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Drugs, Attempted Assassinations and Shock Therapy: The 1972 Presidential Election's Influence on the Modern Election Cycle

by Chris Perry

THE 1972 presidential election can be considered unique for a variety of reasons, but the preponderance of scandalous events remains its most striking characteristic. While not as notable or memorable as the Republican Nixon/Watergate legacy, distinctive controversies permeated the Democratic primaries leading up to the national convention. These events not only affected the outcome of the 1972 presidential election, but also served as the impetus for the continuing media scrutiny and the egregious election cycle improprieties that occur on a systematic basis today. More specifically, the focus will be placed on three key incidents that occurred during the process of electing a Democratic nominee to oppose Richard Nixon: the Edmund Muskie/Hunter S. Thompson ibogaine incident, the George Wallace candidacy and assassination attempt, and the choice of Thomas Eagleton as the running mate for George McGovern. As progenitor of the scandal-prone modern election cycle, the 1972 presidential election served as the line of demarcation between mere muckraking and the extensive media scrutiny that exists today.

The 1972 election enigma leaves those studying the contest with several questions. How did the incumbent president, Richard Nixon, win in a landslide? How did the Nixon campaign overcome the specter of Watergate and the unpopular war in Vietnam to defeat the Democrats de-



Richard M. Nixon. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

cisively with 60.7% of the vote?¹ The strengths of President Nixon included a strong foreign policy and a successful economy, yet the problems surrounding his presidency provided an opportune time for the Democratic Party to seize power. In fact, Nixon himself anticipated defeat, expecting that Ted Kennedy would pose a serious threat to his re-election campaign. However, the events that oc-

¹ CQ Press, ed., *Presidential Elections, 1789-2008*, 10th ed. (Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2009), 201.

curred in Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts in July 1969 effectively ended Kennedy's potential run for the White House.² Why did the Democrats fail? A series of unfortunate events derailed the hopes of those eager to seize the presidency. In 1972 the 26th Amendment to the United States Constitution lowered the national voting age to 18 from 21, in large part to give a voice to the young men who fought in Vietnam. This caused a significant change in primary elections, which now lasted four months. While this initially seemed to benefit the Democratic Party, in the end this change adversely affected its success.³ According to Theodore White's chronicle of the campaign *The Making of the President 1972*, "at one time, no less than fifteen Democrats had announced their candidacies for the nomination of 1972, of whom at least twelve took themselves seriously."⁴ Eventually, the field narrowed and four true challengers participated in the race: Edmund Muskie of Maine, George McGovern of South Dakota, Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, and George Wallace of Alabama.⁵ Regrettably for the Democrats, the combination of a mostly popular incumbent president and controversy within their own party spelled doom. The lengthened primary season and the arduous competition to obtain the youth vote created numerous complications that could not be overcome, leaving the 1972 presidential campaign at best a missed opportunity and at worst a complete failure for the Democrats. This moment in time has been referred to as "The last true liberal moment" and "a watershed" that "marked a generational and class upheaval as well as an ideological crusade."⁶ Analysis of the 1972 presidential election indi-



Edmund Sixtus Muskie. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0.

cates that it will be remembered for controversy, scandal, and a dissatisfying conclusion that not only changed the course of history but all presidential elections to follow.

One of the more disturbing occurrences during the 1972 presidential campaign involved two men whose personalities positioned them as polar opposites. Hunter S. Thompson and Edmund Muskie both played a role in one of the most bizarre and outlandish incidents in the annals of presidential politics. The incident involved a drug, ibogaine, which Thompson described as "effective in combating sleep or fatigue and in maintaining alertness...however, an epileptic-like madness can be produced."⁷ The

2 Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Campaigns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 333.

3 Theodore H. White, *The Making of The President 1972* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1973), 74.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Bruce Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment: The McGovern Insurgency*

and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 1.

7 Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*

entire incident originated when Thompson accused Muskie of using the drug. This type of accusation appears to be a first in a presidential election. A journalist accusing a presidential candidate of using illegal drugs had never before occurred and the event caused controversy that deeply affected the presidential election of 1972.

Covering the 1972 campaign as an assignment for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Thompson wrote a series of articles that delineated the election. This resulted in the publication of *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. Thompson practiced “Gonzo Journalism,”⁸ defined as a style of journalism written without claims of objectivity that often includes the reporter as part of the story via a first-person narrative. The word “gonzo” likely originated from Bill Cardozo who edited the *Boston Globe*’s Sunday magazine and accepted several writing projects from Thompson.⁹ An example of Thompson’s gonzo style is apparent in the following passage from *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*:

The phone is ringing again and I can hear Crouse downstairs trying to put them off... Only a lunatic would do this kind of work: twenty-three primaries in five months; stone drunk from dawn till dusk and huge speed-blisters all over my head...Crouse is yelling again. They want more copy. He has sent them all of his stuff on the Wallace shooting, and now they want mine. Those halfwit sons of bitches should subscribe to a wire service; get one of those big AP tickers that spits out fifty words a minute, twenty-

four hours a day....So much for all that. The noise-level downstairs tells me Crouse will not be able to put them off much longer. So now we will start getting serious: First Columbus, Ohio, and then Omaha. But mainly Columbus, only because this thing began- in my head, at least- as a fairly straight and serious account of the Ohio primary.¹⁰

