

McGovern Beats Nixon

How the South Dakota senator remade the Right

By Daniel McCarthy

GEORGE MCGOVERN is enjoying a renaissance. The 86-year-old ex-senator best known for losing the 1972 presidential election in an avalanche—he carried only one state, Massachusetts—won new friends among libertarians last spring with two startlingly laissez-faire op-eds in the *Wall Street Journal*. He'll receive further attention in January when Times Books publishes his *Abraham Lincoln*, the latest installment in the Sean Wilentz-edited American Presidents series. But sweetest of all for the senator from Mitchell, South Dakota, in November he finally came back to win the White House—or so you might think.

Republicans had a hard time distinguishing Barack Obama from the Democrat Nixon trounced 36 years earlier. Writing at *National Review Online*, Victor Davis Hanson christened the Illinois senator, “the Second Coming of McGovern.” In *Commentary*, Joshua Muravchik warned that Obama “comes to us from a background farther to the Left than any presidential nominee since McGovern, or perhaps ever.” His associates certainly seemed to come straight out of the McGovern bestiary: conservatives pounced on the opportunity to tie Obama to the New Left (via Bill Ayers) and black radicalism (via Rev. Jeremiah Wright). Among liberals, Hillary Clinton supporter Harold Ickes and the *New Republic's* John Judis also ventured comparisons between the 1972 and 2008 Democratic nominees.

And not without reason: Obama's primary base of students, blacks, and cultural leftists bore a striking resemblance to the McGovern coalition of yesteryear.

But for conservative Republicans, the demographic parallels were merely lagniappe—since for them every Democratic leader, no matter how Southern, how pro-war, how middle-of-the-road, is really a McGovernite. Indeed, for nearly 40 years the conservative movement has defined itself in opposition to the Democratic standard-bearer of 1972. Anti-McGovernism has come to play for the Right the unifying role that anticommunism once played, much to the detriment of older principles such as limited government, fiscal continence, and prudence in foreign policy.

That Republicans prefer to run against McGovern no matter whom the Democrats nominate is understandable enough. Nixon's victory against the South Dakotan was a blowout of historic proportions. The Democrat received just 37.5 percent of the popular vote to Nixon's 60.7 percent. The only electors McGovern won, besides those of Massachusetts, came from Washington, D.C. Even Walter Mondale performed better against Reagan in 1984. (Though not by much.) What's more, McGovern's nomination confirmed, in fact and symbolically, the hard Left's takeover of the Democratic Party and the shattering of the New Deal coalition of Southern conservatives, blacks, and working-class whites. The Republican playbook ever since has relied on securing the South while making whatever inroads are possible among blue-collar workers—the “hardhats” of the Nixon era, the Reagan Democrats, and of course Joe the Plumber.

On the other side of the ledger are Democratic “elites” with a small but rad-

ical base of “college-educated suburbanites, blacks, and liberated women, in addition to young people,” in the words of *Why the Democrats Are Blue* author Mark Stricherz. McGovern, a minister's son, a World War II combat veteran—he flew 35 B-24 missions over enemy territory, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross—and scandal-free family man might have seemed an unlikely paladin for hippies and feminists, even if, as George Will notes, he is one of only two major-party presidential nominees to hold a Ph.D. (The other was Woodrow Wilson.) But what drove the countercultural Left to this unprepossessing South Dakotan was his unflinching opposition to the Vietnam War. He voted against sending U.S. troops to Indochina as early as 1963. In 1970, he sponsored an amendment with Republican Mark Hatfield to bring home all U.S. troops from Vietnam within a year. Quoting Edmund Burke—“A conscientious man would be cautious how he dealt in blood”—he told his colleagues the day of the vote:

Every Senator in this chamber is partly responsible for sending 50,000 young Americans to an early grave. This chamber reeks of blood. Every Senator here is partly responsible for that human wreckage at Walter Reed and Bethesda Naval and all across our land—young men without legs, or arms, or genitals, or faces or hopes. ... [W]e are responsible for those young men and their lives and their hopes. And if we do not end this damnable war those young men will some day curse us

for our pitiful willingness to let the Executive carry the burden that the Constitution places on us.

