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Muskie's Racial Comments

CONCERNING Senator Muskie's observation that there would be little point in putting a black vice president on his ticket, inasmuch as both of them would proceed to lose, a few observations.

President Nixon's retort that Senator Muskie had "libeled" the American people is both disingenuous and misleading. Disingenuous because we have all been told that when Henry Cabot Lodge, running for vice president on Richard Nixon's ticket in 1960, promised somebody somewhere that if Mr. Nixon were elected he would name a Negro to the cabinet, candidate Nixon almost fainted. And no wonder.

WHICH BRINGS US to the misleading aspect of Mr. Nixon's criticism. To say there is no race prejudice in this country is about the same as saying there are no rivers that run, or grass that grows. But it is not anti-Negro to observe that there is anti-Negro prejudice. It is not anti-Semitic to say that there is anti-Semitic prejudice. Anybody who wants to become President begins by disencumbering himself of any positions or associations which he believes are net liabilities.

Senator Muskie counts on getting the Negro vote to begin with, for no better reason, nor worse one, than that the Democratic Party has for quite a while now won the overwhelming majority of the Negro vote. Acknowledging that that is the way Negroes tend to vote is to acknowledge that a political prejudice will inevitably be stimulated against that particular block.

Racial bias takes off from an ethnic point. If approximately half of the American Negro community voted Republican, and the other half Democratic, there would be a considerable lessening of the prejudice one here discusses.

The most frequently cited data intended to "document" American racial bias as it touches on politics are inconclusive. Congressman Dellums — and others — cite the presence in Congress of a mere 13

black members of the House, and one Senator. Why shouldn't there be — he asks — 50 black Congressmen, and ten Senators, reflecting the population figures?

Because, a) although there are twenty-two million blacks, the black population does not in fact exceed the white population in any single state, or in any cities except Washington, D.C. and Newark, N.J. It is a more significant datum by far that Senator Brooke was overwhelmingly elected from Massachusetts, notwithstanding that only two percent of the population there is Negro.

And, finally, what the commotion is all about is that the Negro in America began behind — way behind. That is the meaning of a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The Negro people's disadvantages, though distinctive, are not unique. A Jew has yet to be nominated for the Presidency, though the Jews are half as numerous as the Negroes. And this notwithstanding that the spectacular Jewish contribution to American civilization is merely suggested by the fact that 30 per cent of the undergraduate body of Harvard is Jewish (my figures are a few years old).

It is not to be anti-Negro to recognize that the same politicians who until a few years ago were afraid to name a Catholic, are still afraid to name a Jew, haven't even considered naming a woman, as a presidential candidate, should cavil at naming a Negro.

SO THAT THE CASE against Senator Muskie had better be made on more substantial grounds. And let those who fret, remind themselves that progress is being made, very fast. I wrote some years ago that I hoped to see a Negro in the White House in 1980. Why 1980? Because it is a symbol for some future time. To say I'd like to see one nominated today, in the hope of being elected tomorrow, would make me, like unto thee, George McGovern, a hypocrite.