Critics have scathingly referred to Thompson’s work as a “form of fiction”¹¹ and referred to Thompson himself as “a professionally unreliable witness.”¹² While it remains possible to find a pragmatic historical saliency regarding the work of Thompson, it can be treacherous when applied incorrectly. As covered in later sections of this paper, Thompson’s accusation that Muskie used ibogaine exemplifies this perfectly. Disillusioned with politics, Thompson believed that the last hope of a truly utopian culture in the United States had died with Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. He could not hide his disdain for a number of politicians, including Muskie.¹³ Thompson’s caustic style not only victimized Muskie, but also extended to poking fun at Richard Nixon and criticizing Hubert Humphrey’s win in Ohio by saying, “If McGovern had been able to win Ohio with his last-minute, half-organized blitz it would have snapped the psychic spine of the Humphrey campaign...because Hubert had been formidably strong in Ohio, squatting tall in the pocket behind his now-familiar screen of Organized Labor and Old Blacks.”¹⁴ Thompson behaved as the proverbial oil in

⁷2 (New York: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), 133.

⁸ *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*, directed by Alex Gibney (Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD (2008).

⁹ Philip Baruth, “Beyond Realism: William Kennedy on the Surreal and the Unconscious, the Religious, the Sublime, and the Gonzo,” *New England Review* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 116-26.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Fear and Loathing '72*, 186-87.

¹¹ Wayne Booth, “Loathing and Ignorance on the Campaign Trail: 1972,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 12, no. 4 (1973): 10.

¹² Jonathan Raban, “The New Mongrel,” *London Magazine* 13, no. 2 (1973): 100.

¹³ Gibney, *Gonzo*.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Fear and Loathing '72*, 189.

the water of the campaign.

Muskie had served as the vice presidential nominee in 1968 and many political insiders considered him the frontrunner to win the nomination for president heading into the 1972 campaign. In spite of his potential for success, Muskie remained notoriously dismissive of the press and its perceived shortfalls. He also “had a tenden-

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cy to emotional outburst; and an even graver disability- a lawyer-like, ponderous way of dealing with all issues.”¹⁵ Muskie possessed what could be considered archaic ideologies and morality, and once referred to a picketing group of gay liberationists as “a bunch of sodomites.”¹⁶ He refused to cater to them or anyone else for that matter, to be elected president. One can easily see that he provided the perfect foil for Thompson. Muskie, the son of Polish immigrants, left the Maine papermaking town of Rumford to rise all the way to the United States Senate.¹⁷ Though his accomplishments made him successful, he did not represent an imposing figure on the campaign trail. In his monograph of the campaign, *The Liberals’ Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party*, Bruce Miroff states, “Had there been a formidable regular Democrat in the race- if Muskie, for

instance, had been as impressive a figure in the flesh as the pundits dubbed him before the primaries commenced- the reformed rules would have made little difference in the outcome.”¹⁸ The weakness of Muskie as a candidate left him open for a series of jabs and insults sent in his direction by Thompson. In addition, Muskie had co-authored a 1965 senate committee report concerning the conflict in Vietnam, and reached the conclusion that “unremitting pressure in a carefully measured response of the enemy” would be a successful strategy.¹⁹ Such support to continue the conflict in Southeast Asia only fueled Thompson’s negative rhetoric. However, this criticism of Muskie led to Thompson becoming “permanently barred” from attending any Muskie campaign events.²⁰ This restriction served as the impetus for the infamous ibogaine incident.

The headline read, “Big Ed Exposed as Ibogaine Addict” and insinuated that Muskie had become addicted to the psychedelic drug, which he obtained from a mysterious Brazilian doctor.²¹ Thompson based the allegations in this article on a series of incidents in which Muskie behaved erratically. The most famous of these incidents has been termed the “Crying Speech.”²² Muskie made the speech in response to a charge by the conservative publisher of the *Manchester Union Leader* newspaper, William Loeb. Loeb said that Muskie had used ethnic slurs against French-Americans and implied that his wife “took an unladylike pleasure in drinking and telling jokes.”²³ This re-

15 White, *The Making of the President 1972*, 80.

16 Ibid.

17 Theo Lippman Jr. and Donald C. Hansen, *Muskie* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 32.

18 Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment*, 23.

19 Edmund Muskie and M. Mansfield, *The Vietnam Conflict: The substance and the shadow- report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate* (College Park: University of Maryland, 1966), 122.

20 Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72*, 145.

21 Ibid., 143.

22 Elisabeth Goodridge, “Front Runner Ed Muskie’s Tears (or Melted Snow?) Hurt his Presidential Bid,” *U.S. News and World Report*, January 17, 2008: 11.

