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# A Strayed Candidate

By ANTHONY LEWIS

The measure of George McGovern's failure so far as a candidate for President is a poll just taken by Louis Harris. It shows what should be an enormous reservoir of sympathy for the McGovern position on Vietnam: By a majority of 76 per cent to 21, Americans want to bring home "all U.S. military, naval and air forces from Vietnam." But the poll finds:

- By a margin of 46 per cent to 44, people believe that President Nixon has kept his 1968 promise to "end U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war." The favorable percentage has risen from 40 to 46 between April and September, as American bombardment of Indochina has intensified.

- Asked whether they agreed more with McGovern or with Nixon in his "approach to bringing home U.S. troops, naval and air forces," those polled chose Nixon by 51 to 33.

There could hardly be a more devastating comment on Senator McGovern's progress in informing the voters, much less arousing them. The Vietnam war is his issue if anything is. The American public has favored a total withdrawal for years—his position—and that sentiment is at the peak. Yet McGovern evidently has not been able either to identify himself with it effectively or to make the reality of what Nixon is doing in Indochina register.

One has to recognize that Senator McGovern does not have an easy job this election, even on the Vietnam

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## ABROAD AT HOME

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issue. For one thing, he is up against the foremost soothing-syrup salesman of our time. Those who disagree with President Nixon have to say that he has been highly successful in persuading the country that his policy of perpetual war is actually a way out.

It is a country so weary of the subject, moreover, that it is drained of emotional response. A few hundred thousand more Asians killed at a distance, or wounded, or made refugees:

What has it to do with us?

But that is precisely the challenge that any Democratic candidate would have faced in 1972—to dispel the fog of deception and make Americans care again. Can anyone doubt that Robert Kennedy, had he lived, would have made his passion felt across America on the Vietnam issue? That is a demanding comparison, but not unfair; Senator McGovern has rightly considered himself to be carrying on Robert Kennedy's ideas.

There is passion in George McGovern; some of us saw it during the primary campaign. He is famously lacking in the emotional aura, the political presence for which the contemporary word is charisma. But there is something persuasive in his rectitude, his simplicity, his doggedness. Republicans in the highly Republican state of South Dakota learned that over the years, and so did his Democratic competitors for the Presidential nomination.

But the qualities that brought McGovern to this point have somehow faded during the campaign. At least from a distance there is no sense of purpose or drama in what he is doing; it is a scattered and defensive campaign. The President has enormous advantages in money and in an incumbent's ability to make the news, and the Eagleton disaster started McGovern even farther behind. But even with allowances for those handicaps he has failed.

What is it that has gone wrong? Lots of experts have had their say, but the explanation is probably quite simple. In all the efforts to please various sources of advice and interest, we have lost sight of George McGovern. It is ironic when conservative columnists, who used to denounce McGovern as too far from the political center, quote voters as saying he was all right when he spoke his mind but now has become wishy-washy. But it may also be true.

The situation is even more serious for McGovern than a failure to persuade the uncommitted. There is evidence that he is turning off his own supporters. People who feel

strongly about the war and detest the vacuous oiliness of the present Administration are heard to say that they are not going to bother to vote. Maybe that is just talk. But one unquestionably senses in the ranks of Democrats and those who want change in politics a curious remoteness from this election, a detachment that seems to be preparing itself for slaughter.

If Senator McGovern wants to prevent that landslide, he must at a minimum renew the sense of hope and purpose in his natural constituency. That means dramatizing the contrast with the evasion, the gimmickry, the deceit of the other side. It means emphasizing again the quality that he has to offer and that he asks his country to restore in itself: Integrity.

In the British House of Commons after Munich 1938, Arthur Greenwood rose from the Labor benches to talk of the felt shame and anguish. There were shouts in the House—"Speak for the working classes!" But Leopold Amery said across the floor the line that is remembered: "Speak for England." Senator McGovern, speak for America.