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A STUDY OF GEORGE McGOVERN'S RHETORICAL STRATEGY
IN HANDLING THE EAGLETON AFFAIR

THESIS

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By

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The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze George McGovern's rhetorical strategies during the three-week period known as the "Eagleton Affair." First, the thesis describes the communications related to the selection of Thomas Eagleton as McGovern's running mate in 1972. Second, it analyzes the communications related to the disclosure of Eagleton's past medical history. Third, it explains McGovern's vacillating rhetorical strategies and the communications which led to Eagleton's withdrawal from the Democratic ticket.

The results of this study show that McGovern's rhetoric reflected indecisiveness, inconsistency, and impulsiveness. The rhetorical errors greatly damaged his credibility as a serious presidential contender.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

On January 18, 1971, George Stanley McGovern announced his candidacy for the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination. The announcement came eighteen months before the Democratic Convention would convene to actually choose its nominee, and the senator from South Dakota was by far the earliest to declare his intentions for the nomination.

McGovern shattered precedent by making the announcement in his home state rather than in Washington where national media coverage would be better. But this campaign was designed to break precedent; so there was no more appropriate way to begin.¹

General consensus at this time showed McGovern to be a long shot for the nomination. He was less well known than most other potential Democratic candidates. A Gallup Poll taken early in 1971 listed McGovern fifth among the possible choices of Democratic voters to lead their party against the Republicans in 1972.²

¹Gordon L. Weil, The Long Shot (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1973), p. 33.

²Weil.

McGovern felt that an early announcement of his intentions was vital to success in attracting supporters and contributions. Once the announcement was made public, a hectic year of campaigning began. McGovern traveled throughout the country, focusing on key states and those holding nationally recognized primaries. He spoke whenever and wherever he was invited. McGovern workers contacted each member of his audiences with a follow-up letter. Many of those solicited agreed to contribute or work in the campaign.

In this way, McGovern and his staff built an organization. In 1971, it was not a national organization; however, the coalition was becoming solid in the "must" states. The groundwork was falling into place, and by early 1972, the campaign was in high gear. The hectic pace had proved helpful--McGovern had gained the local media coverage and exposure to voters that he desperately needed.

With the beginning of the primaries, the early days of 1972 introduced the all-important national media coverage to the campaign. By 1972, primaries had become one of the great drive engines of American politics.

All else in politics, except money, is words--comment, rhetoric, analysis, polls. But a primary victory is a fact. With the lift of such an event, a candidate can compel attention, build votes, change minds.³ It is the underdog's classic route to power in America.

³Theodore H. White, The Making of the President, 1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 92.

The 1972 primaries were held in twenty-two states plus the District of Columbia and spanned the nation in a period of four months. Theodore H. White, in The Making of the President, 1972, referred to primaries as "the physical endurance contest" which "strains them [candidates] to the limit of their nerves and vitality, and the nation sees how they behave under stress."⁴ The twenty-three primaries became a testing ground for the candidates themselves and for the important issues of 1972.

George McGovern had devoted much of 1971 to establishing grassroots organizations in his "must" primary states. He needed the national media coverage granted the primaries to expose himself and his issues to the nation as a viable contender for the Democratic nomination. If he failed to do this, his candidacy was doomed.

Who, then, did McGovern need to defeat in the primaries to show his strength? At one time no less than fifteen Democrats had announced their candidacies for the nomination, but the serious contenders had dwindled to six by early 1972-- namely, Edmund Muskie of Maine, Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, John Lindsay of New York, Henry Jackson of Washington, George Wallace of Alabama, and George McGovern of South Dakota.⁵ Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, perhaps the most commanding

⁴White, p. 91.

⁵White, p. 92.

name in the Democratic Party at this time, had earlier declared his flat refusal to run in 1972.

By May, 1972, Muskie, Jackson, Wallace, and Lindsay were out of contention for the Democratic nomination. The delegate count following the May primaries found McGovern with 505 votes and Humphrey with 294.⁶ Humphrey was the candidate who McGovern had to defeat for McGovern to be assured of the nomination. This showdown came between an old party regular (Humphrey) and a reform candidate (McGovern).

On June 6, 1972, four states, including California with its enormous 271 delegates, held primaries. When asked what his current chances were of receiving the nomination, Humphrey said, "California is the ball game."⁷

The difference in organization for the California primary sharply contrasted the styles of the two Democratic contenders. Since Humphrey exemplified the old party regular, he dealt in structured systems of power "where friendly leaders could deliver what tradition or loyalty had long since packaged-- unions, ethnic blocks, farm groups, big city machines."⁸ McGovern, however, was introducing a new style of politics and carrying it through with amazing success. His style relied on hard work and sincerity, both in himself and in his organization. McGovern's army in California consisted of

⁶Edward W. Knappman, Evan Drossman, and Robert Newman, eds., Campaign 72 (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1972), p. 78.

⁷White, p. 161.

⁸White, p. 162.

10,000 volunteers, walking precincts and ringing doorbells with news of George McGovern--approximately two million homes were visited by primary day.⁹

McGovern won the California primary and went on to amass a much more impressive record than was ever imagined. He moved to within 170 delegate votes of the 1,509 needed to nominate him at the Democratic Convention in July.¹⁰ The Detroit Free Press, in an article written on June 22, 1972, outlined the rise of George McGovern:

Considering that George McGovern came out of nowhere 15 weeks ago and now has the Democratic nomination all but assured, it would seem that he has done at least all that could be expected of a presidential candidate. He won 10 of the 23 primaries he entered, showed an ability to organize and to lead that no one expected, and demonstrated a vote-getting ability unseen outside South Dakota.¹¹

Throughout the eighteen months of campaigning for the nomination, McGovern was introducing himself to the American people. He began the race as a relative unknown and had to prove his worthiness to the voting public. The senator from South Dakota based his campaign on openness and candor and promised to carry that honesty into the White House with his administration. Several of McGovern's early advocates urged that the electorate would see him, in contrast to Richard

⁹White, p. 161.

¹⁰Knappman, Drossman, and Newman, p. 95.

¹¹Knappman, Drossman, and Newman, p. 96.

Nixon, as simple, straightforward and honest.¹² On January 18, 1971, when the senator declared his candidacy, he stated, "The kind of campaign I intend to run will rest on candor and reason."¹³ Throughout the primaries and up to the time of the Democratic Convention, he carried out that campaign promise.

McGovern pledged an end to the war in Vietnam, disclosed political contributions, a more honest tax system, a lower unemployment rate, and opened doors to the White House. He appealed to basic value systems that were nurtured by the desire for that which is right and just. McGovern sought to establish his credibility through displaying values of trustworthiness, sincerity, and candor. This could be perhaps his biggest asset in facing the Republican Administration in November. McGovern supporters believed in the man and what he said. Without such faith, the senator could not rely on his rhetoric or his grassroots organization to work effectively.

George McGovern went on to control the 1972 Democratic Convention and won its nomination with relative ease. In the November general election against Richard M. Nixon, however, he suffered a smashing defeat. Pierre Salinger, an important member of McGovern's campaign staff, described the blows that crippled the senator in his bid for the presidency in a lengthy article for Time. He wrote that the South Dakota

¹²Ernest R. May and Janet Fraser, eds., Campaign '72: The Managers Speak (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 25.