23 Ibid.

sulted in an incident where Muskie reportedly broke down in tears while attempting to defend himself and his wife during a speech. Though very subjective and likely more folklore than truth, the press seized the crying incident and used it to reinforce Thompson's drug use claims. Thompson's article shows in great detail how Muskie's declining campaign and erratic behavior shared similarities to what might result from the abuse of the drug ibogaine. While the article and incident seemed completely surreal, Thompson attempted to make it clear that no one should take any of it seriously and stated, "We can only speculate on this" and "we were never able to confirm this."²⁴ Unfortunately for Muskie, the press did nothing to investigate the drug use rumor and the accusation hung over the campaign like the grim reaper. Eventually the combination of innuendo and Muskie's odd behavior brought his once promising campaign to an end. George McGovern's campaign manager, Gary Hart, summed up the Muskie campaign extremely well with the following passage from his chronicle of the McGovern campaign *Right from the Start*:

If one should major in political irony, then the Muskie campaign must be looked to as a classic study. Post-Chappaquidick, he was the odds-on favorite for the

Democratic nomination for more than two and a half years. For months, his nomination, and possible election, had been accepted by many of the media and political wise men as practically foregone. Networks and newsmagazines, watched, read, and respected by millions, had only weeks before projected his convention delegate total in excess of 1,000 delegates.

And yet, dating from the first real test of popular strength, the actual life of his campaign could be placed at only 50 days.²⁵

In the end, Muskie did not appear presidential enough to win the nomination, but Thompson's rumors and innuendo about drug use definitely contributed to his quick exit from the 1972 presidential campaign.

The Muskie/Thompson ibogaine incident represented a true first in the history of presidential elections in the United States. Never before had fictional statements made by a journalist played such a huge role in determining a nomination. Furthermore, this event can be looked upon as the impetus for much of the sensational journalism and media reporting that occurs in every presidential election cycle today. Thompson helped derail the campaign of Muskie, the anointed frontrunner in 1972, with every stroke of his typewriter keys. The change from honest fact-based reporting to its more scandalous counterpart had begun, shifting forever the landscape of presidential politics.

George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, became one of the most polarizing figures in the 1972 presidential election. Wallace, an infamous segregationist, seized every opportunity to further the racial dichotomy that existed in the United States. However, he also campaigned directly against intellectuals and liberal reformers with his own brand of conservative populism. Wallace led the populist movement that had previously carried five states and won almost 14% of the popular vote in the 1968 presidential election. Additionally, he gained a large share of the white working class vote during the Democratic primaries in 1972.²⁶ An example of Wallace's rhetoric can be seen

²⁴ Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, 143-44.

²⁵ Gary Hart, *Right from the Start: A Chronicle of the McGovern Campaign* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times, 1973), 161.

²⁶ CQ Press, *Presidential Elections*, 201.

in a *New York Times* interview in March of 1972 when he stated:

The American people are fed up with the interference of government. They want to be left alone. Once the Democratic party reflected true expressions of the rank and file citizens. They were its heart, the bulk of its strength and vitality. Long ago it became the party of the so-called intelligentsia. Where once it was the party of the people, along the way it lost contact with the working man and the businessman. It has been transformed into a party controlled by intellectual snobs.²⁷

The presence of Wallace in the 1972 presidential election provided an unpredictability that only added to the unique character of this epoch in the United States. Furthermore, the attempt on his life facilitated the unique character and controversial aspects of the 1972 election.

The surprising success of George Wallace in national campaigns fascinated many. A shrewd politician, Wallace knew very well that those who had supported Barry Goldwater and his strategy to “woo disgruntled whites in the old Confederacy” would likely support his campaign.²⁸ Wallace appealed to the middle class white working vote more effectively than his competition; with a favorable voter turnout, he could have a significant influence on the election. Wallace attempted to refine his image by 1971, prior to running for president once again. According to Dan T. Carter, he told the National Press Club “that he had always been a moderate and no longer

believed segregation was desirable. The nation, ought to have non-discrimination in public schools as well as public accommodations open to all.”²⁹ Nevertheless, Wallace still regularly used racial slurs in conversations with his closest advisors. While his public rhetoric had softened he remained affixed to racist ideologies. Most observers, however, believed that Wallace had distanced himself from



Former Governor George Wallace of Alabama at a press conference announcing his presidential candidacy. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0.

his previous “hard-line segregationist views” that had almost cost him an election in his home state of Alabama in 1970.³⁰ This new and improved George Wallace appeared ready to run for the presidency again in 1972.

²⁷ White, *The Making of a President 1972*, 97.

²⁸ Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 326.

²⁹ Ibid., 417.

³⁰ Ibid.

