

Mr. Safire:

... And the "Unpopulism" of Senator McGovern

POPULISM, by definition, is supposed to have a wide appeal. It is directed at what Senator McGovern calls "the little man," of whom there are more than anybody; its message is uncomplicated, suitable for 10-second television spots. But in McGovern's hands it has turned into "unpopulism." Tried-and-true appeals to class hatred are falling flat; as a result, McGovern is giving demagoguery a bad name.

What are the reasons for the rise of unpopulism?

First, like the novice at the gagwriters' convention who calls out "number 36" and nobody laughs, maybe he's not telling it right. McGovern leaped on the populist bandwagon after the Wallace victory in the Florida Democratic primary in an attempt to widen his one-issue candidacy; not surprisingly, tirades about being crushed under the rich man's heel are new to him, and he just does not have the rhythm right.

For example, to an observer high atop an ivory tower, the man in the street may look like a "little man," but the man down there — little man or small businessman — does not appreciate a patronizing label from somebody he does not identify with. "In an election year," wrote Robert Bendiner in 1960, "we seem to have an enormous population of midgets. The candidate's immediate audience, however, is never made up of these wee folk; it is made up of the great people of this great state. That's you. The little people are your relatives and neighbors."

Because McGovern's passion for tax reform in favor of political diminutives was so

suddenly acquired, some programmatic mistakes were made: He has since backed off confiscating inheritances and handing out \$1000 bills when he discovered that he was talking to a little man who wasn't there.

Because McGovern is a Johnny-come-lately to the politics of class division, and especially because he does not share the values held by so many of the people he is trying to make angry, he cannot get himself accepted as the majority's champion.

The second reason for unpopulism is that McGovern's policy means higher taxes, and the average man knows that means him. The cost of the McGovern domestic spending program is \$150 billion, if you assume he means all those promises.

To pay for this, he says he can come up with \$22 billion by soaking the rich and another \$32 billion by slashing defense; even if he did this (which he has assured Wall Street Journal readers no responsible Congress will let him do), he would need to come up with an additional hundred billion or so. That whopping gap not only makes ludicrous McGovern's crocodile tears about budget deficits in the Nixon years, but guarantees that everybody's taxes would have to rise under McGovern.

Of course, McGovern cannot admit this; to get elected, he has to equate federal tax policy with painless dentistry. But the average person has heard that song before; when McGovern promises that not a dime in new taxes would come out of the middle class, he is not believed because he is not believable.

The third reason for unpopulism is the voters' recent long and unhappy experience

with inflation, now cut in half after a hard fight. McGovern has announced he would raise prices to farmers, remove price controls, heavily increase government spending and order the Federal Reserve to produce an "expansive monetary policy"—and even to the inexperienced eye, that spells out an invitation to go off to the races again.

But the failure of the populist appeal cannot be laid entirely at McGovern's door. It is not his fault that the economy is surging ahead at its highest real rate in more than six years, with more new jobs being created than at any time in the previous 16 years. With his campaign long ago cranked up to appeal to an economy in depression, he has been confronted with the spectre of a widely-shared prosperity. As Arthur Miller, no Nixon fan, put it last week: "McGovern is trying out for the wrong play. We are not casting Moses to lead us out of the desert, but the chief officer of a bank in which we are all depositors."

The encroachment of good times would be disheartening to an office-seeking Chicken Little herself; about the only handle McGovern had left was the slowness of the decline of the unemployment figures, and he carelessly threw that away in an offhand remark last week: He told a Washington Post reporter he wanted creative jobs "for the million-and-a-half people who have been dislocated in the defense and aerospace field."

For two long years, we have been trying to point out that unemployment has been the result of the changeover from a wartime to a peacetime economy. Critics like McGovern have pooh-poohed this fact, claiming instead that we deliberately induced unemployment in a heartless effort to hold down the cost of ocean-going yachts.

Now, in a burst of unintentional candor, the opposition candidate has blurted out the truth: Unemployment increased, as it always has done, as we have made the transition to peace.

Our plan is to continue to reduce this transitional unemployment—not by hiding the statistics in a haze of government make-work, as McGovern proposes, but by making it possible for free enterprise to bring us to a goal that has not been achieved since the Eisenhower years: a full-employment prosperity, without inflation and without war.

Mr. Mankiewicz Replies:

For two weeks now, my brother Safire has been asked to present the Nixon program — in foreign affairs and now the economy—and he has come up with nothing but a stylish attack on what he and his colleagues want people to believe are Sen. McGovern's policies. It is the easiest course — one Mr. Nixon has always followed — particularly when you're beleaguered with proof of sabotage and espionage right in the White House, and when the magnitude of official corruption is beginning to sink in. But this debate is with Bill Safire, not Murray Chotiner or John Ehrlichman, and we expected better.

For openers, the calculation of Sen. McGovern's program cost is wrong by slightly more than \$100 billion, not surprising from a White House which has five times guessed wrong on this year's deficit and which could not—even with computers—figure out how to withhold taxes right.

Mr. Safire next comes along with the whopper, "inflation now cut in half after a hard fight." Three days after the announcement of a 6.6 per cent inflation rate for this quarter, the claim is ludicrous. Inflation is back above where it was when

Mr. Nixon — that gem of consistency — abandoned a lifetime of rhetoric about "socialism" and instituted wage controls. Price controls, as we have seen, are imposed only on those who cannot afford a substantial campaign contribution.

Finally, we get the admission of defeat. The plan—the Nixon game plan—is "full-employment prosperity, without inflation and without war." We have unemployment inching back to 6 per cent, inflation over 6 per cent, and a war which lasted longer under Nixon than all of World War II. In baseball, that's 0-for-3. In politics, it's failure.

Next Week:

Social welfare, civil liberties, the environment and other domestic issues.