¹³May and Fraser, p. 31.

senator's prime asset had been his credibility, and it was precisely that asset which had been destroyed in the campaign.¹⁴ Salinger went on to indicate he felt the major blow to the campaign was the "Eagleton Affair."¹⁵

In the early morning hours of July 14, 1972, George McGovern made his acceptance address to the Democratic Convention and introduced to the party and nation his choice of a running mate, Senator Thomas F. Eagleton of Missouri. Eleven days later, Senator Eagleton disclosed in a press conference news of his three bouts with nervous exhaustion and fatigue. He further disclosed that during these times, he voluntarily sought psychiatric help. Senator McGovern, standing by his side, fully supported his running mate and insisted that there was no hesitation in his mind concerning Eagleton.¹⁶

Within the three-week existence of the McGovern-Eagleton ticket, George McGovern completely reversed this rhetorical support for his running mate. From a 1,000 percent backing, the senator's support dropped to zero and paved the way for Eagleton's withdrawal.

An overview of the situation revealed that Senator Eagleton left the ticket as a "winner," while McGovern became the "loser." Senator Eagleton did receive a share of the blame for not being candid from the outset, but it was Senator

¹⁴Pierre Salinger, "Four Blows that Crippled McGovern's Campaign," Time, 29 December 1972, p. 72.

¹⁵Salinger.

¹⁶White, p. 269.

McGovern who received the brunt of the blame and definite loss of credibility for the way in which he handled the episode. The senator's complete reversal lost him countless supporters; his image and integrity became tarnished.

McGovern had not been open with Eagleton during the deliberative period, and the media exposed much of this for the public to see.

McGovern made several mistakes in timing. He called a press conference to disclose Senator Eagleton's illness before consulting with advisers; he supported Eagleton 1,000 percent while strong party leaders were seeking his resignation; and, he waited until Eagleton was determined to remain on the ticket before asking him to step down. What was the reasoning behind these ill-timed announcements?

Statement of Problem

McGovern's handling of the "Eagleton Affair" provides an interesting study in the shifting of rhetorical strategy. Rhetorical strategy, used in this context, means the deliberate wording or lack of wording by McGovern to present the various stages of his intentions toward Eagleton. It further suggests the rhetorical plans or methods that McGovern used to achieve his end. The senator, speaking in the framework of a rhetorical situation, organized his rhetoric for the purpose of effecting a change in the knowledge, the understanding, the ideas, the attitudes, and/or the behavior of

potential voters.¹⁷ He employed the rhetoric of persuasion to convince his supporters and potential supporters that he was handling a very sensitive situation in the best way possible. The central question that comes into focus then in analyzing the Eagleton affair must be: Why did George McGovern make the rhetorical decisions he did in this crisis situation?

Purpose of Study

Of all the studies that came out of the 1972 campaign, including Watergate, none is more complex, more tragic, more mysterious than the Eagleton Affair. Months after the election, we still don't know all of the details. . . . Some things we may never know.

But I think we do know what the result of Eagleton's admission was: the Democratic campaign, already in trouble, was wrecked. The issue now became--not Richard Nixon and his policies--but George McGovern and his qualifications to be President.¹⁸

Within the short three-week period known as the "Eagleton Affair," the Democratic ticket suffered a severe setback. McGovern was under careful scrutiny during this time from members of the press and media, political supporters and adversaries, and the American public in general. The purpose of this thesis is to study the shifts in McGovern's rhetorical strategy during this period and to seek an explanation of the role he played in the setback. This will primarily be an analytical study; description will be used as a means to an end in explaining what happened rhetorically.

¹⁷Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 39 (December, 1953), 411.

¹⁸James M. Perry, Us & Them (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1973), p. 184.

Method and Procedure

For an in depth analysis of the rhetorical strategy used in the "Eagleton Affair," this study must go beyond an historical description of the event. It must present the pattern of inconsistency, the steady yielding to the pressure of the situation, as McGovern's rhetorical position completely reversed itself within a matter of days.

This analysis of the "Eagleton Affair" will examine three basic rhetorical situations. First, it will focus on the selection of Eagleton as McGovern's running mate and the presentation of that announcement to the Democratic Convention. Second, it will examine the joint press conference held to disclose Eagleton's three hospitalizations and the rhetorical reaction to that disclosure. Third, it will explore the rhetorical situation surrounding the announcement of Eagleton's withdrawal from the Democratic ticket.

Without doubt, the Eagleton affair was one of the most publicized events of the 1972 campaign. A vast amount of material has been written on it. Since the primary focus of this study will lie in analyzing the shifts in McGovern's rhetorical strategy during this episode, it has been necessary to research the three-week period through all available sources. Newspapers throughout this country and abroad carried daily articles on the McGovern-Eagleton ticket. Five of these newspapers were researched for editorials, press conference excerpts, statements from each of the candidates,

and general information concerning the decline of the ticket. The five newspapers studied were the New York Times, the London Times, the Washington Post, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Many national magazines devoted lengthy coverage to interviews, analysis, and commentary of the Eagleton affair. Articles of the most value to this thesis were located in Time, U. S. News and World Report, Newsweek, Life, Esquire, National Review, and Vital Speeches.

To date, there is no published material specifically analyzing the shifts in McGovern's rhetorical strategy during the "Eagleton Affair." However, several recognized speech scholars have published articles dealing with the 1972 campaign and other focuses of the Eagleton affair. Each of the four articles provided valuable background and supplementary material for this study. The April, 1973 edition of the Quarterly Journal of Speech published two articles related to this thesis: "Electing Time" by Edwin Black and "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis" by Ernest G. Bormann. The Central States Speech Journal published the remaining two supplementary articles. The Winter, 1973 edition of the journal contained "The Eagleton Phenomenon in the 1972 Presidential Campaign: A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Paradox" by John Patton, and the Spring, 1974 edition of the journal contained "The Rhetoric of the Challenger: George Stanley McGovern" by Judith A. Trent and Jimmie D. Trent.

In addition to the many newspaper and magazine articles written on the Eagleton affair, numerous books published on the election year contain detailed chapters on the Eagleton affair. These books--written by McGovern's staff workers, politicians, campaign analysts, and newsmen--each provided different perspectives on the three-week period under study. Taken together, they presented an insight into the reasoning, feelings, and attitudes expressed by McGovern and his advisers as they pondered over the strategy to employ in such a sensitive situation. Books of general value included: The Boys on the Bus by Timothy Crouse, Goodbye, Mr. Christian by Richard Dougherty, The Anderson Papers by Jack Anderson, and Us & Them by James M. Perry. Books of specific value included Right from the Start by Gary Hart, The Long Shot by Gordon Weil, and The Making of the President, 1972 by Theodore White.

CHAPTER II

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE SELECTION OF EAGLETON

In June, 1972, Jules Witcover of the Los Angeles Times inquired into McGovern's thoughts for the vice-presidency if he were to receive the presidential nomination. Gordon Weil, a close adviser to the senator, was forced to admit that McGovern had given little thought to the office. Witcover, who had recently written a book about Spiro Agnew, asked for an interview with McGovern and urged Weil and other staff to attach greater importance to the choice.¹

The conclusion of the primary campaign and the struggle to win the California contest challenge at the convention prevented both McGovern and his staff from devoting much time to the selection of a possible running mate. At the end of June, only Ted Kennedy had really been considered to complement the ticket. Kennedy had been approached several times; however, he refused flatly on each occasion. McGovern clung to the hope that Kennedy would change his mind and, in vain, focused all his vice-presidential plans in that direction.