Little more than a year later, he was running for president on a platform of ending the war, slashing the military budget, reforming the tax code, and offering Americans a federally guaranteed annual income. (A bad idea, to be sure—but not so different from Milton Friedman’s “negative income tax,” a notion favored by Nixon.) To conservatives like *National Review* publisher Bill Rusher, “His original foreign policy was essentially a global bug-out, belatedly modified to provide for the all-out defense of Israel.” As McGovern explained, “I don’t like communism, but I don’t think we have any great obligation to save the world from it.”

This was sharp break with the Cold War liberalism of Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson. Yet the McGovern revolution—as it seemed—never remade the Left as thoroughly as the reaction against him reshaped the Right. Famously, the most ardent supporters of Washington Sen. Scoop Jackson, one of McGovern’s many rivals for the 1972 nomination, deserted the party to become the original neoconservatives. McGovern’s victory, Irving Kristol recalled, “sent us ... a message that we were now off the liberal spectrum and that the Democratic party no longer had room for the likes of us.” Kristol and company were anti-Left and anti-peacenik, but they never embraced the old Goldwaterite goals of curbing the welfare state. They supplied the Right with a new intelligentsia, in the process transforming conservatism.

The neoconservatives were chiefs without braves. But the McGovern revolution also gave Republicans a new grassroots base. In ’72, Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott (R-Tenn.) described McGovern as the “triple-A candidate—acid,

amnesty, and abortion.” The “culture war” had begun before that. Until McGovern, however, that war had been fought within the Democratic Party—literally, in the case of the bloody clashes between Mayor Daley’s police and New Left protestors at the 1968 Chicago convention. McGovern’s nomination finally made the culture war a partisan issue, which Republican activists such as Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie were quick to capitalize upon. Their efforts to mobilize evangelicals for the culture war gave rise to the modern Religious Right. Weyrich, in fact, inadvertently named what became the most prominent Christian conservative group when he told a Lynchburg-based televangelist, “Out there is what one might call a moral majority.”

Rev. Jerry Falwell liked the ring of that. His Moral Majority was by no means the only grassroots organization Weyrich, Viguerie, and their allies had a hand in creating, however. Another, the National Conservative Political Action Committee, took aim at liberal senators and congressmen from conservative districts. One of the first scalps NCPAC collected in November 1980 was that of George McGovern.

At first, the elite neoconservatives and the grassroots New Right had little in common with one another or with the older Goldwaterite conservatives. Irving Kristol acknowledged as much in a 1995 essay, “America’s ‘Exceptional Conservatism,’” which contrasted the “antisocialist, anti-Communist, antistatist” conservatives of old with the neoconservatives and Religious Right. All were anticommunist, but anticommunism was no longer the binding force that it had been at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. Anti-McGovernism, however, would do the trick. The politics of sex, drugs, and war—if not exactly acid, amnesty, and abortion—would define the new conservatism.

The Republican establishment was slow to adopt these issues. Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush had no passion for them. Even Ronald Reagan paid more lip service than fealty to the new priorities of the Right: he had come of age with an earlier anticommunist and libertarian brand of conservatism. But in the 1990s, Republicans embraced anti-McGovernism with ardor. Bill Clinton, an unremarkable Southern governor and keen militarist, looked to the 1990s Right like another McGovern. “From a chicken in every pot,” joked right-wing radio talkers, “to a chicken on pot”—a reference to Clinton’s draft-dodging and drug-using. Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich tagged administration officials “countercultural McGoverniks.”

There were McGoverniks aplenty in the Clinton White House, including the president himself, who in his law-school days had campaigned for McGovern in Texas. And the Clintonites were every bit as beholden to the social Left as their critics maintained—as shown by the president’s commitment to abortion rights and early attempt to end the ban on homosexuals serving in the military. Yet the Republicans’ anti-McGovernite rhetoric disguised a retrenchment on the Right: with the influx of neoconservative intellectuals, official conservatism began honoring pre-McGovern liberal Democrats as heroes. In 1956, *National Review* considered Republican Dwight Eisenhower insufficiently conservative to merit endorsement. By 2008, *National Review Online* thought Harry S. Truman a model for George W. Bush—and meant that as a compliment. “Hopeful conservatives keep comparing Bush to Truman,” wrote Fred Schwartz, the magazine’s deputy managing editor.

