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McGovernites Seek Answer

McGOVERN'S people are desperate for explanations. Even poor Teddy White is getting blamed for the farce-disaster of his candidacy.

After the wild flurry of theories on why McGovern would win, we cannot expect much in the way of retrospective candor or judgment. In the grim last days of the campaign, Frank Mankiewicz elaborated a thesis of "the Attlee effect" that would put McGovern in office — that is, with peace in the offing, the people would want to forget the war, and one of the ways for doing this would be to get rid of the war leader, just as the British did when they turned Winston Churchill out after World War II, and brought in Clement Attlee.

There were all kinds of things wrong with that theory. In the first place, McGovern was busily telling everyone peace was not in the offing. Also, McGovern never did understand that people did not need to forget the war. They had already forgotten it, under Mr. Nixon's delusive and narcotic leadership.

But "the Attlee effect" was no more mistaken than other theories offered, all along, to show why McGovern had to win. The people were dissatisfied, populist, anti-politics, getting younger, getting better. It all, I guess, boiled down to that last point—the people were too good for Richard Nixon, as any fool could plainly see.

But only the fools around McGovern, it turns out, could see this "plain fact." McGovern was, in fact, too good for the people, and had irritating ways of suggesting this superiority to them.

I BRING up the false predictions to stress that we should not be taken in by exculpatory false analyses after the event. There will be plenty of Attlee-effect theorizing on why McGovern lost. Forget them. He lost because he had to;

deserved to; never had a chance not to.

I suppose Eagleton will be the explanation most strenuously offered, because it suggests one accident made the difference, not any structural fault in the campaign.

But single-episode explanations are dangerous—e.g., that Mr. Nixon's bad showing in the first debate made him lose in 1960, or that

Romney's "brainwashed" comment, Muskie's crying in Manchester, ended their primary hopes.

NEITHER THE press nor the public give that much weight to a single incident if it is felt to be out of character or truly accidental. But if an episode crystallizes a growing feeling about the candidate, it has its effect — not so much as a cause of disaffection, but as a symptom of it.

Romney was a clown, and said even more damaging things — e.g., while trying to use kid-talk on campuses: The realization of this just caught up with him in connection with the brainwashing remark. Muskie conveyed a sense of disproportion and bad judgment, of intensity misplaced, of sudden outburst after long hesitation. That impression, shared by many before the Manchester event, was given apt symbolization there.

In the same way, McGovern tried to be a politician above politics, to be considered Mr. Nixon's moral superior yet not to be judged with moral rigor. This was true in his dealings with Daley and Johnson and Louise Day Hicks, not only with Senator Eagleton. If the Eagleton affair hurt, it was because it fit a larger pattern, not because it went against it — not because it was atypical or accidental. Eagleton did not defeat McGovern. McGovern defeated McGovern.

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