Arthur Bremer, an often-unemployed introverted anti-social product of a dysfunctional family in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, carried out a plot to assassinate George Wallace.³¹ This resulted from his initial intention, stated as follows in his diary, “It is my personal plan to assassinate by pistol either Richard Nixon or George Wallace. I intend to shoot one or the other while he attends a campaign rally for the Wisconsin Primary.”³² Bremer made a statement that would move him to the center of attention, “to do something bold and dramatic, forceful and dynamic, a statement of my manhood for the world to see.”³³ Bremer made the dramatic statement above in Maryland on May 15, 1972. Dressed in dark glasses and patriotic red, white, and blue, he sported a “Wallace in ‘72” campaign button while he showed support through applause even though others in the crowd reacted negatively. Bremer then followed Wallace to a second campaign stop at the Laurel Shopping Center in Laurel, Maryland.³⁴ Dan T. Carter described the scene that followed splendidly in *Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*:

Secret Service agent Nick Zarvos stayed a step ahead as the candidate reached across the rope barricade to touch the hands of smiling followers; Alabama State police captain E.C. Dothard walked a step behind. When they reached the end of the rope barricade and began moving back toward the cars, Arthur Bremer—partially shielded by a middle-aged couple in the front row—

shouted: “Hey, George, let me shake hands with you!” Wallace turned in the direction of the voice and extended his hand. Less than three feet away, Bremer began firing. One bullet ripped through Wallace’s forearm and shoulder; another entered his right abdomen and stomach, while a third bullet pierced his right rib cage and lodged in his spine.³⁵

According to Carter, pandemonium reigned and “The next twenty seconds, recorded by an alert television cameraman, were a chaotic replay of a scene familiar to Americans in the 1960s: the assassin wrestled to the ground, the shouts of the bystanders, the screams, first of fear and then of outrage.”³⁶ Bremer had accomplished what he set out to do, and the presidential campaign of 1972 once again moved to the forefront of the minds of the American public for reasons other than politics. The Wallace campaign regained the attention of the people, but this time at the expense of the candidate himself. Wallace ended up paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life; police quickly arrested Bremer and he remained imprisoned until his release on November 9, 2007.³⁷

The aftermath of the assassination attempt of Wallace revealed just how successful his Southern Conservative Populist rhetoric had been. Theodore H. White recorded, “On May 15th, addressing an outdoor rally at Laurel, Maryland, George Wallace was shot by a madman, and thereby eliminated from the campaign. And with that elimination, the re-election of the President was finally, irrevocably, assured.”³⁸ The Wallace campaign had risen

31 Ibid., 419-20.

32 Arthur Bremer, *An Assassin’s Diary* (New York: Pocket Books, 1973), 118.

33 Ibid., 118.

34 Aaron Kraut, “George Wallace’s assassination attempt: FBI agent reflects, 40 years later,” *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2012, accessed on November 1, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

35 Carter, *Politics of Rage*, 437.

36 Carter, *Politics of Rage*, 437.

37 Ben Nuckols, “Wallace shooter to be released,” *USA Today*, August 23, 2007, accessed on November 1, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com>.

38 White, *The Making of the President 1972*, 251.

in the polls and provided a true threat to other Democrats and to President Nixon. The primary election results following the assassination attempt provide evidence of this. Wallace claimed victory in both Maryland and Michigan immediately following the attempt on his life, and no one had anticipated the stunning margin of his victory. In fact, in Michigan Wallace “swept suburban as well as white working-class precincts and racked up a fifty-one percent majority, handily outdistancing George McGovern, who drew only a quarter of the state’s Democratic voters.”³⁹ The crossover vote appears to have been key to Wallace’s success. Many Republicans now voted for Wallace, which became a significant concern for all other candidates – both Republican and Democrat.⁴⁰ When writing about Wallace, Gary Hart stated, “A number of students of modern American politics believe that any chance a Democrat had to defeat Richard Nixon was lost on May 15th. That theory is based on the presumption that the votes Wallace received in 1968, and might have received in 1972, were votes that otherwise would have gone to Nixon.”⁴¹ The veracity of these theories remained less important than the impact that the Wallace campaign and the assassination attempt had not only on the 1972 presidential election, but also on subsequent political campaigns.

Wallace had a significant influence on politics and his assassination attempt left a remarkable impact on the presidential election landscape. The fact that a candidate like Wallace could have such a substantial effect on the 1972 presidential campaign indicates the importance of this particular election cycle. Additionally, the way in

which the attempt on his life played out on television for the world to see offers enormous insight into the presidential politics of today. Unlike the current populace, which stays somewhat detached and disconnected from events like an assassination attempt because of familiarity, an occurrence such as this would have heavily impacted the 1972 populace. This public event significantly influenced the election in 1972 and every election cycle to follow. The fact that news of a politician being accosted in some manner does not shock to our sensibilities today began, at least in part, with Wallace and the 1972 presidential election.

McGovern ascended to the top of the Democratic Party and accepted the party’s nomination for president of the United States in 1972. He had benefitted directly from the failure of other campaigns and won support from the liberal faction of the Democratic Party for his anti-war and progressive ideologies. McGovern believed, “The President of the United States can restore respect for the truth. He can renew this country’s commitment to justice, and he can find the compassion and decency that also live in each American. And that is the search I want to make.”⁴² This generated support from many, and supporters welcomed the campaign as a satisfying and desired change in the presidential politics of the era. McGovern now had to choose his running mate for the campaign for the White House. In his acceptance speech on July 14, 1972 in Miami, he stated, “I crossed the wide Missouri to recommend a running mate of wide vision and deep compassion- Tom Eagleton.”⁴³ Eagleton served as

“ THE EAGLETON AFFAIR
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OF MODERN TIMES.”

