

A Moment of Belief

By ANTHONY LEWIS

CHAMPAIGN, Ill.—The night of President Nixon's speech on busing, Senator George McGovern was here at the University of Illinois, speaking to nearly 3,000 students jammed into the auditorium. Just before nine o'clock he said he thought everyone should hear the President. A small television set was brought on stage, and a microphone held up to it so the sound came over the loudspeaker system.

When the President finished, Senator McGovern switched off the set and went to the rostrum.

"What we have just witnessed," he said, "is a collapse of moral and political leadership by the President: a total surrender to Wallaceism and the demagoguery it represents.

"He has talked for years about law and order. What he has asked Congress to do now is to defy the courts and defy the Constitution. This course will doubtless be welcomed by many frightened people, but it represents a backdoor, sneak attack on the Constitution of the United States."

For perhaps five or ten minutes, Senator McGovern spoke about the issues posed by the Nixon address. The response in that hall was electric. Of course it was a sympathetic audience, but even the most detached observers were impressed by what George McGovern was doing—his passion, his articulation, his courage.

In a plastic primary campaign, filled with nonevents and media slickness, here was something real happening. A candidate was expressing his beliefs live, so to speak—expressing them on the most loaded and difficult of issues without long strategy sessions and calculation. In fact, he was showing that he had beliefs.

Not too many people around the country will have heard about those moments in the University of Illinois auditorium. It was one incident in a sprawling campaign, and it naturally was overwhelmed by reports and comment on the President's speech. Still, the episode could say something about the possibilities of George McGovern as a candidate for President.

Senator McGovern is often called an unexciting candidate, lacking charisma, and it is certainly true that he tends to be a flat speaker, with a rather monotonous, Midwestern voice and little in the way of rhetoric. But no one who heard him here could doubt that he has resources of emotion in him, and the ability to convey it.

The substance of his reaction to the Nixon antibusing program was even more interesting than the manner. Democratic professionals have mostly considered McGovern too far left for a country seemingly moving to the

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right. But a lot of Democratic voters are going to want a clear alternative to Richard Nixon and George Wallace. And on the busing issue—which the President has now made certain will dominate politics for months ahead—an alternative Democratic position is getting harder and harder to find.

Hubert Humphrey outdid himself in hastening to climb on the antibusing bandwagon; he said "thank goodness" that Mr. Nixon had at last come around "to some of the things that some of the rest of us have been trying to do . . . he's in agreement with me." Henry Jackson followed his Florida pattern by saying that the President, like Governor Wallace, had not gone far enough: He should have proposed a constitutional amendment against busing.

Edmund Muskie happened to be at the University of Illinois the morning after McGovern. He criticized the President for raising "a straw man"—extreme busing situations that the Supreme Court has never approved. That was a strong point, but somehow Senator Muskie did not make it seem clear or forceful; he lost his way in testy and defensive arguments with his student audience.

As Senator McGovern saw the Nixon program, it raised two broad issues. One was the President's use of busing as a political distraction. Mr. Nixon "staged this elaborate charade tonight," McGovern said, "because he wants Americans to forget about the real issues in this country—unemployment, inflation, the war."

In states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, Massachusetts, California, Democratic voters may well be ready for that approach—if George McGovern can identify himself with the basic issues he mentioned. Even in Florida, surveys have shown, people who voted in the primary were more concerned about the war and the economy than about busing.

But the other issue that Senator McGovern saw in the President's busing message has potentially even deeper significance. That is the integrity of the Constitution and the courts.

Americans have often been angry at the Supreme Court. But again and again in our history they have decided that their own best safety lay in accepting the Court's function as interpreter of the Constitution, however temporarily uncomfortable—in remaining faithful to the rule of law. Someone is going to make that fight now against Richard Nixon and the political lawyers advising him, and it is not necessarily going to be a losing fight.