

1,000 Per Cent to Zero

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For one fleeting period the McGovern and Eagleton camps were united both publicly and privately. Everyone was confident the health question finally had been dismissed at Tom Eagleton's South Dakota press conference. Their joint press conference was an example, as George McGovern said that day, "of the kind of candor and openness that you're going to get in this campaign from Sen. Eagleton and myself."

The candor and confidence didn't last long, but for a time they created a deceptive glow.

Tom Eagleton flew off to Los Angeles, determined not to respond to further questions about his health. He left South Dakota and his memorable private meeting with George McGovern "totally confident that I was not debar-

red. I don't recall any statement by McGovern . . . that 'your position on the ticket depends on what the public reaction is.'" Frank Mankiewicz flew off to Washington, D.C., "temporarily heartened" by the initial public reaction to the health disclosures. In Washington, when he saw Gary Hart, the campaign manager, he found Hart similarly determined.

"The mood was very much Eagleton's on the ticket, McGovern's behind him, and we're going to fight it out," Hart said.

Eagleton's staff reflected the same thinking. "You can rap us both for a lack of foresight," said an Eagleton aide, "but neither side thought this was something we couldn't get through together politically. They didn't, we didn't. We were agreed that electro-

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Shock treatment six years ago wasn't all that crucial, but we didn't see the press going wild. We just didn't calculate on the overkill of the press."

While the mood of determination lasted, it led to one incident that probably always will be associated with George McGovern: his assertion that he was behind Tom Eagleton "1,000 per cent."

Wednesday, July 26, was the first day after the Eagleton health disclosures. Everyone from the candidate down was determined to put forward the best public face—and to spike any indications of doubt, hesitation or ambiguity. Like so much else these goals were easier to proclaim than to achieve.

William Greider of The Washington Post was in South Dakota covering McGovern at that point. He recalls the next sequence of events: "Bill Eaton (of the Chicago Daily News) and I caught Eleanor outside her cabin," Greider remembers, "and she told us something to the effect: 'we'll have to wait and see what the public reaction is.' At that point, everyone else was denying that much ambiguity."

"Then Carl Leubsdorf (of the Associated Press) caught McGovern after tennis that day, rode back to the lodge with him, and wrote an innocuous lead which said something about 'waiting and watching.' One version is that Gary Hart saw the AP lead back in Washington, called McGovern and insisted that the senator must knock it down so no one could accuse him of running out on Eagleton."

Whether Hart called him or not is uncertain—and not the critical point. "McGovern," as Frank Mankiewicz recalls, "got mad" when he saw the AP lead; it undermined his whole position, he believed. He then drafted a short statement discrediting the AP story—and coining the phrase that he was behind Tom Eagleton "1,000 per cent."

That phrase will live with George McGovern long after the 1972 presi-



By Joe Heiberger.—The Washington Post
Sens. McGovern and Eagleton at July 31 press conference at which Eagleton withdrew from Democratic ticket.

dential campaign is a hazy memory to most Americans.

Within 48 hours George McGovern's support had plummeted from 1,000 per cent to virtually zero and he was furiously dropping public hints that Eagleton was through.

For Tom Eagleton, those first days after the Black Hills press conference had not gone as expected, either. If he believed the press would not hammer

at him with more questions, or that the public reaction would be entirely favorable, he was sadly naive.

Nothing better portrays Eagleton's state of mind—and increasing frustration—than one news interview in that period. It occurred the very evening after he left South Dakota when he sat down to talk with Robert Abernathy in NBC's Burbank studio. The transcript of the interview is revealing.

It began with Abernathy sketching the details of Eagleton's press conference earlier in South Dakota, and then asking:

"The question remains: should you become President is there anything about your physical or emotional condition that would even slightly affect your ability to do the job?"