39 Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 445.

40 Ibid.

41 Hart, *Right from the Start*, 176.

42 Shirley MacLaine, *McGovern: The Man and His Beliefs* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 13.

43 Aaron Singer, *Campaign Speeches of American Presidential Candidates, 1928-1972* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing,

a United States Senator from the state of Missouri. The choice of Eagleton as the vice presidential nominee caused the demise of the McGovern bid for president. In fact, it could be argued that the choice of Eagleton proved to be one of the largest blunders in the history of presidential elections in the United States. The vetting process failed in the McGovern campaign, costing the candidate dearly in the general election. Media outlets from coast to coast broadcast the personal life and medical problems of the nominee for vice president of the Democratic Party. Never before had a nomination process been so scrutinized as in the 1972 presidential election. The Eagleton affair came to be known as the “greatest campaign fiasco of modern times.”⁴⁴ According to James N. Giglio, “The Eagleton affair has all the elements of a Greek tragedy- it inflicted pain on two decent men and altered their political careers in ways that circumscribed their goals and ambitions. Both George McGovern and Tom Eagleton revealed human frailties because of mistakes in judgement- McGovern by acting impulsively, indecisively, and carelessly and Eagleton by placing ambition ahead of openness and good judgement.”⁴⁵

The process of choosing a running mate in a presidential election requires time and thoroughness, and one misstep can lead to an irreversible setback. Precisely this occurred in the McGovern campaign. Gary Hart acted as campaign manager for McGovern and described Eagleton as “a last minute entry put on primarily because he was Catholic, urban, and an unknown from a border state.”⁴⁶ The campaign considered several high profile candidates, including Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator Walter Mondale,

Mayor Kevin White of Boston, Senator Abraham Ribicoff, and Sargent Shriver. Hart describes the nomination process in the following passage:

From the complete list of 36 or 37, formal nominations were required with justification. The person responsible for raising each name was asked to support it or drop it. Twenty-two names were nominated. Justification arguments were made and countered. Action around the large circular table was quick, concise, blunt, but fair. Sides shifted. Some people thought of arguments in favor of nominees they had previously criticized. Original supporters became critics.

Fairly obvious traditional standards were used; who would bring strength and balance to the ticket? Urban background, labor connections, ethnic or religious factors, ties to the party regulars, ties to the South; standing with minority groups.

Despite the absence of real vetoing blocks in the modern party, who would be alienated by each choice? Personal characteristics: Family, reputation, habits, business dealings, background, peer evaluation. But, most importantly, each candidate was thoroughly scrutinized regarding his ability to govern, to become President.⁴⁷

Hart admitted that his top candidates included Kennedy, Mondale, and White, and when Kennedy and Mondale removed themselves from contention he considered

1976), 408.

44 Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 1.

45 James N. Giglio, “The Eagleton Affair: Thomas Eagleton, George McGovern, and the 1972 Vice Presidential Nomination,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (December 2009): 647-676.

46 Hart, *Right from the Start*, 240.

47 Hart, *Right from the Start*, 239.

White the obvious choice. However, Kennedy appeared less than enthusiastic about White and urged them to consider other names. Hart recalls, "The fact that Kennedy had raised other names, plus whatever else Kennedy had to say, led McGovern to conclude that Kennedy was less than enthusiastic about the White nomination."⁴⁸ McGovern appeared to hold out hope that Kennedy might reconsider his own decision to reject the nomination, but this did not happen. Instead, the field of vice presidential candidates narrowed. They eliminated White. Then Ribicoff declined. A close senatorial friend of McGovern, Gaylord Nelson, also declined. Hart stated, "I could scarcely believe what was happening. I recalled reading accounts of deliberations like this- particularly the confusion surrounding John Kennedy's selection of Lyndon Johnson- and thinking to myself: if I ever get into a situation like that I am going to make sure that the deliberations are careful, thoughtful, and calm. That's no way to make such important decisions. But here it was happening and I was right in the middle of it."⁴⁹ The decision regarding Eagleton hinged on rumors of previous mental illness issues and a potential drinking problem. However, McGovern campaign leadership mistakenly contacted the wrong reporter, which appeared to clear the Senator from Missouri causing him to gain traction in the nomination process. Then, according to Hart, the unlikely and unthinkable happened: "McGovern said: I think I'll go with Tom. The call was placed. And the time-bomb destined to destroy the infant McGovern Presidential candidacy started ticking."⁵⁰ McGovern offered the vice presidency to Eagleton and he eagerly accepted. The decision surprised many, including McGovern's wife Eleanor. In her memoirs *Uphill: A Personal Story*, she stated: "George and I fantasized about what

might have happened if we had been able to sit down together and quietly, privately, lengthily analyze, as we have done for so many years, some of the campaign's crucial decisions- such as the choice of a Vice-Presidential candidate. It was reported that I was openly, out-front opposed when I walked into the suite and George told me that it was going to be a McGovern-Eagleton ticket...I was merely surprised because I had never heard George mention the Missouri Senator as a possibility."⁵¹ This account speaks volumes concerning disbelief surrounding the Eagleton nomination, and the eventual disappointment when considering what might have been. The promise of the all-inclusive "new liberalism"⁵² dominated by intellectuals, people of all races and economic backgrounds, the youth of America, progressives, and feminists began a rapid descent that left many of the supporters of the McGovern campaign wondering what had happened.