In order to analyze the selection and announcement of Eagleton as McGovern's running mate, it is necessary to

¹Gordon L. Weil, The Long Shot (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1973), p. 158.

understand the chaos and confusion that hit McGovern and his staff during the week of the Democratic Convention.

When the 1972 Democratic Convention convened on July 10, McGovern and his staff were geared to tackle the one remaining obstacle between them and the nomination, the California challenge. Hubert Humphrey (and labor)--backed by Muskie, Jackson, Wallace, and other marginal candidates--tried a parliamentary maneuver to take away almost half of the California delegates McGovern had won. To defeat the challenge on the convention floor and preserve what appeared to be the margin for nomination, McGovern and his entire staff had to apply all their time and energy to getting delegate support. Not until Humphrey's attack was beaten back at the opening session of the convention on Monday night could McGovern afford the luxury of turning his thoughts to other problems such as the vice-presidency.²

The next two days found the McGovern camp struggling internally to keep their coalition together. Gary Hart, McGovern's campaign manager, explained it this way:

"You don't understand," said Hart, "that our people were accustomed to defeat . . .

"And after they won, they didn't know who the enemy was anymore, so they turned on McGovern--blacks, peace people, Chicanos, women, students, our own organizers. They were seized by a fever, a kind of fear of having their ideals acted out. These were

²Milton Viorst, "Did Tom Eagleton Do Anything Wrong?" Esquire, 79 (January, 1973), 60.

people who were all pulling together twenty-four hours before, and suddenly we were their enemy. It was like the revolution devouring its own."³

McGovern himself compounded the problem. On July 12, he addressed the wives of Vietnam War prisoners and included a promise to keep American military forces in Thailand even after the end of the war. This was entirely contradictory to previous statements indicating a complete withdrawal within ninety days of his inauguration. This apparent reversal of position, whether intentional or not, created doubts in the minds of many followers as to the senator's credibility. A protest formed in the lobby of McGovern's hotel and refused to disband until the candidate himself appeased their grievances. With so many internal problems in the McGovern camp, the task of selecting a vice-presidential candidate was pushed back for later consideration.

McGovern, now exhausted from the unrelenting fast pace of the convention, returned to his hotel room and prepared to watch his nomination via television. Theodore White accurately described the physical and emotional state of McGovern at this time:

Open politics is exhausting, for open passions tire the spirit; the executive mind avoids open politics, for executive decision requires another kind of energy. Thus of all those exhausted at the convention, none could possibly have been more exhausted than George Stanley McGovern, who for three days had been practicing simultaneously the roles of executive, politician,

³Viorst, p. 61.

and saint. The events of the next forty-eight hours, and even more of the next two weeks, can be understood only through the exhaustion of George McGovern.⁴

In the early morning hours of July 13, 1972, George McGovern officially won the nomination of the Democratic Convention. In approximately twenty-four hours, he would address the convention and name his running mate. Although the senator had made a tentative list of choices, at this time he had no idea whom he would select for the number two spot. The man who "showed an ability to organize and to lead"⁵ in the primaries was lacking in the planned organization and leadership necessary at such an important time. Realizing that time had now become a crucial factor, McGovern asked several of his staff to assemble the key members of the camp's leadership, the veterans and the friends, early the next morning to screen vice-presidential names for him to consider.⁶

It is important to note that unlike frontrunners of previous years, Senator McGovern was not beset by an army of senators, governors, and mayors seeking the nod as his running mate. The reason was simple enough. Unlike other frontrunners, McGovern had not had any help during his long, arduous campaign from potential running mates. On the contrary, many of them were conservative or moderate Democrats who were among

⁴Theodore H. White, The Making of the President, 1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 240.

⁵Edward W. Knappman, Evan Drossman, and Robert Newman, eds., Campaign '72 (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1972), p. 96.

⁶White, p. 244.

the hand-wringers predicting a gloomy November for the party. McGovern was able to look about without owing special favors to anyone.⁷

Gary Hart, in his book written on the campaign, called July 13, 1972, "the longest day in a long campaign."⁸ The issue of the day was the selection of a running mate for McGovern. Some twenty-plus people gathered in a downstairs conference room at McGovern's hotel headquarters. All were tired from overwork and celebration, some had had only two or three hours' sleep, a good number were hungover, and others had had only a quick dip in the ocean at dawn to clear their sleep-starved minds.⁹ This was the group given the task of choosing a possible future leader of our country. Most were totally exhausted. The agenda for the morning became impromptu--where was the carefully planned grassroots organization McGovern and his advisers had so carefully constructed in the primaries?

For half an hour the mood was light. Victory was being savored for the first time in the light of day. It was like a group of fraternity boys who had spent most of the night successfully stealing the rival school's mascot.¹⁰ The time was 9:00 a.m.--McGovern had only seven hours to choose the

⁷Paul R. Wieck, "Balancing the Tickets," New Republic, 8 July 1972, p. 15.

⁸Gary Warren Hart, Right from the Start (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Company, 1973), p. 238.

⁹White, p. 258.

¹⁰Hart, p. 238.

man he would have to campaign with, work with, and share the White House with for the next four years if the Democratic ticket won the November election. Leaving such an important decision to such a late date proved to be a costly mistake in timing.

Finally, after several rounds of coffee, the group became serious in their search for vice-presidential potentials. The consensus was to seek a running mate who was compatible with McGovern's views and could help patch up strained relations with party regulars. Approximately two dozen names were discussed by the group present, but the list was narrowed to six or seven by the time it reached McGovern at 11:30 a.m. It was now four and one-half hours before the filing deadline, and McGovern had just received a list of names to consider. Those in contention for the position of McGovern's running mate were Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut, Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, Governor Patrick J. Lucy of Wisconsin, Mayor Kevin White of Boston, Sargent Shriver, former Peace Corps head and Kennedy brother-in-law, and Democratic National Chairman Larry O'Brien. One other name often mentioned was Senator Walter Mondale of Minnesota.¹¹

Of the names sent to McGovern for consideration, two were relatively unknown. In the gathering of twenty-two people,

¹¹Weil, p. 162.

no more than three had ever met either Kevin White or Thomas Eagleton, and of those three, none had any real knowledge, experience, or observation of their records.¹² Gary Hart recalled that Thomas Eagleton was "a last-minute entry put on primarily because he was Catholic, urban, and an unknown from a border state."¹³

After only three short hours of deliberation and consideration, McGovern received the list of possible running mates. From that point on, it became McGovern's decision as to whom he would call. Senator Ted Kennedy's refusal had finally become a reality as he had turned down the formal invitation in a call the preceding evening. Courtesy calls were placed to Ed Muskie and Hubert Humphrey, and, as expected, neither accepted McGovern's invitation.

With his hope of Kennedy's acceptance now shattered, McGovern began searching the list carefully. His next choice, Senator Abraham Ribicoff, asked not to be considered for the job. Senator Walter Mondale, contacted around 1:30 p.m., sought to concentrate his efforts for re-election to the senate rather than the vice-presidency. A call to Sargent Shriver revealed that he was in Moscow on business. Since he could not be reached, his chance for the nomination was then considered lost. It was now close to 2:00 p.m., and the 4:00 p.m. filing deadline was drawing close. At this stage of

¹²White, p. 25.