Eagleton's reply, and the next series of questions and answers, were:

Eagleton: I think not, Bob. I don't want to replot old ground and be redundant and go over the ground that was covered at that South Dakota press conference. But my health is excellent. I feel excellent. And I had a physical taken this week by the Senate physician, the results of which will be made public. And I'm in very good shape.

Q: Since you talked in South Dakota, all of us reporters have had time to think about what you said and to talk to some experts about it. And there are some follow-up questions. You called what happened "nervous exhaustion." Wasn't it also a rather severe depression?

A: Bob, I—I hate to cut you short on this, and we—we can get on perhaps to other questions, but there's no sense in being redundant and replowing the ground that was very thoroughly considered by a press conference that included all of the major television . . .

Q: Perhaps . . .

A: . . . networks, the printed media, the wire services were represented, and they had a full and abundant time to go through the questioning. And I've made up my mind I'm not going to be redundant and repeat and repeat and repeat.

Q: Okay. But just—just on this point, though. Was it a rather severe depression? Was it a depression of any kind?

A: Well, you see, if it's not on this point, it's—then it's on the next point or it's on some other point. And—and I—it was—these questions were asked in South Dakota, my answers were given there to, and . . .

Q: But can you—can you just repeat here what you said . . .

A: Well, I'm not going to repeat.

Q: . . . in South Dakota about whether it was a depression?

A: The—that's the very point, is that if you keep replowing the same ground it is redundant; you're going through the same line of questioning time and

again and again. And that was—that was what . . .

Q: Well, senator . . .

A: . . . the gist of the press conference was in South Dakota.

Q: Senator, you know—you know that this is not going to go away just because you said it in South Dakota.

A: Well, I'm not—it's not a question of what goes away. It's a question of being redundant and being superfluous and . . .

A: But everybody—but—but the people in this country are choosing a President and somebody who can fill in for him if that's necessary. The question of your health and of every detail about it is of the greatest importance to people, as you know. And if you are . . .

A: That's why—that's why I broached the subject at the press conference today of my . . .

Q: If you are—if you're a man who is subject to depressions that force you to go to the hospital for a period of a month or three weeks, or even if that happened at some time in the past, that's a matter of the greatest importance to the voters.

A: This—yes. And it was covered at the press conference today with, as I say, the three major networks represented, all of the wire services, the printed media. And I'm sure that they made—will make adequate coverage of it. I'm sure that it's already been adequately covered here in the Los Angeles . . .

Q: At the risk of being doubly redundant, there is—in addition to this matter of your health, there is a matter of judgment. Why didn't you tell Senator McGovern about your medical history before you agreed to be his running mate?

A: I didn't think it was relevant. I've been in excellent health for these six years. And now that Senator McGovern has considered it he—he concurs

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in that estimate and says he thinks it is of significant moment.

Q: And why did you disclose it now?

A: Well, that question was asked at the South Dakota press conference. You see, Bob, if—if . . .

Q: But since the South Dakota . . .

A: . . . wherever I go we—we go through . . .

Q: Okay. But since South Da . . .

A: . . . the same litany of questions and repeat and repeat and repeat the same question, it does become redundant; it does become terribly repetitious.

Q: The way to . . .

A: And I don't—I—and I don't think it becomes any more newsworthy by—by—by repetition.

Try as he did, Eagleton kept facing the same questions—and repeating the same responses. He left Los Angeles and flew on to Honolulu for an important meeting before the retail clerks' union. Then came the crusher, the final disastrous blow.

As Gary Hart puts it, "this whole thing blows apart Wednesday night."

Columnist's Charge

That was when McGovern's people learned that Jack Anderson, the columnist, had prepared a report saying Eagleton had been cited for drunken driving and reckless driving in the 1960s. Anderson never proved his charges. Finally, reluctantly, he retracted them, but by that point it was too late: the damage had been done.

The Anderson charges came precisely at the most inopportune moment. Both candidates were again isolated from each other, their staffs were equally separated, and they all were unable to assess the situation calmly and privately together. The Anderson report affected the candidates in other important ways.