Eagleton appeared to be on the fast track politically at the time of the nomination for vice president. He had graduated from Harvard Law and became the youngest circuit attorney, state attorney general, and lieutenant governor in the state of Missouri. Eagleton had developed a strong reputation and distinguished himself through his captivating campaigns. He also presented himself as a proponent of politics similar to those associated with Robert F. Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, and George McGovern. However, he did not support McGovern initially, and many knew that his comfort resided with Muskie.⁵³ In the rather limited vetting process concerning his potential nomination for vice president, Eagleton later claimed that they only asked him one question, "Was there any skel-

48 Ibid., 241.

49 Ibid., 243.

50 Hart, *Right from the Start*, 243.

51 Eleanor McGovern, *Uphill: A Personal Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 186-87.

52 Giglio, "The Eagleton Affair," 648.

53 Giglio, "The Eagleton Affair," 650-51.

etons rattling in your closet that we should know about?”⁵⁴ Eagleton answered no, because he felt that his prior health issues had no bearing on the McGovern campaign. He assumed that their question referred to something, “illegal or immoral, something dirty or filthy, something shameful.”⁵⁵ In 1972, Theodore H. White described some of Eagleton’s medical history and how it affected his service:

Tom Eagleton had, in the past, concealed three serious rounds of mental illness; had, indeed, through his staff, deceived the press of Missouri when he ran for office there. He had been hospitalized three times: once in 1960, after running for Attorney General of Missouri and winning; once during the Christmas holidays of 1964; once more in 1966, out of total nervous exhaustion. He had on two occasions been given electro-shock treatment at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis and the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, but the press had been told he was hospitalized for stomach trouble. The need for concealment was, however, by 1972 long past. Eagleton had learned the limits of the strain he could absorb, had learned, as he said later, “to pace himself,” and he had tucked away the memory of mental illness as completely as the memory of a broken leg. He had performed with distinction in all the offices he had won, and in the Senate, where he had arrived in 1969, he was recognized as a winner. He knew he was capable of action, was healed, full of zest for life.⁵⁶

Or, did the McGovern campaign fail miserably in the investigation of Eagleton’s background? Historians and political scientists have asked these questions for decades. While the probable answer to both is “yes,” most agree that the combination resulted in a colossal failure. The campaign began to realize this when “an anonymous caller had left messages that Eagleton had been hospitalized three times for mental illness and that his treatment had involved electric-shock therapy. The caller also indicated that he had passed the same message to the Knight-Riddler newspapers.”⁵⁷ The identity of the caller to the McGovern campaign headquarters has never been determined, but some claimed that a McGovern supporter tried to warn the candidate of a significant scandal. However, many McGovernites have claimed that Nixon operatives performed the deed.⁵⁸ In light of what occurred later when the Watergate scandal broke and it became known that “the Watergate conspirators hoped to bug Senator George McGovern’s Washington campaign headquarters,” this certainly seems plausible.⁵⁹ Those activities, coupled with the Committee to Re-Elect the President and its intelligence-gathering program, also seem believable.⁶⁰ However, no concrete proof links the Nixon campaign with the anonymous Eagleton phone call – only conjecture. Regardless, the McGovern campaign felt it necessary to distance itself from Eagleton as quickly as possible. These events fascinate those interested because the ensuing controversy and scandal took place within a three-week time frame following the Democratic convention, yet they had a devastating impact on the McGovern campaign. This type of event

Did Eagleton mislead the McGovern campaign?

⁵⁴ Ibid., 653.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ White, *The Making of The President 1972*, 209.

⁵⁷ Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment*, 90.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 90-91.