¹³Hart, p. 240.

consideration, the Democratic nominee for the presidency had been turned down by three potential running mates and was unable to reach a fourth one. Prior planning and checking could have saved McGovern the valuable time he had wasted on unnecessary phone calls.

As the filing deadline approached, McGovern and his advisers grew anxious and began to attack the task with haste due to the time pressure. The list had narrowed to Mayor White of Boston, Senator Nelson of Wisconsin, and Senator Eagleton of Missouri. Governor Lucy of Wisconsin had been removed from contention because of rumors dealing with marital problems. And Larry O'Brien's name had been taken off the list for various reasons, one being his acceptance of a position on McGovern's campaign staff. Of the three men left in consideration for the nomination, Eagleton and White were the two relatively unknown politicians added to the morning's list.

Earlier in the day, as the initial list of two dozen was being narrowed and endorsements changed, a question arose concerning Senator Thomas Eagleton.

Rick Sterns recalled a recent conversation with a national reporter who had mentioned problems of drinking and mental illness in the family, perhaps a mental institution. Although there is not general agreement on this point, Rick also remembers mentioning the possibility of Eagleton's having a record of mental illness.¹⁴

Gordon Weil agreed to look into the rumors. He contacted

¹⁴Hart, p. 239.

Missouri newsmen and other sources and reported back to the committee in less than an hour. Aside from a lingering speculation about alcoholism, Weil could find nothing to support the drinking or mental illness rumors.¹⁵ That brief look into Eagleton's background was all the investigation the senator received before being considered for the nomination.

Richard Dougherty, another of McGovern's close advisers, attended the meeting in which the rumor concerning Eagleton was mentioned, but he could not see substance in the accusations. Eagleton had been subjected to public scrutiny and the private investigations of opponents in at least three hard-fought primaries and general elections over a period of eight years.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it was important to check into the backgrounds of both Eagleton and White since they were unknown to most of the selection committee. The committee made the mistake of assuming too much in its hurried investigation of each man. There was not time for detailed analysis and investigation--another of McGovern's mistakes in timing.

While Gordon Weil was checking on Eagleton and White, another key conversation was taking place. An old political friend had called a McGovern worker and reported that Eagleton "had been mentally ill and had been hospitalized."¹⁷ The

¹⁵Hart.

¹⁶Richard Dougherty, Goodbye Mr. Christian (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1973), p. 154.

¹⁷Weil, p. 165.

worker relayed this message, but somehow through the chain of commands, it never reached McGovern. The chaos of the afternoon prevented any semblance of order. Had the message gotten through, Weil said that Eagleton would never have been selected.¹⁸

When Weil arrived with the information on the two potential candidates, he found that Eagleton had been practically eliminated from discussion. McGovern had recently stated, "I really don't know Tom very well," and Richard Dougherty interpreted that comment to mean that McGovern knew the young colleague well enough not to like him.¹⁹ Since Eagleton was no longer taken seriously as a candidate, the rumors about him were not taken seriously either.

The emphasis now turned to Boston's mayor, Kevin White. He was a young, popular mayor from a major urban stronghold in the east. McGovern placed a call to White, and the young mayor responded with enthusiasm. No major investigating had been done on White; however, McGovern felt the time pressure and was willing to take a chance. The day finally looked promising for George McGovern until he began receiving very negative feedback from Massachusetts politicians and other Democratic Party leaders who felt they should have been consulted before McGovern made such a decision. With such a

¹⁸Weil.

¹⁹Dougherty, p. 155.

response, the White candidacy was doomed an hour before the filing deadline.

Frustrated, fatigued, and preoccupied with the necessity of finishing his speech for the greatest audience of his career that night, the senator turned to his old friend Gaylord Nelson. After twenty minutes of trying to reach him by telephone, Nelson declined the nomination at 3:45 p.m.

Gary Hart accurately depicted his feelings as he sat in McGovern's headquarters at this moment:

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 the deliberations are careful, thoughtful, calm. That's no way to make important decisions." But here it was happening and I was right in the middle of it. What had started as a happy day putting frosting on the cake was disintegrating into a nightmare.²⁰

Before concluding his phone conversation with Gaylord Nelson, McGovern asked for advice in selecting a running mate. Nelson suggested the last name on McGovern's list, Thomas Eagleton. At 3:45 p.m. the senator from South Dakota verbalized, "I think I'll go with Tom."²¹ Another account of this episode quoted McGovern as saying, "Well, I guess it's Eagleton."²² Neither statement showed enthusiasm or strong backing by McGovern. Eagleton was the last choice in a very desperate situation. The senator yielded to time pressure and was forced

²⁰Hart, pp. 242-243.

²¹Hart, p. 243.

²²Weil, p. 168.

to compromise on his vice-presidential choice. His later rhetoric accurately depicted this attitude.

McGovern had only met Eagleton twice previously--once in a steambath room and once at a large dinner party in 1969. The South Dakota senator knew very little about his potential running mate and did not take the precaution of careful investigation. On the surface Eagleton promised everything--Catholic, young, bright, witty, good connections with labor, big city background, firm on law and order.²³

Some in the room were still asking for more time to think it over, but McGovern was already on the phone placing a call to Eagleton. Again he acted out of impulse. Throughout the day, McGovern had been impatient and hasty; he was not exemplifying the cool, calm exterior so often imagined in a presidential candidate. As McGovern phoned Eagleton, "the time-bomb destined to destroy the infant McGovern Presidential candidacy started ticking."²⁴ Eagleton eagerly accepted the vice-presidential offer only minutes before the 4:00 p.m. filing deadline.

McGovern offered the candidacy to Eagleton in this way: "I've thought it over carefully, and I think you would make a good contribution to the ticket and in office. I'd like for you to accept the vice-presidential nomination."²⁵ The

²³White, p. 252.

²⁴Hart, p. 243.

²⁵Thomas W. Ottenad, "Picking a No. 2 Man: Job Began Month Ago," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 14 July 1972, p. 5, cols. 6-7.

statement was direct and concise, giving no explanation for the late call or glimpse into the chaos of his search for a running mate. Eagleton immediately accepted with no questions asked.

Thomas Eagleton had all the right credentials to be George McGovern's running mate. On the current big issues, the two men thought along the same lines; and, where McGovern needed strength, Eagleton was able to offer it. Only forty-two years of age, Eagleton was the youngest man nominated for the vice-presidency in 120 years. A well-informed adviser, unknown by name, broke the announcement of Eagleton's selection in this way:

Of the people under consideration he Eagleton is as well qualified as any, or better, to succeed to the presidency. . . . Also, his legislative activities in Washington were first class. . . . He is a leading Senator and McGovern felt comfortable with him as a person. . . . The decision in the final analysis was based 100 percent on ability in the abstract and on his capacity to serve as President.²⁶

McGovern and his staff were employing the rhetorical strategy of positive reinforcement. Although insiders were aware that Eagleton was a hasty, uncertain choice, this was not the way McGovern wanted the voting public to perceive his new running mate. The statements issued to the press created the impression that Eagleton and McGovern were entirely compatible and matched with care. Careful examination of the statement, however, revealed that McGovern's adviser was only

²⁶Ottenad, p. 5, col. 2.

able to speak superficially and in generalities. The McGovern camp was terribly uninformed concerning the junior senator from Missouri. Once again time pressure had prevented both men and staffs from conferring and editing an announcement before it was released to the press.

