

WXPost
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DEC 22 1973

Taxes and Public Office: Avoiding the Borderline

Ever since he was elected to Congress, Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) has asked the Internal Revenue Service to figure his income tax, and has paid whatever sum the agent assigned declared was due.

I learned this fact the other day because I called McGovern to ask him about what seemed a contrary report. A private accountant in this city had told me the following story:

In 1971, he said, McGovern came to him and told him he thought he was paying too much tax. Would the accountant go over the figures? The accountant did so and came up with a lower tax. But he pointed out to McGovern that the additional deductions he had calculated were what he called "borderline." They might, he suggested, be questioned by the IRS. What did McGovern want to do?

According to the accountant, McGovern shook his head sorrowfully. "That's too bad," he said, "I guess I can't do it. The trouble with the borderline is that it looks like hell in public."

McGovern verified the accountant's story and added this reminder: "Remember that by 1971 I was already campaigning for tax reform. Suppose it had come out that I was tax dodging?"

I tell this story not to demonstrate that George McGovern is holier than thee or than me but because it illustrates the mentality of most men who hold public office. They think of themselves as living in a fishbowl; they can't take the chances that private citizens can take. Propriety is important, but so is the appearance of pro-

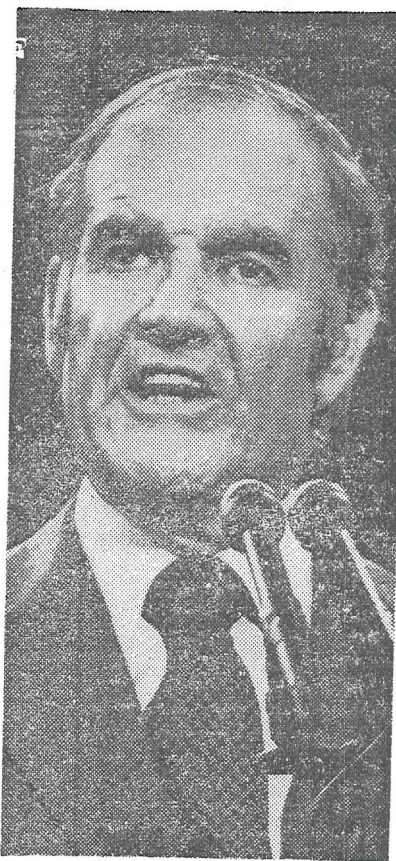
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prty. Borderlines are for people who don't have to care what other people think.

Which is why Richard Nixon is an exceptional public servant. His tax returns show that he was not only willing to walk the borderline but to waltz clear over it. Moreover, he seems to have been totally insensitive to the possibility that someone would catch him at it.

One assumes that the Internal Revenue Service was too timid to do so. Accountants in this city are astonished that a man who claimed a deduction of \$576,000 for a charitable gift was not questioned.

I'd say the odds would be 1,000-1



that any private citizen with an adjusted gross income of more than \$200,000 who reported a contribution of more than \$500,000 would be questioned," one of them said. And Mr. Nixon said, at his press conference of Sept. 5, 1973, "The IRS has had a full field review or audit of my income tax returns . . ."

But Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) has pointed out that neither the recipient of the gift nor the man who appraised it was ever contacted by the IRS. "If that's a 'full field review or audit,' IRS is not doing much of a job," said Weicker.

One would think that the President might have wanted IRS to spare him possible public embarrassment. But then one must admit the possibility that maybe Mr. Nixon doesn't care about embarrassment. Ask yourself this question:

Why would a man who has the highest office in the world, every possible creature comfort (including four houses and a jet airplane), permit improvements to those houses at the taxpayers expense? In other words, why would a man who has everything try to get a little more by stepping over the boundaries, whether boundaries of legality or decency?

Maybe Richard Nixon can answer that question, but he hasn't done so yet. And in the meantime, to borrow the words of George McGovern, "it looks like hell in public."