⁵⁹ United States Senate, *The Final Report of the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities*, Select Committee (Washington, D.C, 1974), 27.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 17.

had never before been witnessed in presidential politics.⁶¹

The aftermath and fallout from the Eagleton affair began at an unorthodox press conference. This moment can be considered the catalyst for the negative views and rapid failure related to the McGovern campaign. McGovern's positive reputation began to plummet following the Eagleton affair and the press conference announcing that he was stepping down as the vice presidential nominee. Bruce Miroff described McGovern as producing "a disastrous new image...both cold blooded opportunist and hapless bungler" following the events involving Eagleton's failed nomination.⁶² Following the election, McGovern told Dick Cavett that the Eagleton affair had been "the saddest part of the campaign."⁶³ "Sad" aptly described



Thomas Francis Eagleton. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0.

the unprecedented press conference. Never before had a nominee for vice president resigned under such odd circumstances after only three weeks. The press conference began with McGovern making short remarks and then introducing Eagleton to make a statement. Eagleton approached the microphone and the surreal event began. He revealed his medical history, including the hospitalization for exhaustion and depression. During the event his hands shook noticeably and he perspired so significantly that his hair and face appeared soaked with water. The uncomfortable nature of the event became etched into the memory of the 1972 voter, and McGovern's approval declined while Eagleton emerged as a sympathetic figure.⁶⁴ The press conference became infamous because of the bizarre nature of this incident, and effectively ended any chance that McGovern had to win the 1972 presidential election. Sargent Shriver replaced Eagleton as the vice presidential nominee for the Democratic Party.

McGovern introduced Eagleton in his acceptance speech for the democratic nomination for President of the United States in Miami, but he had a much different message in his August 5, 1972 speech in Washington D.C. McGovern stated, "Last week, as most of you know, Senator Thomas Eagleton withdrew as the Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee. When I learned of his treatment for mental distress, I hoped that his past afflictions would not be allowed to obscure and dominate the public dialogue."⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the maladies suffered by Eagleton did enter the mainstream media and destroyed any chance the Democrats had of winning in 1972. This moment became the first of many public displays of sorrow and regret by politicians, whether self-inflicted or otherwise. Never again would the personal lives, past indiscretions, legal history, or even medical histories of a politician be considered

⁶¹ Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 89.

⁶² Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 89.

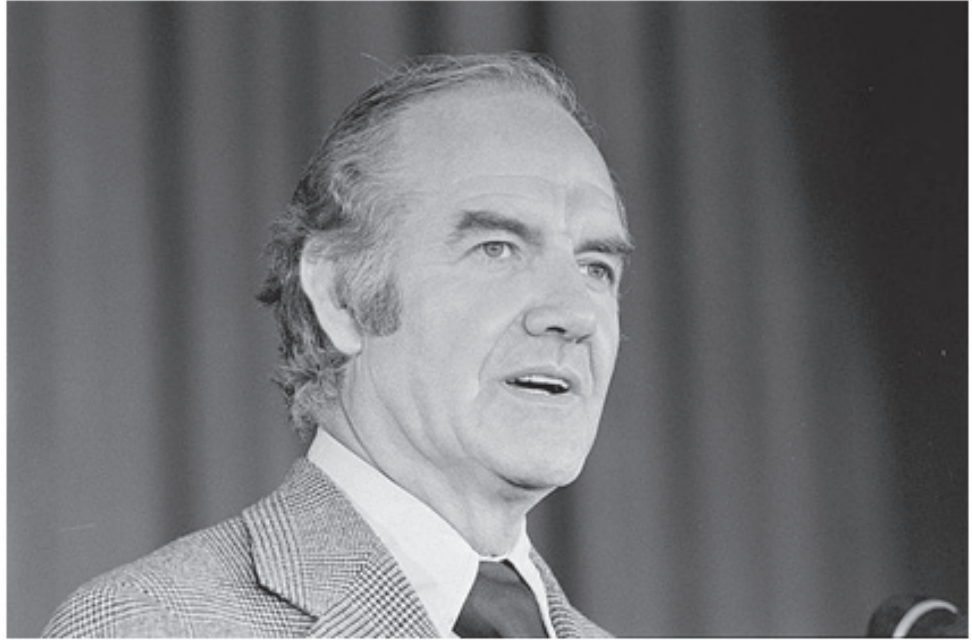
⁶³ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

⁶⁴ Giglio, "The Eagleton Affair," 662-63.

⁶⁵ Singer, *Campaign Speeches*, 413.

off-limits. The long-term effects of the Eagleton affair have been felt in many subsequent election cycles, and the selection of a running mate has not been the same since.

The 1972 presidential election served as the catalyst for the current scandal prone election cycle, and it provides a fascinating study of the interaction between politics and the media. As previously stated, the 1972 election served as both the progenitor of modern election improprieties and controversies, and as the line of demarcation between mere muckraking and the extensive media scrutiny that exists today. Muckraking has been associated with “yellow journalism, narrow partisanship, and sensationalism, or pandering to human instincts...it has been characterized as a splenetic distortion of reality, intended to convey falsehoods...and the phenomenon is specific to the journalism of the United States.”⁶⁶ The evolution of this phenomenon reached a crescendo during the election of 1972. The journalism, while sensational, inserted a dose of reality. The all too real lives of candidates, including their faults and weaknesses, became fodder for reporting to the masses. Controversies, scandal, and violence appeared regularly on the broadcast media and in print journalism. Voters could no longer ignore the comings and goings of candidates in national elections. Instead, they received continuous reports of the outcomes of media scru-



Senator George McGovern, June 30, 1972. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

tiny and egregious election cycle improprieties recounted with impunity. The examination of three key incidents that occurred during the 1972 presidential election makes this especially clear: the Edmund Muskie/Hunter S. Thompson ibogaine incident, the George Wallace candidacy and assassination attempt, and the choice of Thomas Eagleton as the running mate for George McGovern. The election cycle changed significantly after 1972, as did politics in general.