McGovern asked his supporters to accept his decision concerning Eagleton without question. Information fed to the press placed the selection of Eagleton squarely on McGovern's shoulders, and he would later be summoned to account for that decision. In extending himself to this point of accepting the responsibility of Eagleton and the facade the McGovern camp created for the Missouri senator, McGovern became vulnerable. He was too hasty in issuing statements concerning the competency of Eagleton without spending more time investigating his background. A presidential candidate is expected to research, confer, deliberate, and scrutinize before reaching a decision of such importance. The voting public assumed McGovern had followed such steps in the selection of Eagleton. McGovern's decision-making and leadership abilities--his credibility as a future contender for the presidency--were placed before the public's view in the form of his decision to choose Thomas Eagleton.

It is important to note what was happening in the Eagleton camp at the time of McGovern's phone call in order to understand why Eagleton did not acknowledge his past illness the moment before accepting the vice-presidential nomination.

Eagleton's hotel room was filled with staff, friends, and friendly press when McGovern called. The South Dakota senator's conversation was short and concise and encouraged that kind of response from Eagleton. Eagleton's acceptance was only one sentence: "George, before you change your mind, I hasten to accept."²⁷

Then George Mankiewicz, McGovern's national campaign coordinator, took the phone and asked Eagleton several brief background questions. One was phrased "if there were any skeletons in your closet," to which Eagleton responded "no" and later added he felt totally justified in answering that way. To Eagleton his past health "was like a broken leg that had healed."²⁸

While Eagleton and the McGovern camp were conversing, news spread rapidly. Strangers and more newsmen burst into Eagleton's room and forced him to flee into his bedroom--only to be followed there by cameras and photographers. In this instant mini-bedlam, privacy had evaporated, and with it any possibility of thoughtful reflection. Bizarre as had been the selection of Eagleton by the McGovern advisers, it would have been even more bizarre for Eagleton or a member of his staff to have lifted the phone in such a crowded and public room and said in the pandemonium, "Listen . . . you should

²⁷Weil, p. 169.

²⁸White, pp. 264-265.

know . . . Tom's been hospitalized three times for nervous breakdown."²⁹

During the evening of that "longest day in a long campaign," rumors began circulating on convention floor concerning alcoholism and mental illness. Gordon Weil immediately phoned this information to other McGovern workers who began canvassing the floor for information on Senator Eagleton. It was still several hours before the acceptance speeches would begin. Weil later reflected:

In retrospect it might have been possible at this point to suggest that McGovern ask for a suspension in the proceedings. If we McGovern and advisers felt the information was too damaging, we could have, even then, chosen another nominee. Yet, since Mankiewicz's press conference, the process seemed to be inexorably under way. The best we could do, I thought, was to find out all we could in order to deal with whatever stories might arise in the campaign.³⁰

According to this statement, McGovern was faced with two options. As the leader of the Democratic Party, he was in the position to ask for a postponement or suspension in the proceedings. His second option was to savor his evening of glory, introduce Eagleton, and run the risk of later embarrassment. A third option appeared to be available but was not exercised at this crucial time. An experienced, practical politician might have opted to speak directly with the source of the impending rumors and bring the pertinent information into the open. Neither McGovern nor his aides spoke directly

²⁹White, p. 264.

³⁰Weil, p. 170.

with Eagleton or his aides to confirm or deny the rumors before the nominating speeches. With Eagleton rumors already spreading on convention floor, it was a dangerous choice to ignore this third option.

When the session opened at 8:00 p.m. on July 13, 1972, no immediate obstacles were in sight. Before long, however, the convention became bogged in a compromise battle. This was followed by long floor nominations for the vice-presidency. During the convention evening, thirty-nine names were entered into nomination for the vice-presidential role in addition to that of Thomas Eagleton. By the time he was finally nominated by acclamation, a new day had arrived. It was 3:00 a.m. on July 14, 1972, before McGovern mounted the platform to deliver his acceptance address. Convention Hall was ringing with loud refrains of "This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is My Land," "Happy Days Are Here Again," "America the Beautiful," and "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here."³¹

Gaunt, bearded with sweat, his brow shining, the early-campaign dimple lines now cut into folds by weariness, George McGovern was about to have his moment. The moment was 2:48 in the morning. Even in California, most people had gone to sleep; only in Guam, where it was still a quarter to six in the evening, was George McGovern speaking in prime time under the American flag. On the mainland, the audience for his speech had dropped from 17,400,000 homes to 3,600,000. Yet he was speaking beautifully. He had sucked up from his experience in one of the longest campaigns in human history a knowledge of precisely those keys of emotion he himself could touch best, and the organ keys he played on were poetic and evangelical.³²

³¹White, p. 246.

³²White, p. 247.

McGovern began his acceptance address with this attempt at humor:

I assume that everyone here is impressed with my control of this convention in that my choice for Vice-President was challenged by only 39 other nominees. . . . But I think we learned from watching the Republicans four years ago as they selected their Vice-Presidential nominee that it pays to take a little more time.³³

That statement is paradoxical when one reflects upon the chaos and confusion of the McGovern camp throughout "the longest day of a long campaign."

Earlier in the evening, Senator Eagleton's name had been received by the convention floor with only a modest response. Many delegates barely knew the name--he was unknown even to some of the most trusting McGovern backers in the hall. To many delegates "it appeared somewhat inconsistent for McGovern as the champion to follow the old-style procedure of naming his choice of running mate instead of leaving that choice to the convention."³⁴ Such an action seemed to contradict the openness which McGovern sought. As soon as McGovern's supporters heard Eagleton's name, the senator from Missouri became an extension of their candidate. Any actions of Eagleton would now reflect on McGovern and form a measure of the integrity of the man who chose him.

³³"About that Challenge by 39 for No. 2 Spot. . . .," New York Times, 14 July 1972, p. 11, col. 4.

³⁴John H. Patton, "The Eagleton Phenomenon in the 1972 Presidential Campaign: A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Paradox," Central States Speech Journal, 24 (Winter, 1973), 281.

Eagleton concluded his address with the following sentence: "And let us so conduct ourselves and our campaign and our lives that in later years men may say--1972 was the year, not when America lost its way, but the year when America found its conscience."³⁵ Eagleton could not have chosen more appropriate language to include in his address to the convention and nation, for it was conscience that became a primary value by which the Democratic ticket of 1972 was to be judged and perceived.³⁶

In the first stage of the "Eagleton Affair," the Democratic presidential nominee chose the junior senator from Missouri as his running mate and made that announcement to the Democratic Convention. Unlike the careful planning of the grassroots organization that McGovern and his advisers constructed in the primaries, the selection of a vice-presidential nominee was impromptu and lacked coordination. Very little advance checking had been done on any vice-presidential hopeful. The McGovern group went into the selection cold, and this was the cause of much of their difficulty. By the time "the longest day in a long campaign" arrived, the McGovern group was mentally and physically exhausted. They had spent hours beating down the California challenge and trying to settle internal coalition problems. McGovern and his advisers

³⁵Thomas Eagleton, "Acceptance Speech: Candidate for Vice-President," Vital Speeches of the Day, 15 August 1972, p. 643.

