

The Importance Of Being A Landslide Loser

By George McGovern

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REFLECTING ON THE MEANING of the last presidential election, I have decided "at this point in time" that Mr. Nixon's landslide victory and my overwhelming defeat will probably prove to be of greater value to the nation than would the victory my supporters and I worked so hard to achieve. I think history may demonstrate that it was not only important that Mr. Nixon win and that I lose, but that the margin should be of stunning proportions.

We are moving toward the 200th anniversary of our nation in 1976. This should be a time for rediscovering and revitalizing the ideals that provide the intellectual and moral underpinning of our society and our system of self-government. And after months of trying to sort through the debris of the November defeat, I have about concluded that the shattering Nixon landslide, and the even more shattering exposure of the corruption that surrounded him, have done more than I could have done in victory to awaken the nation to what Henry Adams called the "degradation of the democratic dogma."

This is not a comfortable conclusion for a self-confident—some would say self-righteous—politician to reach. It takes a period of physical and spiritual rejuvenation, plus a few tears and an occasional outburst of bitter anguish, to recover from a presidential defeat. It is especially painful to be overwhelmed by an opponent whose ad-

ministration one has repeatedly described as "the most corrupt in American history."

But, even before we receive the verdicts of Sen. Sam Ervin, special prosecutor Archibald Cox and Judge John Sirica, let me argue history's case in support of the verdict of Nov. 7, 1972.

Ends and Means

FIRST, THE REELECTION of Mr. Nixon, followed so quickly by the Watergate revelations, has compelled the country to re-examine the reality of our electoral process.

Is it possible for a presidential incumbent to so manipulate events and our resulting emotions that he is virtually unbeatable? Is the power and prestige of the White House so great that, when harnessed cleverly for political purposes, only calamitous depression or obvious catastrophe can prevent "four more years"? What are we to say of a presidential team that is so desperate to win that the team manager—the former attorney general of the United States—engages the following dialogue on worldwide television:

Sen. Talmadge: "Am I to understand from your response that you placed the expediency of the next election above your responsibility . . . to advise the President of the peril that surrounded him? Here was the deputy campaign director involved, here were his two closest associates in his office involved, all around him were people involved in crime . . . and you deliberately

refused to tell him that. Would you state that the expediency of the election was more important than that?"

Former Attorney General Mitchell: "Senator, I think you have put it exactly correct. In my mind, the reelection of Richard Nixon, compared with what was available on the other side, was so much more important that I put it in just that context."

Or consider these words by Egil Krogh, White House aide and campaign lieutenant: "Anyone who opposes us, we'll destroy. As a matter of fact, anyone who doesn't support us, we'll destroy."

Who could better state the shabby doctrine of "the end justifies the means"—even when those means include burglarizing the private files of an opponent, stealing the medical records of a private citizen with the help of borrowed CIA equipment, perverting the FBI, wiretapping telephones, secretly taping the words of everyone who speaks to the President in person or by phone, hiring obnoxious demonstrators to pose as supporters of the other side, repeatedly and flagrantly violating the campaign finance laws, forging documents to defame a dead President and his surviving brother, disrupting and discrediting citizens who seek honest political debate — and so on, ad nauseam, as each week adds new shame to a list of abuses so shocking that nothing new seems to shock us anymore.

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All of these sordid practices are now unfolding in the Watergate investigation. They are forcing us to face the corrupting of our political process—an examination I was unable to provoke effectively for most of my fellow citizens in 1972. Watching the high and mighty who so arrogantly engineered Mr. Nixon's re-election now humbled by their own testimony, I have been struck that such humiliation would have looked like a graceless vendetta had it been executed in the wake of a Democratic presidential victory. It is much better to have the palace guard hang each other while the king is still on the throne. (It is perhaps no accident that John Mitchell's pet phrase before the Ervin committee—"et cetera, et cetera, et cetera"—derives from the musical "The King and I.")

I have also wondered whether all the facts could ever have come out under a Democratic administration. Would Judge Sirica have been as determined to break the silence of the defendants? Would John Dean, "private citizen," have been placed in a position where he felt he had to cooperate? Would L. Patrick Gray have been before a congressional committee for any purpose—let alone confirmation hearings—to confess that Dean "probably lied?" How much of the documentary evidence now in dispute would have been carted off to San Clemente, to be secreted or even shredded and never seen again? Would The Washington Post have continued to pursue the case without an administration that thumbed its nose at the press? And without an administration that thumbed its nose at Congress, would a bipartisan Ervin committee have been probable or even possible?

The unraveling of the whole White House tangle of involvement has come about largely by a series of fortuitous events, many of them unlikely in a different political context. Without these events, the cover-up might have continued indefinitely, even if a Democratic administration vigorously pursued the truth.

Campaign Reform

SECOND, THE REEXAMINATION of our electoral reality provoked by the juxtaposition of the Nixon landslide and the Watergate expose may lead to a reassertion of our political ideals.