If modern Democrats—Zell Miller and Joseph Lieberman aside—were countercultural McGoverniks, old liberals like Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John F. Kennedy were now

conservatives. And if this adjustment entailed conservatives making peace with the welfare state and Cold War liberalism, so much the better for right-wing social democrats like Irving Kristol, whose “chosen enemy,” he avowed, “was contemporary [McGovern-style] liberalism, not socialism or statism.” As for the social conservatives who flocked to the GOP, Kristol noted that economics and limited government were not their foremost concerns. They came to the conservative movement innocent of economics and political philosophy—and untutored in foreign policy as well. “Only neoconservatives can really speak to them in the language of moral values,” Kristol insisted.

Throughout the 1990s, McGovern remained a touchstone for the culture war. After 9/11, he again became a symbol in a real war. “The Dems are still the party of George McGovern, and for them it’s still 1968,” Jed Babbin wrote in a 2003 column about the Iraq War. Notably, although McGovern was not the most prominent antiwar Democrat in ’68—that distinction belonged to Minnesota Sen. Eugene McCarthy—Babbin still chose him as the benchmark of the antiwar Left. McCarthy, after all, had fallen short of his party’s nomination and could hardly serve as synecdoche for all Democrats.

For 30 years, Republicans, neoconservatives, and liberal hawks have cultivated the myth of the McGovern Party: weak on defense, ineluctably opposed to Middle American values, the party of peaceniks and perverts. Not only has this narrative distorted the Right by allowing anyone starboard of McGovern to set himself up as a conservative, it has also led Republicans to misunderstand their enemy. Paula and Monica notwithstanding, Bill Clinton was less interested in sex than in NAFTA-style managed trade. And far from being a peacenik, Clinton led the country into military actions in Haiti, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq,

Kosovo, Serbia, and a plethora of other places. Clinton was no more a McGovern-style left-winger than George W. Bush was a Goldwater-style right-winger.

The Democrats have not nominated a McGovernite since McGovern himself. The senator’s understudy and 1972 campaign manager, Gary Hart, lost the 1984 nomination to Hubert Humphrey’s protégé, Walter Mondale. Left-wingers such as Jerry Brown and Dennis Kucinich have not fared as well in today’s Democratic Party as Eugene McCarthy did in the Johnson-Humphrey party of ’68. Both Jimmy Carter and Michael Dukakis were, by the standards of their party, moderate governors. Even John Kerry, a celebrity of the Vietnam-era antiwar movement, voted for the Iraq War in the Senate and didn’t dare run as a McGovernite in 2004.

Though the party’s social liberals—feminists, abortion supporters, and gay-rights activists—have indeed consolidated their power, they often did so in alliance with the party’s right wing: the pro-business, Southern-accented Democratic Leadership Council. It was a DLC-run party that denied antiabortion Gov. Robert Casey of Pennsylvania a speaking slot at the 1992 Democratic convention. McGovern, on the other hand, was the last Democratic presidential nominee to select a pro-life running mate. (In fact, he chose two: Missouri Sen. Thomas Eagleton, who withdrew from the ticket when his history of psychiatric treatment came to light, and Peace Corps founder Sargent Shriver. McGovern’s own position was that abortion was a matter properly left to the states.) While the social Left worked out a *modus vivendi* with the DLC, the antiwar Left steadily lost out to humanitarian interventionists. Madeleine Albright, not George McGovern, remains the face of the Democratic Party’s foreign policy.

All indications are that this won’t change under Barack Obama, even if his campaign had similarities to McGovern’s.

He ran on an anti-Iraq War platform and inspired hope among many of the same groups that McGovern did. And like the South Dakotan, he had trouble with white working-class voters during the primaries—indeed, both McGovern and Obama won the Democratic nomination with less than a majority of the votes cast in the primaries and caucuses. McGovern received approximately 68,000 fewer votes than Hubert H. Humphrey; Obama, by the widest possible count, received about 176,000 fewer votes than Hillary Clinton. (Appropriately enough, the protracted Democratic nominating battle of 2008 was itself a legacy of electoral reforms McGovern had helped craft.) When John McCain added Miss Middle America—Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin—to his ticket, pundits Left and Right for a time thought Obama’s fate was sealed. The McGovern coalition couldn’t prevail in a rematch against Nixon’s silent majority.

Yet it did. In the intervening decades, the McGovern coalition had grown. And perhaps more importantly, Middle Americans faced with a choice between the semicompetent socialism of the Left and the spectacularly incompetent socialism of the Republican Right split three ways—between McCain, Obama, and staying home. Mideast war, torture, and national bankruptcy turned out to be even less popular than social liberalism.

