, its theoretical godfather is Prof. James Macgregor Burns. Active in the charter commission's work, Burns has

long advocated sewing the Democratic Party into an ideological straitjacket excluding all conservatives. The sewing machine, he has written, is the annual party conference.

Therefore, moderates are concerned that the 1974 conference will attempt to "Europeanize" the party—tailor it to Western European parties with membership cards, party dogma and strict discipline. Although nothing that ambitious will be ventured this soon, the party charter to be drafted next year could be a step down that grim path.

The problem facing mainstream Democrats floored them in McGovern commission days: the only Democrats devoting time and energies to such lethal games are the activists on the left. Sanford's critics complain bitterly that the commission's next meeting has been scheduled at Colorado State University, July 21-23. Some party regulars on the commission don't want to spend a midsummer weekend sleeping in a dormitory, eating in college cafeterias and considering disputatious points of arcane procedure.

The same holds true for the 1974 conference itself, which may be even more unrepresentative of the party than the 1972 convention if its delegates are picked through the caucus system.

Sanford told us he has no intention of trying to reconstitute the national committee, purge Strauss or "Europeanize" the party. But considering his staff and the probable delegates to the 1974 conference, it is at least questionable whether Terry Sanford can control the tiger of reform he now rides.