In the wake of Watergate may come more honest and thorough campaign reform than in the aftermath of a successful presidential campaign which stood for such reform. I suspect that after viewing the abuses of the past, voters in the future will insist on full and open debate between the candidates and on frequent, no-holds-barred press conferences for all candidates, and especially the president. And I suspect the Congress will respond to the fact that Watergate happened with legislation to assure that Watergate never happens again. Today the prospects for further restrictions on private campaign



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financing, full disclosure of the personal finances of candidates, and public finance of all federal campaigns seem to me better than ever—and even better than if a new Democratic administration had urged such steps in early 1973. We did urge them in 1972, but it took the Nixon landslide and the Watergate expose to make the point.

But the reassertion of our political ideals requires more than the reform of our electoral process. If Watergate has its proper result, we will all come to recognize again the central place of certain principles in our society. The shock of this scandal after the landslide victory of those who created or concealed it may yet serve to call the nation home to its founding ideals.

I succeeded in scaring—or boring—much of the citizenry with such a call last year. But as Adlai Stevenson reminded us 20 years ago: “There are no gains without pains.” The historian, G. M. Trevelyan, put it even better: “Liberty is harder to maintain than to obtain.”

Self-government is as hard as well as a happy process; life is less demanding, if also less satisfying, under a monarch. It is easier for the Congress to assume that the President has better information and is therefore better qualified to make the tough decisions.

If those decisions are controversial, it is more convenient that they be made and executed in secret—in the name of national security—so that the rest of us can avoid the discomfort of thinking and the political hazards of assuming responsibility.

This, of course, is not what the Constitution requires. And, at long last, the shame of Watergate may stir us enough to regain our constitutional system of checks and balances and to reverse the disastrous drift toward executive secrecy and presidential monarchy.

A Sense of Perspective

THIRD, THE CONJUNCTION of the Nixon landslide and the Watergate scandal may return an essential sense of perspective to our public debate.

I am painfully aware of my own errors of judgment in 1972. They have been so thoroughly publicized that they scarcely need another listing, but here are a few: mishandling the Eagleton affair; venturing into the complex field of welfare reform without a cost analysis chart; permitting the convention managers to bring me on for my acceptance speech at 3 a.m.; failing to develop and constantly assess a general election strategy after winning the presidential nomination—

The Benefits of Losing Big

a strategy that included clear lines of staff responsibility and the best use of my own time and talent.

Running a presidential campaign—even without a bad break like the Eagleton incident—has become so complicated that no candidate can avoid serious mistakes the first time over the course. We made fewer mistakes in the bid for the nomination than the dozen or more contenders we defeated. Then we made too many mistakes in the fall. But few people will contend anymore that they were more critical to the country than the issues we tried to discuss, with so little success, and without a real response from the other side.

We know those issues today; we cannot escape them now. Men who stood at the President's side now stand accused by federal prosecutors. The President claims a presumption of innocence, while his actions invite an assumption of guilt. And we confront not only a shocking corruption, but a spreading chaos. The economy is in disarray. The once universally respected dollar is in rapid decline. The Congress has had to bring the administration kicking and struggling out of Indochina. The arms budget is up and domestic programs are down. An energy crisis is upon us. Incredibly, we are running out

of food. And special favors still flow to the few. Despite the President's apparent determination to do more than "wallow in Watergate," it is becoming more and more apparent that an administration that proved so competent at conniving to win the election is not truly competent to govern the nation.

Yet most of the shortcomings were as real last year as they are now—and they should have been the real issues, not just in 1973, but in 1972. Yet perhaps something like the Nixon victory and the Watergate scandal together were needed to redirect our focus to the questions that should be important in any national campaign.

"Through a Glass Clearly"

IN COMING YEARS, it may be that all of the press will follow the example of some of the press last year and concentrate on events truly vital to the direction of the country. In 1972, too much of the media seemed more fascinated with the Eagleton trouble than the Watergate tragedy. There were awkward errors made in full public view in resolving the vice presidential matter, but they never included anything illegal or anything which threatened our democracy.

The ITT deal, the dairy deal, the carpet deal, the wheat deal, the mishandling of campaign funds—this pattern of corruption and incompetence should have moved press and people alike far more than the occasional and inevitable errors of an open campaign. I hope that in the future the public, the reporters, and the commentators will be more concerned with central issues and less concerned with what is irrelevant, peripheral or secondary in importance. We did reelect the President; we are mired in the wallow of Watergate; and probably nothing else could have so sharply refocused our perspective.

I believe there were great gains that came from the pain of defeat in 1972. We proved a campaign could be honestly financed. We reaffirmed that a campaign could be open in its conduct and decent in its motivation. We made the Democratic Party a place for people as well as politicians. And perhaps in losing we gained the greatest victory of all—that Americans now perceive, far better than a new President could have persuaded them, what is precious about our principles and what we must do to preserve them. The nation now sees itself through the prism of Watergate and the Nixon landslide; at last, perhaps, we see through a glass clearly.

Because of all this it is possible that by 1976, the 200th anniversary of America's birth, there will be a true rebirth of patriotism; that we will not only know our ideals but live them; that democracy may once again become a conviction we keep and not just a description we apply to ourselves. And if the McGovern campaign advanced that hope, even in defeat, then, as I said on election night last November, "every minute and every hour and every bone-crushing effort . . . was worth the entire sacrifice."