If Republicans and liberal hawks were correct in calling Obama a new McGovern, they only succeeded in proving how repellent most Americans, including many conservatives, find today’s GOP. The trouble is, instead of the country getting George McGovern—a temperamental conservative, an anti-militarist, and a committed decentralist—we’re getting Barack Obama, who dreams of another New Deal and picked Hillary Clinton as his chief diplomat. Somehow the neoconservatives and liberal interventionists prevailed again. ■

Spending Our Way to Solvency?

IN A DEEPENING RECESSION, what does the reasonable man do?

Seeing friends laid off, he will get rid of all but essential credit cards, dine at home more often, terminate unnecessary trips to the mall, put off buying a new car, give up the idea of borrowing on the vanishing equity in his house. He will begin to save and start paying down debt.

A company that has reached the limits of its credit and is staring at Chapter 11 will batten down the hatches, lay off nonessential workers, cut employee hours, put off expansion plans, cancel year-end bonuses, and try to ride out the storm.

This is the natural behavior of people responsible for others in an economic storm of the magnitude of the category-four hurricane heading our way. Yet to see and hear our government, folks are doing exactly the wrong thing.

For the U.S. government is set to borrow on a colossal scale, unprecedented save in World War II, and take America trillions of dollars deeper in debt to pick up the slack in the economy caused by the rational decisions of individuals and corporations.

The Fed, whose easy-money policy created the housing bubble that has exploded in our faces, is back printing money and shoveling cash into the banks. And though the Bush deficits are said to have been responsible for our troubles, a new Congress and president have advanced a deficits-be-damned, full-spending-ahead policy.

On top of Bush's \$455 billion deficit and hundreds of billions in bailouts for AIG, Bear Stearns, Fannie, Freddie, and Citigroup, Obama is talking up a new stimulus package of \$500 billion to \$1 trillion.

Our governors and mayors—who, facing deficits, had been cutting back—

have now reversed field and are demanding to follow the federal formula.

When Obama arrived at the National Governors Association Conference in Philadelphia, they pounced. Led by Pennsylvania's Ed Rendell, they handed Barack a bill: \$138 billion. The governors want U.S. taxpayers to relieve them of what American families face: the need to cut spending, pay down debt, make sacrifices, take pain, and live within their means.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the mayors have now followed the governors' lead, declaring they have 4,100 projects "ready to go," which they want U.S. taxpayers to fund.

What are these projects? Under the ever-popular rubric "infrastructure," they include roads, bridges, schools, and public buildings. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger says he has \$28 billion worth "ready to go," which he would like folks in the other 49 states to fund.

Now historically, bridges, highways, roads, and public buildings have been regarded as pork. In the campaign, they were "earmarks"—payoffs for powerful constituents, a form of political corruption that reformers like Obama and John McCain were going to end.

Now, it seems, earmarks are our salvation. Why are governments at every level doing this?

Because government believes that the restoration of economic health requires us to act against our natural instincts in a recession and start buying and financing new homes and cars and get back to the malls, lest this Christmas season become a bummer for retailers.

After all, 70 percent of our gross domestic product is now based on consumption, though Americans in recent years have had a savings rate of zero.

The disconnect between the instincts of average citizens and the policies of government could not be greater. Governments want us to act prodigally, while natural instincts and inclinations are telling us to act conservatively.

Conservatism and capitalism are giving conflicting signals.

Average Americans are behaving as though in rehab, trying to kick a bad habit of spending more than they earn and borrowing more than they can pay back, while the U.S. government is suggesting that what we really need is to return to the auto showrooms and malls and start spending again, only in radically increased dosages.

Beyond the present recession, questions arise as to whether the U.S. model is sustainable. If government spending were the remedy to recession, why, after Bush's deficits, are we in recession? And if the easy money of Ben Bernanke's Fed is the cure for what ails us, how did we get sick when Alan Greenspan's Fed was conducting a never-ending policy of easy money?

How does it stimulate the private economy to pump hundreds of billions of dollars into consumer checking and credit-card accounts, when more and more of what we consume—from computers to cars to clothes—isn't even produced in America anymore?

What do conservatives, few of whom have opposed the Obama plans and fewer of whom have called for repeal of Bush's big-spending social programs, believe is the alternative approach to ending the recession and creating a sustainable economy?

For the economy we have seems to be condemned to an ever-deepening and widening cycle of crises, each brought on by the cure for the previous crisis, which is always the same: more government. ■