³⁶Patton, p. 282.

left themselves only seven hours to choose the vice-presidential nominee. As these seven hours wore down, time pressure caused anxiety and frustration in the group. The senator was unexpectedly refused by several politicians he called, and more time was wasted in trying to locate other hopefuls. Time pressures did not allow for thorough checking into unconfirmed rumors on Eagleton. The entire day lost the order and careful planning that McGovern had previously been known for. McGovern hastily called the last name on his list, Eagleton, minutes before the filing deadline. On the surface, the Missouri senator offered everything that would appeal to a Democratic audience--he was young, witty, had a winning Democratic record, had good relations with labor, and was compatible with McGovern on most issues. On the surface it was a good match; yet, in reality, McGovern knew very little about the junior senator. They had only met twice previously. McGovern, in his first decision-making task as the Democratic nominee for president, chose a running mate about whom he was relatively uninformed. However, the Democratic audience assumed McGovern had spent a great deal of time and research in deciding such an important matter. Eagleton became symbolic of McGovern's ability in making decisions, and McGovern would be held accountable for that decision in later stages of the Eagleton affair.

CHAPTER III

THE RHETORICAL REACTION TO THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF EAGLETON'S "ILLNESS"

The Democratic Convention drew to a close after the two nominees' acceptance addresses in the early morning hours of July 14, 1972. Victory parties and celebrations completed the night for the two groups, and it was here that new priorities of relaxation and vacations came into focus. Even though some credence had been granted to the disturbing rumors concerning Senator Eagleton's health, the issue was dismissed for the present.

The weekend passed with relative calm; however, Monday morning brought the first pertinent information into Eagleton's background. Strangely enough, the information came from an anonymous caller rather than from a meeting between representatives of the McGovern-Eagleton groups to discuss the rumors. McGovern and his advisers were vacationing and had allowed their thoughts to turn away from Eagleton. The senator from Missouri, who felt his illness was like a broken limb that had healed, had no intention of volunteering such information on his private life.

The anonymous caller, who brought the Eagleton rumors back into focus, phoned campaign headquarters in Washington

with news of Eagleton's medical record. He left the information with a volunteer worker and then contacted John Knight III of the Detroit Free Press. The anonymous caller said he feared that "irreparable damage could be done to the McGovern campaign if information concerning Eagleton's hospitalization for mental illness was made public. The Republicans had the information and might very well use it."¹ Now the Knight newspapers were onto the story. In addition, Time had been making inquiries, and the Manchester Union Leader was becoming suspicious.²

The anonymous tipster placed a second call to McGovern's campaign offices and the Knight newspapers within a few days. This time he cited the approximate date, the place, and the name of a person on the treatment team for one of Eagleton's hospitalizations. Apparently quoting a phrase from some kind of medical report, the caller added that "the therapy had been administered for a 'manic-depressive state with suicidal tendencies.'"³

In the meantime, Clark Hoyt, a Washington correspondent for the Knight newspapers, began investigating. He started

¹Gordon L. Weil, The Long Shot (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1973), p. 173.

²James M. Perry, Us & Them (New York: Clarkston N. Potter, Inc., 1973), p. 192.

³Milton Viorst, "Did Tom Eagleton Do Anything Wrong?" Esquire, 79 (January, 1973), 142.

his work in the file of yellowed clippings marked "Eagleton" in the morgue of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and located the three successive hospitalizations.

While Hoyt was busy making inquiries in St. Louis, Eagleton was telling the story of his illness to McGovern's advisers in Washington. This was the first actual meeting between the two groups since the rumors had begun circulating a week earlier. The meeting had been initiated by the tipster's messages delivered to Gary Hart and Frank Mankiewicz. Without the external stimulus of the anonymous caller providing the information on Eagleton, it is impossible to say how long the two groups would have avoided facing the issue.

It is ironic to note here that McGovern was not informed of the anonymous caller's messages or the Hart and Mankiewicz meeting with Eagleton until July 21. McGovern was in South Dakota to rest. Therefore, with Hart and Mankiewicz in control, the power shifted from the presidential nominee. By not informing McGovern of these developments as they occurred, the advisers wasted valuable time that could have been spent in conference, strategy planning, or decision making with the two senators and their staffs.

At the conclusion of the Hart, Mankiewicz, and Eagleton meeting on June 20, the senator offered to resign from the ticket. Hart and Mankiewicz responded that such a decision would have to be made in consultation with Senator McGovern and urged that the two men meet as soon as possible.

They could have done it that very day--because McGovern had flown in from South Dakota to vote for a minimum wage bill. In fact, the two men saw each other on the senate floor and talked briefly--but not, incredibly, about the problem that would soon destroy them both.⁴

This was another mistake in timing, for as the two men talked, McGovern was unaware of the recent developments concerning Eagleton. Had Hart and Mankiewicz communicated with the senator earlier, the two candidates could have spoken at greater length that day.

McGovern learned the full story of Eagleton's three hospitalizations and electric shock therapy exactly one week after Eagleton's nomination. Seven precious, critical days which could have been spent making decisions and planning rhetorical strategy had been wasted. Hart and Mankiewicz briefed McGovern on a plane back to South Dakota on July 21, 1972.

Perhaps because one of his own daughters received therapy for drug use several years before, McGovern seemed undisturbed, outwardly at least, by the news of Eagleton when he first heard it.⁵

He [McGovern] certainly gave no sign of grasping the report's implication for the campaign. He heard Hart outline the procedure for the Democratic National Committee's replacement of a Vice-Presidential candidate, but it did not seem to bother him when Hart added that, thanks to the post-convention disorganization, the Committee might not be ready to meet for weeks. Nor would he contemplate the suggestion from Mankiewicz that a face-saving cover

⁴Perry, p. 193.

⁵Viorst, p. 142.

story should be devised and Eagleton cut off at once. In fact, Mankiewicz recalls, McGovern seemed much more concerned about the development of political plans than about Senator Eagleton. Insistently, McGovern moved the discussion on to other subjects, but only after Mankiewicz and Hart extracted an understanding that no decision would be made until they could meet again and assess the results of the forthcoming McGovern-Eagleton encounter.⁶

McGovern apparently still did not realize the impact such information would have on the Democratic ticket. Either McGovern felt that Eagleton's illness would never become an issue in the campaign or that there was time to deal with that problem at a later date; the senator was incorrect on both counts.

By the time McGovern first heard the full story of Eagleton's health problem, Clark Hoyt was armed with enough evidence to publish an exclusive on the hospitalizations. Hoyt and his bureau chief, Robert S. Boyd, scheduled a meeting with Frank Mankiewicz on Sunday, July 23, and presented a memo that was clearly in the right direction. Mankiewicz appealed to the two reporters for a little time to do some more checking. By agreeing to the delay in publishing, Hoyt and Boyd lost their exclusive.

Thomas and Barbara Eagleton met with George and Eleanor McGovern over breakfast on Tuesday, July 25, in the Black Hills of South Dakota. This day was to begin a critical, explosive week in the McGovern presidential campaign. In retrospect,

⁶Viorst.

the next seven days have been aptly labeled, "the week that was."

McGovern had taken the Democratic nomination with what seemed to be a charmed political life; but, after "the week that was," George McGovern and his wobbly young presidential campaign looked suddenly and painfully accident prone.⁷

The week began with a meeting over breakfast. The Eagletons and McGoverns were the only four present; there was not an adviser from either side invited to the parley. During the ensuing hour, Eagleton persuaded McGovern that his health was sound and that he could convince the American people that his psychiatric history was not relevant to his capacity to serve as the vice-president. He verbally shared his medical past with the McGoverns but did not bring his health records to substantiate his claims. McGovern was sympathetic to Eagleton and apparently believed that the past illness would be an immediate sensation that would soon die away. It was out of this sympathy that McGovern immediately refused Eagleton's offer to resign his position on the ticket.⁸

The advisers were called in after the decision had been made and were handed a fait accompli. McGovern said matter-of-factly: "I've told Tom I'm prepared to stand by him in

⁷"It's McGovern and . . . uh . . . Shriver," Newsweek, 14 August 1972, p. 16.