The exceptional nature of the Hunter S. Thomson/Edmund Muskie ibogaine incident demonstrates the power of the media, because never before had a pseudo-journalist accused a U.S. Senator running for president of using an exotic drug. Though ridiculous and without merit, the accusation that Muskie used ibogaine spread quickly via media across the nation. This allegation alone sufficient-

66 John M. Harrison and Harry H. Stein, *Muckraking: Past, Present, and Future* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), 12-13.

ly derailed the Muskie campaign. Hunter S. Thompson effectively ended Muskie's campaign by creating what amounted to a sensational version of journalism referred to as "gonzo" journalism. This "first" in presidential politics reinforces the importance of the 1972 presidential election as the line of demarcation between the differing eras of media involvement in presidential elections and politics in general.

The influence of George Wallace and his brand of populist conservatism remains with us today. The surprising support generated by Wallace in 1972 speaks to the unique nature of the campaign, and the attempt on his life substantiates that presidential politics have become a dangerous business. An attempted assassin in search of fame seeking to take the life of a candidate still occurs today. The popularity of Wallace, his effect on the campaign, and the impact that the assassination attempt had on the outcome of the election demonstrates the distinctiveness of the 1972 political events. The Wallace assassination attempt marks one of the first events of its kind recorded and broadcast live to the world.

The choice of running mate remains extremely important. Generations ago a candidate could safely choose a potential nominee without thoroughly investigating his background, a marked contrast from today. Specifically, George McGovern's selection of Thomas Eagleton led to the downfall of the campaign and dashed the hopes of the Democratic Party. This continues to be salient to all campaigns post-1972. The Eagleton affair had an immeasurable effect on presidential politics. McGovern became the first of many politicians who faced controversies that derailed a campaign and an entire movement.

Prior to 1972, the 1968 presidential election remains the only election in the 20th century that came close to the 1972 presidential election in terms of controversy and legacy. In 1968 many factors produced a similar

changing of the election norms. The election began with the incumbent president, Lyndon Johnson, deciding not to accept the nomination of the Democratic Party. The re-emergence of Richard Nixon onto the political scene after his previous failed campaigns provided a shift in the landscape. The 1968 presidential election also occurred during a year of violence that included the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., subsequent race riots, and the assassination of the former Democratic frontrunner Robert F. Kennedy. Racial unrest prevailed throughout the country and a familiar face mounted a third party campaign. George Wallace ran extremely well in 1968 as that candidate and carried the Deep South. Wallace vocally advocated for racial segregation, and in the racially charged atmosphere of 1968 he provided a controversial and divisive element to the campaign. The widespread opposition to the conflict in Vietnam provided yet another example of controversy, and anti-war protestors attended the 1968 Democratic National Convention. When examining both elections side by side, striking similarities emerge. Though the 1972 election comprised significantly more controversy and led directly to the modern scandal-prone election, it could be argued that the two elections combined formed one defining moment in history. The close proximity in time and the participation of similar players demonstrates that 1968 saw the initiation of change, but 1972 provided the blueprint for what would come later.

The legacy of the 1972 presidential election clearly persists. The preponderance of scandalous events that year changed the landscape of presidential politics, as evidenced by the constant media involvement in politics and the ever-increasing sensational stories that arise from the modern election cycle. The landslide victory by Richard Nixon resulted partially from the controversies generated

by the Democratic Party, and the election provided the impetus for what would come later. One needs to look no further than the players involved. Gary Hart served as the campaign manager for George McGovern and later failed in his own bid for president in 1984 and 1988. During the 1988 campaign, Hart faced a scandal of his own creation – an extramarital affair and accusations of womanizing⁶⁷ – which ended his hopes for the democratic presidential nomination. In addition, a young boyfriend and girlfriend team (Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham) assisted with the McGovern campaign in Texas. In fact, according to Bruce Miroff, “The roots of Bill Clinton’s political network- and of many other politicians, issue advocates, and campaign specialists who continue to shape Democratic and liberal politics in the first decade of the twenty-first century- can be found in the insurgency of 1972. Liberal politics since 1972 cannot be understood apart from the repercussions of the McGovern campaign. It is a key to the enduring identity crisis of Democratic leaders and activists.”⁶⁸ On the other side of the aisle, many historians believe that Ronald Reagan successfully utilized the conservative populist ideology of George Wallace in the 1980s. Reagan became the “spiritual godfather” of the conservative movement, effectively picking up where Wallace left off.⁶⁹ The repercussions and aftermath of 1972 have directly influenced elections that followed and have provided a blueprint for politicians and the media. The importance of the 1972 presidential election and its significance in history cannot be underestimated.

67 Paul Taylor, *See How They Run: Electing the President in an Age of Mediaocracy* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 100-110.

68 Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment*, 3.

69 Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 466.