To Eagleton, who immediately branded the charges "a damnable lie," it stiffened his resolve to redeem himself. Eagleton, who had begun the week voluntarily offering to get off the ticket, now was fighting aggressively to stay on. From the McGovern side, the Anderson charges led to other rumors surfacing about Eagleton. It made Tom Eagleton all the more controversial—and it raised private doubts among McGovern's counselors that maybe they still didn't have the full story.

Inevitably, the tensions between the two camps led to ill will. As one of Eagleton's aides says:

"The Anderson charges created many sour notes. It made McGovern's people think maybe Anderson was right, maybe Eagleton had lied. Anderson really turned the tide. He, really, is the villain, the man who screwed McGovern."

When word of the charges first reached Frank Mankiewicz, he immediately called Anderson. "I told him I didn't think he had anything, but he

said he had this report from a 'high Missouri official' that I would respect. But then it turned out that he hadn't seen the evidence himself, couldn't produce photostats of the supposed arrest records, and also couldn't produce any witnesses.

"So we went with Eagleton's strong denials."

Counterattack Begun

Understandably, Eagleton's staff launched a strong counterattack. Hart remembers Doug Bennet, Eagleton's assistant, calling to say: "We're all going to have to be very strong about this. There is no drunkenness and there are no arrest records." After checking sources throughout Missouri, Bennet called back Hart Thursday morning to report: Eagleton had been arrested twice, once on a routine speeding ticket, and the second time when his car skidded on ice. Neither case had anything to do with alcohol.

"And I said—because we were then very gunshy the way the other business had come up—'are you absolutely sure?' I just kept grilling about this. He was absolutely sure. Then he said: 'This is our chance to hit this thing head on. Let's kill this once and for all,'" Hart recalls.

But the latest Eagleton controversy was firing other reactions. As Hart said, "The response we were getting from around the country was overwhelmingly anti-Eagleton."

McGovern was told financial supporters thought the Eagleton case was disastrous; other political soundings were equally negative. "The real anger at Eagleton for not telling us down in Miami began to surface," Hart said. Press reaction—particularly the editorial comment by The Washington Post and The New York Times—also was critical.

In the midst of all this, more disquieting reports came to the McGovern camp. "By then, we were also getting good information that the other side was loaded," Mankiewicz said, referring to the Republicans. Word came from a "responsible Republican" on Capitol Hill that elaborate lists had been prepared to show that someone with Tom Eagleton's background could not qualify for sensitive positions in the government. Someone with his health record would be disqualified as a private in the Strategic Air Command, to say nothing of a SAC general charged with scrambling planes. Neither would he qualify, under security regulations, to carry the top-secret "black box."

"I gave McGovern all those scraps," Mankiewicz said.

Hart adds other details. "By this time," he said, "McGovern had consulted with one or two noted psychiatrists, all of whom couched their advice in these terms: they could not diagnose Tom Eagleton, because he wasn't a patient of theirs, but in general they could comment about that type of syndrome. The phrase had then arisen which became the operative di-

agnosis, and I can't even remember it now; but it was some kind of paranoia. And then the phrase with 'suicidal tendencies' began to surface.

"So by Friday, the waves were cresting."

Yet while the private pressure against Eagleton was mounting, neither he nor key McGovern operatives in Washington were fully aware that McGovern had begun to reassess his position.

The first signal came on Friday night. McGovern hopped from table to table where groups of reporters were having dinner that night in the resort lodge. He let it be known clearly that his position was changing, and that he was troubled by Eagleton's lack of candor in Miami Beach.

That same day McGovern called Eagleton, now back on the mainland in San Francisco. He let Eagleton know that he was reassessing his position, and quoted a paragraph from a speech he was scheduled to deliver Saturday night in Aberdeen, S.D., before the state Democratic convention. The speech was McGovern's first since he accepted his nomination, 2½ weeks earlier. The paragraph he quoted said:

News of McGovern's switch took even Frank Mankiewicz by surprise. "I talked to Gary about it," Mankiewicz recalled, "and I remember saying, 'what the hell's going on? Here we are (in Washington) standing solid as a rock and somebody's digging out the foundation.'"

