

John P. Roche

A Word Edgewise: File, Remember

BEFORE the Presidential election of 1972 mercifully vanishes into the past, there are a few things that newspaper readers, radio listeners, and TV watchers ought to file away for future reference. My concern is not with petty matters: Bill Buckley can have the pleasure of cutting up Ken Galbraith and other miscellaneous prophets of the McGovern landslide. As a matter of fact, in ideological terms, Buckley and Galbraith deserve each other; each is representative of the other's ideal losing candidate. The only Republican that George McGovern might possibly have beaten was Barry Goldwater—and vice versa.

Yet the Buckley-Galbraith duet does somehow symbolize one of the major problems in the media's coverage of the election. Every-

body these days believes in "fairness"; indeed, the Federal Communications Commission is supposed to impose a "fairness doctrine" on radio and TV stations. But in practical terms what did this "fairness" amount to? I would argue that generally speaking it came down to an equilibrium of unrepresentative bias.

To be specific, what happens when a station or a network is accused of ideological prejudice—is denounced, for instance, as being "too liberal"? Somebody, with a wary eye on the F.C.C., hits the panic button and says, "Get a conservative, dead or alive, and put him on that tube." The head-hunters go to work; obviously they need an articulate, masterful ideologue, and they find one. They are not looking for someone with a political base, but for a conservative "spokesman." Since real conservatives avoid theory like the plague (after all, it's those theorists who keep getting us into trouble), this limits the field.

The same thing happens, of course, on the other side of the hill, except that the left end of the political spectrum is overpopulated with theorists. Here then the competition is stiffer and victory goes to those capable of making the most outrageous statements about American society.

In short, American politics emerged in caricature with virtually no spokesmen for the mass of the population, which actually decided to vote against McGovern but to keep the Democrats in control of Congress. Who, for example, took the AFL-CIO—which was the epitome of this position—seriously? A clique of bitter old men, it was said, be-

haved like spoilsports (or, in McGovern's word, "wreckers"). Ingenious young reporters, suffused with righteousness, invented a split in the labor movement because the leadership was totally out of touch with the rank and file. And so it went until the smoke cleared and lo! the leadership of the AFL-CIO turned out to have been completely in tune with the sentiments of their constituents. Now the same journalists who split the movement last summer are busy "reuniting" it!

Similarly there are millions of liberals in the United States who are still committed to a combination of a prudent anti-totalitarian foreign policy and a broad program of domestic reform. They could not stomach McGovernism because of what they considered its pervasive anti-Americanism: without denying the evil in American society, they refuse to believe that the United States is an evil force in the world. As far as the media were concerned, they were the orphans of the election. The notion that a liberal could oppose McGovernism on liberal principles was simply unthinkable. But, as a careful analysis of voting patterns in New York City (particularly Brooklyn) will indicate, this sentiment was there.

The stock McGovernite answer to this is that a liberal who opposed the Senator ipso facto excommunicated himself. This is nonsense: as the voting demonstrated, it was the McGovernites who detached themselves from the main stream of American liberalism. However, as yet the media have largely failed to reflect the election returns. We still live in the era of caricature.

King Features Syndicate