

McGovern -- How Wrong He Sounds Now

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Sioux Falls, S.D.

A few months ago, his vision seemed so clear and confident, but now the words have a pitifully hollow ring.

George S. McGovern, the junior senator from a backwater Western state, had just arrived in Miami Beach, Fla., to collect the presidential nomination of the world's oldest political party, the party which his candidacy had changed so much. At the airport, he delivered a lofty manifesto:

"Some have said that we are too blunt in the way that we have presented our proposals. But I think the American people crave blunt and candid discussions of the great issues before this nation.

"Some have said that we have broken too sharply with the status quo, but the fact is that the tides of change are running very deep indeed all across this land."

Change

How wrong it all sounds after the fall. The tides of change were not running as deep as he envisioned. His proposals were not only too blunt, some of them were so clumsily drawn that he abandoned them. If there is a hunger for idealism, George McGovern did not establish himself as a man who would satisfy the craving.

What happened to him? For one thing, he never quite found the proper range as a national candidate — the focus of voice and vision which transmits a man's person and his ideals to the distant audience.

Aboard the Dakota Queen II, the big jet which flew him around America for two months, the operative cliché went like this: If only their candidate could sit down for an hour's conversation in every living room of America, he would surely win. His essential decency would come through, his compassion, his

thoughtfulness, et cetera, et cetera.

Maybe so. The trouble is, there are 200 million people and too many living rooms and the McGovern which so many voters saw was gawky and self-righteous, a virtuous peddler of scary ideas on the evening news.

McGovern started out in politics as a lonely Democrat driving around South Dakota in a station wagon, shaking hands and talking on front porches. Even as the early-bird presidential contender he was a solitary figure, touring college campuses to secure the loyalty of leftward youth who admired his out-front positions on war and amnesty, marijuana and women's rights.

But his best issue was that he told the truth. He said so, all the time. His campaign was open. He did not change his mind for political expediency. People liked that. With incredible good breaks, gaffes by his opponents, arduous personal campaigning, he built momentum. Nobody knocked him for losing New Hampshire, Florida and Illinois. Then he won Wisconsin against the field and nine other primaries and the nomination.

But the personal chemistry which may have been ideal for state-by-state primaries proved to be disastrous for a campaign on the large national stage where openness, consistency and honesty are harder virtues to sustain. McGovern never seemed to grasp that what he took to be an act of candor might translate as indecisiveness or deceit or sloppy thinking.

As the apostle for truthfulness, McGovern paid doubly for this failing, because flip-flops or tactical shifts which other politicians might have sloughed off became chinks in his white knight's armor. McGovern's unique sense of himself complicated it further. He was the son of small-town idealism, blessed with a high-minded vision of what the great world is like, oblivious

to the cynical and ugly. He must have mentioned goodness and decency a million times.

Yet he was also a politician who, faithful to the breed, made tactical maneuvers, trimming his words or concealing his thoughts, testing the wind, calculating. Only McGovern's perception of himself, like the latent hypocrisies of life in a small town, would not permit him to acknowledge these as acceptable techniques of the trade.

In Chicago once, he made some flimsy charges about Republican bribery and offered no evidence to support them. When reporters pressed him and suggested he was acting like Joe McCarthy, McGovern, answered righteously: "The difference is that this is the truth."

Garry Wills, the columnist, wrote a harsh but perceptive analysis: "He does what he does because it is right and it is right because he does it. He cannot lie about this, because he wouldn't know he was lying."

Even so, McGovern's campaign staff argues with considerable force that events did them in, circumstances beyond their control, not the candidate's performance.

For instance, if Arthur Bremmer had not met up with George Wallace at that shopping center in Laurel, Md., Wallace as a third-party candidate might have received millions of the votes which defecting Democrats gave to President Nixon.

Muskie

According to another line of wishful-thinking, if Senator Edmund Muskie had withdrawn early and endorsed McGovern (as some of his advisers thought he would do), the convention hassles could have been avoided. Party solidarity would have been helped. Muskie might have been chosen as the vice presidential nominee first off.

And Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri would not have been chosen. More than anything else, the Eagleton affair set the public impression of McGovern — untruthful, weak-willed, calculating — that was the very opposite of all he tried to convey about himself.

In hindsight, it was probably a no-win situation for him. If he kept Eagleton as his running mate, legitimate questions about the vice presidential nominee's mental health would have persisted. But when McGovern dropped him, he did in a way that seemed brutal to many.

With some validity, McGovern could insist afterwards that his errors in the Eagleton business were "mistakes of the heart." But that does not really explain to voters how he could be "1000 per cent" behind Eagleton one day, then begin pushing him off the bridge the next.

Again, the candidate did not grasp how to create the illusion of leadership for people who would never get to meet him, over a backfence or in a church basement. They need reasons to trust a man who is going to hold the enormous power of the White House. Instead, McGovern unwittingly played villain in a great national drama.

Confronted with this new handicap and a new running mate whom he barely knew, McGovern lost the confident voice that had guided him through the spring. His candidacy always required that he balance himself between the new and old elements of the Democratic party but, as he shifted to the bread and butter themes which usually elect Democratic presidents, he was not especially convincing.

The absence of a dynamic personality, a virtue in the primaries when the product was credibility, became a burden that strained his vocal cords in the general election. Raised in rural simplicity, he did not speak the language in an ethnic ward in Brooklyn or a black neighborhood in Milwaukee.

That's what politics is all about. But it's because you know at that moment that a great deal is expected of you. You really do stand alone in a sense.

"Sometimes when you're in the largest crowds, you feel most alone," McGovern told an interviewer once. "It isn't that you're afraid of the crowd or that you can't