

Eagleton Discounts His Role in Debacle

11/15/72
By Haynes Johnson
and David S. Broder
Washington Post Staff Writers

Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton said yesterday that he believes his dismissal from the Democratic ticket was no more than "one rock in the landslide" that buried the presidential hopes of Sen. George McGovern.

In his first extended interview since the election, the Missouri Democrat, who was dropped from the vice presidential spot after McGovern belatedly learned he had been hospitalized three times in the 1960s for mental depression, said he felt he was "certainly not" the cause of McGovern's defeat.

Far more important, he said, were President Nixon's skill in manipulating the advantages of incumbency and the fact that the "perception of him (McGovern) on issues caused the term radical to stick."

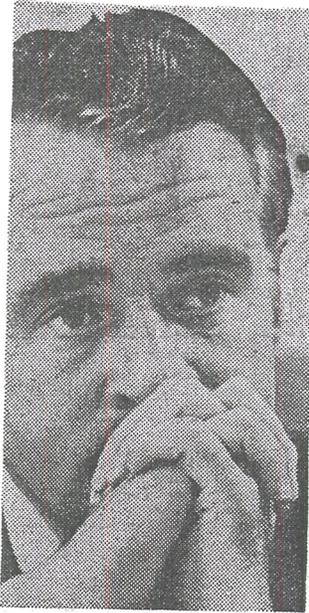
Rejecting any role of national leadership for himself, Eagleton said he believed Sen. Edward M. Kennedy was the likeliest man to lead the party "a bit closer to the political center" and regain the support of voter blocks that deserted the Democratic ticket in 1972.

Eagleton, who has avoided any public post-mortems on the defeat of his erstwhile running-mate, was interviewed in his Senate office before returning to Missouri for an appearance today before a group of editors.

Highlights of the taped-recorded interview:

Question: What do you think caused last week's landslide?

Answer: I can't identify any one single reason being the dominant factor. Only twice in this century has an incumbent been defeated for re-election. President Nixon utilized the inherent advantages of incumbency to maxi-



SEN. THOMAS EAGLETON
... rock in a landslide

mum political advantage. He was the international and national statesman, almost immune from the helter-skelter of the political process.

Also, the calendar year 1972, I think, was a good year politically for President Nixon. His trips to Peking and Moscow painted the picture of a world statesman in quest of peace. Despite the 5.5 per cent unemployment the economy appeared to have more pluses in it than minuses.

And the war, which had always been McGovern's key and principal issue, really evaporated pretty much insofar as public voting consciousness was concerned. This took away from McGovern the key issue which had been the cornerstone of his entire candidacy.

Q: What do you think the impact of the Eagleton incident was on the campaign?

A: Well, to use the analogy of the landslide, I think the Eagleton situation was one

rock in that landslide. I can't quantify it any better than that. It played a role in the campaign. But the analogy of the rock and the landslide is about as good as I can come up with.

Q: You don't think it was the decisive factor, perhaps?

A: No, certainly not. When you've got a spread of 23 points, translating into many millions of votes, I can't describe the Eagleton situation as being the determinant as far as that outcome was concerned.

Q: Do you think it was the Republican year, no matter what happened?

A: Yes, in retrospect or based on hindsight, I think it was a Republican year. I think the Wallace vote went in overwhelming percentage to Nixon making it all the more difficult for McGovern or any other Democratic nominee who might have run this year.

Q: How do the Democrats recover from a defeat like this?

A: I think the maximum effort of the Democrats for the next four years is going to have to be expended on trying to reassemble those traditional components of the Democratic Party which scattered in this 1972 election. I mean labor, the ethnics, the Wallace vote.

Q: You don't agree with those that say the old Democratic coalition is gone?

A: In terms of labor and ethnics, I wouldn't say it's gone. The Wallace vote is going to be the toughest of all to bring back to the Democratic fold.

Q: How do you think the Democrats can get any of them back?

A: The candidate we field in 1976 will have to be perceived as a bit closer to the so-called political center than McGovern was identified in this '72 campaign.

See EAGLETON, A5, Col. 1

EAGLETON, From A1

I don't perceive George McGovern myself as a radical, but I suspect that some in the blue collar areas and ethnic areas might have.

Q: What was at the root of McGovern's perception problem?

A: Well, I think the \$1,000 welfare program and the concern over the three As — abortion, amnesty and acid. I think he was misinterpreted in many respects, but nevertheless the perception of him on issues such as those was one that caused this term radical to stick.

I think in the closing days of the California primary where McGovern's lead dropped from 20 points in the Field poll down to 6 points in the final outcome there were the beginning, tell-tale signs of genuine citizen concern as to whether McGovern was too far to the left. I don't necessarily put him in that category myself, but we're talking now as to what John Q. Citizen in that voting booth perceived as the campaign went on.

Q: I assume when you went on the national ticket you must have had some ideas about how you could deal with that problem. What were they?

A: Well, I thought that once the convention was over that traditional components of the Democratic Party could be convinced that McGovern was a Democrat in the true tradition of Roosevelt, Kennedy, Adlai Stevenson and Lyndon Johnson, domestically. But I was wrong. It just was an impossible task to woo all these elements back into the party.

I made some calls during that week after the convention—to many, many leaders of organized labor for instance—and the reception was quite mixed. Some were reconciled to going along, but others were just adamantly opposed to McGovern, based on, I think, a misconception of what he was.

Q: The overall reaction was more hostile than you had expected?

A: Yes, a bit more, especially in some of these labor leaders. I misjudged how negative they were as to the events at the Democratic National Convention. I thought it had been a relatively peaceful convention, but they felt the issues highlighted in the debates on the party platform were such as to emphasize the fact that the far left, perhaps, had taken over the party. I didn't agree with the analysis, but nevertheless it was there.

Q: Do you think the Democratic Party has to make some changes in its nominating procedures for 1976?

A: I think rather than changing the procedures, labor and the other groups are going to have to work harder within the confines of those rules to see that they are more fully represented at the next Democratic National Convention. That's within the great organizational power that labor has. They are going to have to be more fully participatory in '76 than they were in the days leading up to the '72 convention.

Q: What do you see as your own role in these next four years?

A: I don't have any personal ambitions in the national sense. My aspirations and hopes politically are singular in nature—to be re-elected to the Senate in Missouri in 1974 and nothing beyond that. I don't intend to interject myself as any kind of national spokesman.

Q: What about in the Senate?

A: I'll try to seek a position on the appropriations committee if one opens up. I will pursue again my war powers resolution. I am chairman of the subcommittee on aging, and, in light of a couple presidential vetoes, we have to try to draft some legislation in that area that is veto-proof if possible.

Q: Will you take any part in the question of the national committee leadership?

A: I don't think I'll play any role in so far as the selection or continuance of the Democratic charman.

Q: If not yourself, who do you expect to lead the efforts at Democratic recovery?

A: Well, the name that immediately is speculated about above all others is Ted Kennedy. I would expect him to take that role.

Q: Do you think he's someone who can lead the party back closer to the center, as you put it?

A: I think he could, because, unlike McGovern, who was unfortunately and unfairly perceived as a radical, I don't feel at this moment that that same perception exists with respect to Sen. Kennedy.