

First Hint of the Problem

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George McGovern's key advisers knew they had a problem, but they didn't know how serious it was. On the day after Tom Eagleton's nomination they had learned Eagleton had been hospitalized once for exhaustion. The incident, they believed, was related to past campaign activities.

It is easy, in retrospect, to see what should have been done. But in the Eagleton story, the easy way was not accomplished so simply. In the entire episode, as one of the participants now puts it, "there were so many mismatched circumstances." At times events seemed beyond anyone's control; they moved, inexorably, on their own course, taking strange and unexpected turns, trapping both candidates and their respective staffs.

Not the least of the problem, from beginning to end, was one of distance. The candidates and their staffs were continually separated, often by thousands of miles. Their schedules, commitments, and political responsibilities

kept drawing them farther and farther apart.

It was that way on the first day, Friday, July 14, when the earliest glimmerings of an Eagleton problem became known.

Tom Eagleton had a long-standing commitment to speak that day before a convention of the National Audio Visual Association in Kansas City. He and an aide left Miami around noon, changed planes in New Orleans, and headed on to Kansas City later that afternoon. McGovern, after a round of political appearances in Miami Beach that morning, flew home to Washington later in the day to spend the weekend. On Monday he left for South Dakota for a two-week vacation of what he hoped would be rest and campaign staff work. He and Eagleton would not see each other until an extraordinary week had passed, and political history had been made.

Left behind in Miami to deal with any problems were two of McGovern's closest confidants, Frank Mankiewicz

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and Gary Hart, and Eagleton's aide, Doug Bennett. That day Bennett had picked up disturbing rumors. Apparently Time magazine was making inquiries about Eagleton's health at Johns Hopkins University and throughout Missouri.

Bennett was concerned that Eagleton might face press questions about his health upon arriving in Kansas City later in the day. He and Mankiewicz, who already was concerned about how to deal with the health question on Eagleton's scheduled "Face the Nation" television appearance Sunday, spoke on the phone about 3 p.m. Once again, the accounts of past conversations differ.

Mankiewicz says he knew only that Eagleton had been hospitalized once for exhaustion after his 1960 campaign. Bennett says he already had told Gordon Weil earlier that morning during a victory celebration party that Eagleton had been hospitalized more than once for exhaustion and depression. Whatever the disparities, Mankiewicz was not concerned enough to interrupt plans for a vacation himself. He left for the Virgin Islands, where he was joined on Saturday by Gary Hart. "That's how excited they were about it," an Eagleton aide recalls of the aftermath of their knowledge of a health problem.

The two staff representatives did agree that Eagleton and Mankiewicz should talk by phone Saturday night, after Eagleton returned to Washington from his Kansas City engagement.

Saturday night Eagleton met at his house with his own staff members and two of McGovern's. They discussed campaign questions, and how to deal with any health (or alcohol) questions if they came up on Sunday's TV show. Then, around midnight, Eagleton called Mankiewicz in the Virgin Islands.

Once again, the recollections are in conflict. Everyone agrees that the conversation was inhibited by fears the phone lines might not be "secure." This led to what Gary Hart calls "pretty vague references and allusions" and to what Mankiewicz says was a conversation couched "in code words." They did, however, talk about Eagleton's health.