Mankiewicz called McGovern in South Dakota and was told a public signal had to be made if he was going to make a change.

Bitterness Increases

The bitterness between the two camps deepened. Tempers were flaring. The wonder is the private anger didn't surface publicly. Listen, for instance, to the words of one McGovern aide: "I couldn't believe that Eagleton performance. There was no sense of common purpose, no sense of 'we'll do what's best,' instead, it was 'I'll fight.' Eagleton never won any primaries, he never laid out any money, he never was fighting all year until the conventions. Who was he? And it was clear who he was going to fight—'they.' 'They' was his running mate, the man who had picked him up from obscurity."

Eagleton's aides felt equally bitter, if not betrayed. It was George McGovern, after all, who had stood solidly behind Tom Eagleton, McGovern who had said had he known in advance he would have acted the same way, McGovern who was behind Eagleton 1,000 per cent. What was going on?

In that fractious atmosphere the final decisions were reached that last weekend.

On Saturday, Eagleton had returned to Washington. He was scheduled to go on "Face the Nation" the next day. He would be questioned by, of all people, Jack Anderson and two CBS correspondents.

McGovern was to fly back to Washington after delivering his Saturday night speech in South Dakota; then, he would meet with his closest advisers at his home on Sunday.

That Saturday morning, the question of the Eagleton medical records again arose. Hart called Doug Bennet about getting access to the records.

"I was zeroing in on the records," Hart says. "McGovern had to see the records and had to talk to Eagleton's doctors. There was serious thought given Saturday night and Sunday morning to either myself or John Douglas (another top McGovern aide) flying out to St. Louis to talk to the doctors and look at the records if Eagleton would make them available. Bennet and I had a long conversation about the logistics of it. One doctor apparently said he wanted both a call from Tom Eagleton and a note signed by him. I think by then the senator realized he had less than 48 hours to make some sort of final decision. He couldn't drag along. There was great pressure."

Sunday was another extraordinary day. While Eagleton was going through his ordeal on "Face the Nation," McGovern and his advisers were watching from McGovern's house. Immediately after "Face the Nation," Jean Westwood, Democratic national chairman, appeared on "Meet the Press." In answer to the first question, she said she thought it would be "the noble thing" for Eagleton to step down.

Before going on TV that day Westwood had talked first with Gary Hart and then McGovern about what she would say. Mankiewicz says, "Jean had called George and said what I think I ought to say is such and such, and he said, 'Fine, why don't you say that.'"

As soon as the show was over, she immediately went to McGovern's house. There, a full-dress meeting was held about Tom Eagleton's fate.

Various Viewpoints

Everyone present spoke about the situation from his own point of view. Henry Kimelman, the money raiser, spoke on the financial situation. A key financial mailing had been held up until the Eagleton situation was resolved.

Jean Westwood reported on the earliest possible date the Democratic National Committee could meet to consider another vice presidential candidate. With the exception of Missouri delegates, the committee would back up any action McGovern decides to take, she said.

Gary Hart again repeated his earlier advice: "The only way he could stay on is if you see those records and convince yourself. Otherwise, the burden is on him and you have no choice." He also reported a strong consensus from state political operations that Eagleton be dropped.

Frank Mankiewicz touched on several aspects. One was that this question would hang over the entire campaign. Another was the prospect of having to face the knowledge that the Nixon operation had the records—and

would use them. "I couldn't believe, I said, that a campaign in which Murray Chotiner and Bob Handeman had anything to do wouldn't use every trick they could. We had to face the real possibility that they had the records and would have to go through this again and again. And we had to ask ourselves why we didn't have the records. We didn't have them because they might be bad. We had to assume the worst."