⁸Weil, p. 175.

this. I think we can ride it through."⁹ Hart and Mankiewicz were deeply concerned over the decision for two reasons. First, they felt they had extracted a promise from McGovern to consult again and weigh the evidence before making a decision; and, second, they believed it was the duty of political advisers to check the candidate's judgment before political decisions are reached.¹⁰ Hart and Mankiewicz felt that McGovern was allowing himself to be ruled by compassion rather than logic. McGovern was moved by Eagleton's rhetoric, and the South Dakotan's emotions allowed Eagleton to remain on the ticket. The senator had not seen Eagleton's medical records, nor had he explored available channels of advice and party opinion. In reacting emotionally rather than logically, McGovern took a dangerous step politically.

The only question asked of the advisers when they were permitted into the conference area regarded the timing of the press conference announcement. Should Eagleton's medical record be disclosed at once or put off until a later date? It was decided, but not by unanimous agreement, to present the information immediately--thus outwardly upholding McGovern's campaign promises of openness and candor.

It must be recognized, however, that external pressures were in actuality forcing the McGovern-Eagleton openness and

⁹Richard Dougherty, Goodbye Mr. Christian (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1973), p. 176.

¹⁰Viorst, p. 144.

candor. The Knight newspaper chain was ready to go to press with a disclosure of Eagleton's medical history. Their diligent research, plus rumors spreading throughout political circles, provided the necessity for the July 25 press conference.

The purpose of Eagleton's disclosure that afternoon was to present a picture of his past health problem, confirm that he was in fine physical and mental shape now, and let the rumors of his "illness" come to an end. Both he and McGovern, in their apparent naivety about national politics, seemed to believe the issue would die away within a few days.

The reporters, expecting a routine press conference, were not surprised when Eagleton took the platform and began speaking of rumors that occur during political campaigning. However, the mood and attitude changed to one of seriousness and intensity when he went on to say:

"It is a legitimate question the press has to ask me about whether my health is such that I can hold the office of the Vice President of the United States. On three occasions I have voluntarily gone into hospitals as a result of nervous exhaustion and fatigue . . ." ¹¹

After an explanation of his past medical history, Eagleton asked for questions from the floor. At this moment, McGovern moved forward to be by Eagleton's side as a nonverbal show of support. As expected, many of the following questions regarded McGovern's knowledge of Eagleton's illness and present feelings

¹¹Dougherty, pp. 182-183.

toward him and their joint Democratic ticket. McGovern admitted to not learning of the illness until after the Democratic Convention was over, and then continued:

I am fully satisfied on the basis of everything I've learned about these brief hospital visits that what is manifest on Senator Eagleton's part was the good judgment to seek out medical care when he was exhausted. I've watched him in the United States Senate for the past four years. As far as I am concerned, there is no member of that Senate who is any sounder in mind, body, and spirit than Tom Eagleton. I am fully satisfied and if I had known every detail that he told me this morning, which is exactly what he has just told you here now, he would still have been my choice for the vice presidency of the United States.¹²

After several more questions regarding Eagleton's present health, McGovern fielded the last question and reiterated his complete faith in and loyalty to Eagleton. McGovern aides began muttering words as "disaster" and "ruin" as the conference ended, and the reporters ran wildly to telephones to report the latest breaking news.

Throughout the press conference, McGovern stood right beside Eagleton as though he shared in what was happening. He gave the impression of weathering the storm together as a united Democratic ticket. This complete integration in the situation was the rhetorical strategy chosen by McGovern himself. Two observations are necessary at this point. First, McGovern was handling this decision alone--no major Democratic Party leaders were in on the decision or at Sylvan Lake to

¹²Dougherty, pp. 184-185.

lend symbolic unity. And second, McGovern chose to be the decisive person as to whether or not Eagleton would remain on the ticket.

This strategy opposes one used by a presidential contender in an earlier campaign. Confronted with a similar predicament in the 1952 campaign, Dwight Eisenhower simply detached himself and moved to a plane above the level of battle. Richard Nixon, the vice-presidential nominee, was put on his own. He was given a few days to extricate himself from the slush-fund scandal and prove he was an asset to the ticket. Otherwise, he was to be matter-of-factly dumped with no appreciable loss to Eisenhower.¹³ But McGovern rallied to Eagleton's defense at the outset and became a central rhetorical figure in the next week's events.

In analyzing McGovern's rhetoric during "the week that was," four individual stages surfaced at different times. The first stage emerged as one of full support and backing for his running mate. The verbal and nonverbal stands of unity with Eagleton were obvious in the afternoon press conference and throughout the next day.

McGovern remained at Sylvan Lake for much of the following week. Eagleton, however, flew out immediately after the press conference to begin a campaign tour of the west coast area. Through such a time of internal crisis and turmoil,

¹³Jack Anderson, The Anderson Papers (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), p. 182.

it seems strange that these two men did not meet face to face during the deliberative period of "the week that was," but rather communicated only via the telephone and articles in the newspapers.

As soon as the reporters' stories of the July 25 press conference hit the media, Eagleton's disclosure mushroomed into "a possible major issue in this year's presidential campaign."¹⁴ Friendly newspapers treated the press conference as factual information, commending McGovern and Eagleton for their honesty and directness with the voting public. Other newspapers, however, began asking questions by including articles on mental depression and the shock therapy used to treat it, and by publishing editorials on the uncertain future of the Democratic ticket. The "Eagleton Affair" was to become a major issue in the presidential campaign, and it dominated the media until its resolution in early August.

With the media now seizing the news of Eagleton's story, McGovern forces lost control of the event. From this point on, they no longer had the initiative as media stories, interviews, editorials, and polls multiplied. McGovern was not learning quickly enough that he had lost the upper hand. Being somewhat isolated in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the senator could not clearly perceive how quickly and heatedly the disclosure was becoming a key issue.

¹⁴Thomas W. Ottenad, "Had Psychiatric Care Twice, Eagleton Says," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 25 July 1972, p. 1, col. 3.

While Eagleton began to receive vast amounts of favorable mail, nearly 90,000 favorable letters by the end of July,¹⁵ McGovern began receiving the opposite kind of mail and pressure in similar proportions.

While awaiting the public's reaction to Eagleton's disclosure, McGovern continued to play the role of full supporter to his running mate's cause. In media articles appearing on July 26, the senator was quoted as saying he would "absolutely"¹⁶ keep the ticket united.

Later that same day, McGovern issued what Theodore White, in The Making of the President, 1972, called "possibly the most damaging single faux pas ever made by a presidential candidate."¹⁷ Here McGovern, trying to overcompensate for his resolve and determination to keep Eagleton on the ticket, quoted this line for the media: "I am 1,000 percent for Tom Eagleton and I have no intention of dropping him from the ticket."¹⁸ Once again, McGovern acted hastily and independently. He did not discuss this latest statement with advisers or

¹⁵John H. Patton, "The Eagleton Phenomenon in the 1972 Presidential Campaign: A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Paradox," Central States Speech Journal, 24 (Winter, 1973), 285.