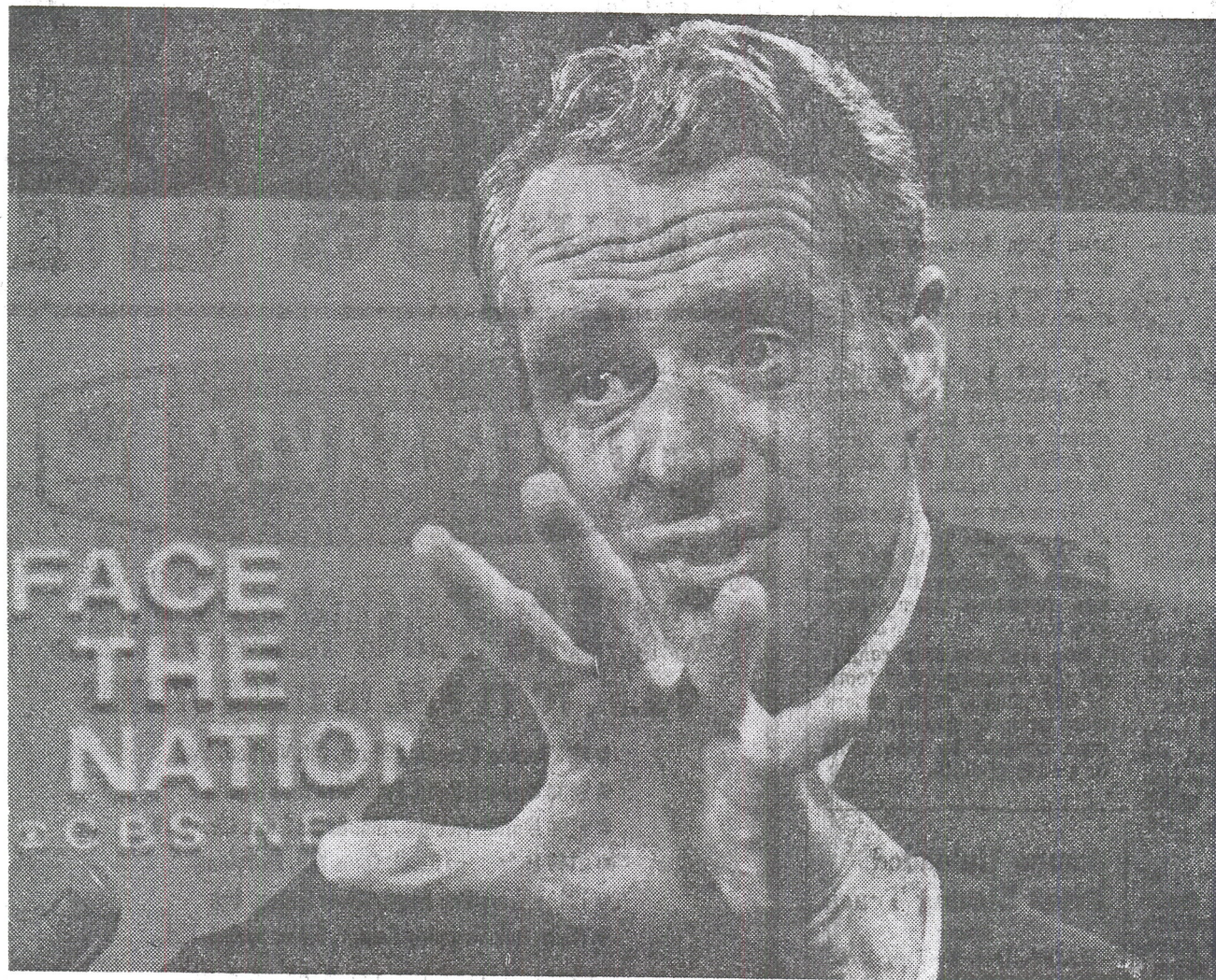
"Frank had said he wanted me to be a party in the conversation so I'd know what was going on," Hart says.

"When I heard the phone ring downstairs around midnight, Holly (Mankiewicz' wife) ran up to get me, but by that time I was already on the line. I didn't participate; I just listened. Frank was saying, 'Tom, I don't know about the integrity of these lines so I think we ought to sort of talk in generalities.' Then Frank mentioned the health reports and said it had all been very general. Tom said something to the effect that it had been after a



Associated Press

Sen. Eagleton meets with newsmen after being nominated for Vice President.



Associated Press

Sen. Eagleton makes a point in an interview just before appearing on CBS' "Face the Nation" program in July.

campaign and he was very tired so he just went in and rested up. The doctor had suggested it would be a good idea. Then Frank said, "That was about it?" and Tom said, "Yes, nothing very serious."

Mankiewicz says he tried to find out the nature of Eagleton's problem. At one point, he says, he asked Eagleton: "Tom, let's suppose I'm Chuck Colson in the White House and I have those medical records and I say, 'Look here, Mr. President.' Tom, what does the President see? What do the medical records say?"

He says Eagleton answered: "Exhaustion, probably depression, maybe melancholy."

They talked some more about the TV show Sunday, and agreed to speak again by phone after the program.

No health questions were asked on "Face the Nation" that Sunday. Sometime after the program, a similar three-way conversation occurred. This time, Mankiewicz and Hart say more probing questions were asked—about the kinds of treatment, possible medication, lengths of stay, and had there

been other occasions. It was then that Mankiewicz says he learned Eagleton had been hospitalized not once, but twice. They ended that conversation more disturbed.

"I remember Holly and Frank and I sat together out on the patio after that call," Hart says. "We were all very disturbed because there were enough loose ends that we couldn't really probe. I remember we sat up about an hour and a half hypothesizing what all this might mean. You know, how it would be treated, what the worst possible set of circumstances might be, and, when we got all the facts and if it looked very, very bad, what would happen then?"