Elanor McGovern reportedly was "very strong" about dropping Eagleton.

As someone else present that day said, "nobody had to argue with anybody."

McGovern "wanted to be sure that everybody was convinced he had to go."

They all talked about the next steps. McGovern called Eagleton to arrange a meeting Monday night at the Capitol. He also told Eagleton he wanted to speak to Eagleton's doctors by phone. Eagleton said he would arrange it.

Out of that Sunday afternoon meeting came general agreement on two other points about the next vice president choice. The very things that had disqualified some people before now made them particularly attractive: experience, proven records, continuity, party standing. They also agreed that the next selection could not be arrived at hastily.

Attends Funeral

The Eagleton case came to an end on Monday, July 31. Even the last act was complicated. Sen. Allen Ellender's funeral was being held that day in Baton Rouge, and McGovern, among other leading politicians, flew down from Washington to attend the services. Twice, from the plane, he talked with Mankiewicz about last-minute details of the evening Eagleton meeting and subsequent press conference. Later in the day, he returned to Washington and went to Capitol Hill to meet Eagleton and Sen. Gaylord Nelson, a mutual friend.

While McGovern was attending the funeral of an older politician, Tom Eagleton had contacted two of his doctors "to find out where these gentlemen were going to be between 7:30 and 9 p.m. Eastern daylight time."

The three senators met alone.

During their meeting, Eagleton placed two phone calls to his doctors. "You know who this is?" he would say and, upon receiving an affirmative reply, said, "Now I'm going to put George McGovern on the line." As McGovern picked up the phone, Nelson and Eagleton withdrew to the other side of the room so McGovern could speak in private.

Of those two 20-minute conversations with Eagleton's doctors, George McGovern will say nothing. It is known they discussed Eagleton's health in the context of the national interest, and the possibility that Tom Eagleton might become President of the United States.

"It was a privileged conversation," McGovern said last summer. "I'm willing to take the responsibility for the statements I made the night Sen Eagleton resigned. He is a good friend of mine. I want him to continue in public life. I think he's going to have a brilliant career and I'm not going to say anything more about his medical history."

During their meeting that night, Eagleton, the lawyer, presented his case. "There was a backlash in my favor," he said. And he still felt he would be more of an asset to the ticket than a liability.

McGovern answered: "I think your being on the ticket will divert attention from the real issues."

Eagleton quickly replied: "In light of that, why don't I step aside?"

He also recalls saying, "George, tell us what the doctors told you." He said they said Eagleton's health is excellent."

The three senators drafted a statement for the press announcing the decision, Mankiewicz was called in for last-minute details on the press conference, and the meeting ended.

Statement Drafted

George McGovern and Tom Eagleton faced the cameras for the last time as the 1972 Democratic ticket. It was exactly three weeks since the gavel had pounded on the podium in Miami Beach opening the Democratic National Convention. Then it was all over.

As the people were leaving that emotional press conference, Frank Mankiewicz encountered a young girl he had known during Robert Kennedy's 1968 campaign. "Well, you lost me forever," she said bitterly.

"I realized then," Mankiewicz said, "that an awful lot of people that day were turned off because of a general, not very well thought out, liberal commitment to mental health. But mental health wasn't the issue, the issue was the presidency."

"The point had not been to show he couldn't be President—and yet in a sense that was the point. And I thought at the time a lot of people really missed what was at stake. They lost sight of what the presidency is. It's not like choosing a president and vice president of Ford Motor Co., or a governor and lieutenant governor, or the officers of the junior class. All of those are places where traditional American values and a sense of loyalty and fair play have—and should have—a role. The one job where that is not true is the President of the United States. We're talking about the stewardship of the whole world."

Much more will be written about the Eagleton case, but at this point there is at least one additional point to be made. When a reporter asked him about the diagnosis of his doctors he replied: "The diagnosis was exhaustion and fatigue."

Then he said:

"I'm not a thousand per cent sure. I'm a million per cent sure."