"A perceptible mood of apprehen-

sion was spreading all over the Virgin Islands."

Looking back on it now, Mankiewicz says: "Gary and I were worried and I think if we'd been in better shape we'd have come straight back to Washington. But it was so great being down there, and we'd only been there such a short time."

That same type of "what-might-have-been-if-only-we'd-done-it-differently" colors virtually all the memories of the Eagleton case today. "It makes you very aware of human weaknesses," one person says. "If we all had been sharper it wouldn't have happened." But that, obviously, is said with the benefit of hindsight.

Mankiewicz and Hart were worried enough, however, to call George McGovern from the Virgin Islands. "I think we made some allusions to the fact that he (McGovern) might get a question by a reporter on the road about Eagleton's health," Hart says. "We told him that what we found out was he got tired and had to go in the hospital for a rest and apparently—at least on the surface—there is not

much to it. But he should know."

Sometime after he got to his South Dakota vacation retreat, George McGovern did call Eagleton in Washington. At this writing, all that is known of that conversation is that the two candidates did discuss Eagleton's health. In one interview after Eagleton's psychiatric history became public knowledge, but before Eagleton left the ticket, McGovern spoke of their phone conversation in these words:

"We didn't know if it was serious enough to disclose it or not. Tom's judgment at the time I talked with him was that it was needless complication that was a closed chapter in his life."

There, briefly, the matter rested.

Monday brought more disquieting news. Hart recalls it this way:

"On Monday, I called my Washington office to check on calls that had come in over the weekend. She was reading the calls off to me and then she said, 'Oh, and we got a crazy call at the switchboard that was taken down by a volunteer before I came in this morning.'

"There had been a hand-written note on the switchboard saying an anonymous caller had telephoned and said he had called the Knight newspapers. He either knew, or was related to, someone who had worked in the St. Louis hospital where Tom Eagleton was treated for mental illness in the '60s. And the treatment included shock therapy. I probed as to the details, but my secretary didn't know them and the switchboard operator—the volunteer—had left.

"So I immediately called Frank and there was a lot of eyeball rolling and head-shaking and forehead-tapping, and that sort of thing. It was a thing that just kept growing and growing. On Tuesday, I guess it was, the anonymous caller called back to the Washington switchboard and it was put

through to Frank's assistant who typed out a note that Frank still has.

"The anonymous caller named a woman who was a medical assistant at the hospital where Tom Eagleton was treated in St. Louis. The caller said Eagleton had been administered shock treatment and this woman knew the details. He also said this story has been given to the Knight newspapers. In both cases, the anonymous caller identified himself as a McGovern supporter who was concerned that the story came out right before a whisper campaign got going."

After Mankiewicz received that message, he and Hart again called Eagleton. They suggested meeting together privately immediately upon their return to Washington "to go over all the details that we know." Wednesday night they flew back to Washington. Early the next morning they met for breakfast in the Senate dining room with Eagleton and Doug Bennet.

At that breakfast, Eagleton has since said, "I told Mankiewicz and Hart the full Eagleton story."

The McGovern aides' account understandably, gives a different perspective.

"Frank and I had talked a great deal before that meeting," Hart says, "and our idea was to really grill him to find out every last detail so we wouldn't be caught on the blind side. Then it turns out on Thursday morning, a week after the nomination, that there had been three hospital incidents, not two; one at Barnes Hospital, two at Mayo's; that shock was involved; that he still occasionally had medication at home through pills prescribed in his wife, Barbara's name; and that he had not been troubled at all since 1966.

"He was very vague on the question of restraints and the degree to which his family was involved in his commitment. It just got very vague on that fringe—and on the actual condition itself. He, of course, always wanted to minimize it, and understandably so."

Mankiewicz also was struck to learn that not all of the hospital incidents were related to campaigning. Eagleton's second admission had come during Christmas holidays of 1964.

The question of the health records again came up, with Mankiewicz pressing to find out what the medical diagnosis might be. Would they say paranoid or schizophrenia or what? Eagleton didn't know; he had never seen the records; only the doctors could say; but it certainly wasn't any kind of permanent condition. Were straight jackets employed; no. As Hart remembers, "the word 'depression' kept floating around a lot."

Hart also says:

"Both Frank and I spent some time convincing him that this potentially was a very serious problem in the campaign. He began, I think, at that point to appreciate it. And we also stressed that it was very important for us to know everything there was to know. So he said, 'I've never seen the records, but I am sure that we could get them if we want them.' And he said he would do anything to get this straightened out. He said McGovern had been so kind to him and he thought so highly of him, and he didn't want to hurt him. He was very much at our service."

They also discussed the anonymous calls and the knowledge that the Knight newspapers were looking into the health question.

The meeting ended amicably. Eagleton was told McGovern would be briefed on the conversation and "we will keep it very quiet so it won't get around the campaign." It was recalled that Eagleton was supposed to meet with McGovern personally in South Dakota early the next week. That would be a good time for the two candidates to discuss the matter themselves.

That Thursday, by coincidence,

George McGovern had flown back to Washington on another political mission. He cast the deciding vote on a minimum wage bill in the Senate.

McGovern also spent that day dealing with an important campaign announcement about Lawrence O'Brien's role. In one of those political chance encounters McGovern and Eagleton met briefly on the Senate floor during the roll call on the minimum wage bill. They chatted a moment, but it was no time for serious discussion—certainly not of the kind Eagleton had experienced with Mankiewicz and Hart earlier that morning. The candidates did not see each other again that day.

Again, it is easy to speculate about missed opportunities. Why didn't McGovern and Eagleton meet later, in privacy, while both were in Washington? Why didn't Mankiewicz and Hart—or Eagleton's aides—or Eagleton himself—insist upon it? The questions beg other questions. None can be answered satisfactorily. They

were all part of larger miscalculations.

The next morning, Friday, McGovern flew back to South Dakota from Washington. With him on the plane when it took off about 12:30 p.m. were Frank Mankiewicz and Gary Hart. They had not yet told McGovern what they knew.

Either just before they were to land in Chicago for refueling, or shortly before they departed on the last leg to South Dakota, Mankiewicz and Hart arranged to meet privately with McGovern and his wife Eleanor in the front of the plane.

There, George McGovern learned for the first time of the full dimensions of Tom Eagleton's health problem.

"We told him the whole story," Hart says, "everything we knew. And he was very thoughtful about it, very non-committal. He said things like, 'What does this mean?' and 'What shall we do?' Everybody agreed that at the least it was a matter that deserved extremely serious thought and consideration and judgment—and that the implications are still not too clear.

"And the senator said, 'Well, let's do this: let me get together with Tom on Tuesday in South Dakota. I will talk to him when he gets there and learn all the story myself, and then we will talk it over and decide what to do.'"

They also agreed that the situation was coming at the worst possible time. If a change on the ticket had to be made—a change that never had occurred in all of American history—it would be difficult to get the Democratic National Committee together for some time. In addition, there were no precedents for such an event. Besides, the campaign itself had already taken on its own momentum. It could not—

and must not—be stopped. That very weekend key Democrats from across the country were planning to fly to South Dakota for critical strategy sessions. Indeed, those meetings were scheduled to begin the next day, Saturday.

Both Mankiewicz and Hart offered their own opinions to McGovern on the plane ride. "I was very strong that

he should get him (Eagleton) out," Mankiewicz says.

Hart gave a more elaborate argument.

"The point I made very strongly Friday afternoon on the plane (and again that Next Sunday morning) to McGovern was that he had a fiduciary duty, if you will, in the legal sense to the American people to assure himself that Tom Eagleton was sound enough to be President of the United States. The only advice I ever gave him was that: that that was the standard. I really put myself in the role of McGovern's lawyer at that point, and I put it very much in legal terms.

"I said that you have to assure yourself, based on all the evidence, that he is capable of being President of the United States— and you should have no hesitation about that. And I said I don't think you can take his word for it. I think you have to talk to the experts. You have to talk to his doctors and you have to see his records. You owe that to the country."

The questions of the records, a sore point even now among both McGovern and Eagleton partisans, already figured prominently in the case up to that time. Hart and Mankiewicz maintain that at their Thursday breakfast meeting with Eagleton he had agreed to send his staff men out to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and to Barnes Hospital in St. Louis to pick up the records. The Eagleton version is less clear on this point.

In any event, the records were discussed on the flight to South Dakota.

McGovern took the counsel under advisement.

At that point only four of McGovern's people knew that a potentially fatal problem had dealt them a stunning blow. Those people were George and Eleanor McGovern and Frank

From all accounts, it was a somber Mankiewicz and Gary Hart.

conversation that day on the plane back to South Dakota. Hart particularly remembers Eleanor McGovern's reaction.

"She was appalled."

NEXT: "A Very Nasty Turn"