¹⁶Christopher Lyndon, "Eagleton Tells of Shock Therapy on Two Occasions," New York Times, 26 July 1972, p. 1, col. 8.

¹⁷Theodore H. White, The Making of the President, 1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 270.

¹⁸Judith S. Trent and Jimmie D. Trent, "The Rhetoric of the Challenger: George Stanley McGovern," Central States Speech Journal, 25 (Spring, 1974), 13.

party regulars. The rhetoric was his own, and he would later be called to account for it. An experienced, logical, calculating politician would have waited until a sampling of public reaction was in before committing himself to any position before the media. One can only ask why McGovern did not take such advice. Throughout the Eagleton episode, McGovern's timing seemed to be at fault. He was impulsive. He had not tested the national political waters enough to gauge his footing. McGovern, not yet a seasoned national campaigner, was attempting the sink or swim method of learning. He began the week with a polarized stand for Eagleton. This limited his future choices considerably. McGovern could now maintain this extreme position he had taken and attempt to weather the storm with it, or he would have to compromise his position at a later date and suffer a loss of credibility with the voting public.

Richard Dougherty, the campaign adviser who accepted McGovern's 1000 percent message from him on the phone and fed it to the media, believed that McGovern meant every word of the statement when he said it. Dougherty went on to say that McGovern "was angry, of course, and anger tends to inflate one's rhetoric."¹⁹ The senator was feeling pressured to clarify his position, angered that this was becoming such an

¹⁹Dougherty, p. 193.

important issue in the campaign, and belligerent because he was becoming boxed in too quickly.

If McGovern had merely waited a few days to sample public reaction before reaffirming his stand with Eagleton, this entire episode might have ended differently. At the same time McGovern was pledging himself to Eagleton, Democratic Party regulars and newspapers were beginning to apply the pressure in the opposite direction. Matt Troy, of Queens in New York City, called for immediate action to drop Eagleton. The New York Post, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and the New York Times²⁰ were the first of many newspapers suggesting that Eagleton be let go.

McGovern, now media shy, went into seclusion to sort things out. He now began listening rather than talking. He accepted phone calls from senate colleagues and Democratic Party regulars, he listened to his campaign advisers, and he waited for results of polls and public opinion surveys. He heard from Henry Kimelmann, the Democratic national finance chairman, that contributions were drying up considerably because of his decision to keep Eagleton;²¹ he also listened intently to the report that "a pilot of SAC [Strategic Air Command] or the captain of a nuclear submarine would be invalidated by such a health record as Tom Eagleton's."²²

²⁰"The Best and the Worst," Newsweek, 7 August 1972, p. 58.

²¹Weil, p. 178.

²²White, p. 269.

McGovern began to reevaluate his 1000 percent stand behind his running mate. But this time as he pondered his course of action, he did it with help and advice from others.

Gary Hart, one of McGovern's closest political advisers, presented an adept look at the internal scene of the McGovern camp approximately forty-eight hours after the press conference disclosing Eagleton's past medical record:

By late Wednesday, however, a true national picture was beginning to emerge. Personal understanding, but political intolerance. The consensus from almost every side was: Eagleton must go. From New York, California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Ohio, Wisconsin, and at least two dozen other states, the political leadership was speaking uniformly--we can't win with Eagleton, we can't get a campaign off the ground; Eagleton will be the issue.²³

It became obvious that McGovern's audience of potential voters were verbal. Thousands of phone calls and letters poured into the Black Hills each day. This rhetorical audience proved capable of modifying McGovern's rhetorical strategy concerning Eagleton.

Eagleton, during these same forty-eight hours since the press conference, was vigorously campaigning for the ticket in California and Hawaii. He greeted crowds openly, smiled, and vowed to educate the nation about mental illnesses. When asked if there was any chance he might withdraw as the Democratic vice-presidential nominee, Eagleton replied, "Well,

²³Gary Warren Hart, Right from the Start (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1973), p. 259.

there's no discussion under way as to my departure from the ticket."²⁴ He continued by saying:

I have said to reporters that I said to Senator McGovern that if at some future date it appears that my presence on the ticket might be an embarrassment to him or in any way injure the chances of him achieving the White House, I would, if that were his judgment, step aside.²⁵

Thus, at only forty-eight hours after the press conference disclosure, two separate rhetorical strategies had been presented to the American people. McGovern had presented himself as a defiant, independent aggressor, fully backing his running mate to remain on the Democratic ticket. Eagleton had presented a positive, jovial image, pleased to be on the ticket, but willing to reassess his position if it looked injurious to McGovern. It is ironic that these two rhetorical strategies almost completely reversed themselves before the week was out.

July 27, 1972, provided the final, devastating blow to the already troubled McGovern-Eagleton ticket. On this day, crusading reporter and columnist, Jack Anderson, charged in a broadcast that Senator Eagleton had an arrest record for drunken and careless driving. Although the story could not be substantiated and Anderson had to later retract his story and issue an apology, a McGovern adviser claimed that these charges became "the wedge between the Eagleton and McGovern

²⁴"Eagleton Says Decision Depends on U.S. Reaction," San Francisco Chronicle, 27 July 1972, p. 24, col. 2.

²⁵"Eagleton Says Decision Depends on U.S. Reaction."

staffs."²⁶ This was the added pressure that broke the alliance with Eagleton.

McGovern had by this time moved into his second rhetorical strategy of the Eagleton affair. He was being nonvocal and keeping silent to the media. He was no longer the aggressive, independent spokesman; instead, he became more cautious and careful, listening, watching, and waiting for party and public opinion signs. The McGovern camp even went so far as to call off a scheduled press conference on July 27 to allow more time for deliberation and strategy planning.

When Eagleton, still campaigning on the west coast, heard Anderson's charges of drunken and careless driving, he became enraged. His immediate response was that

Mr. Anderson's statement to that effect is, in blunt but direct English, a damnable lie. I have never been more determined in my life about any issue than I am today about remaining on this ticket. I'm not going to bow to Mr. Anderson. I'm not going to let a lie drive me from this ticket.²⁷

Throughout the next hours and days, Eagleton became more adamant in his stand. When Anderson failed to substantiate his arrest claims, the Missouri senator promptly became a victim of slander in the public eye and his stock soared. Eagleton, earlier the complacent, compromising running mate, now took the role of aggressor. He vowed to stay on the ticket at all

²⁶Hart, p. 260.

²⁷Ernest G. Bormann, "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (April, 1973), 153.

costs. He began to adopt the rhetorical strategy of resistance under pressure.²⁸ McGovern was now faced with a running mate who was forcefully campaigning to salvage a wronged reputation. Eagleton was shifting the ticket decision-making power to himself rather than leaving it with McGovern. Newspapers of the day caught Eagleton's rhetoric in remaining on the ticket as "irrevocable" and that he would "never" withdraw. The Missouri senator, now feeling the pressure that McGovern had once felt in clarifying a position, spoke impulsively and emotionally with absolutes. He fell into the same trap of polarization that had been so harmful to McGovern. However, Eagleton could not see the impending doom, for he had both McGovern's promise of supporting him 1000 percent and Jack Anderson's publicity building up his self-confidence.

For McGovern tacticians, this new aggressiveness by Eagleton caused severe complications. McGovern had lost control of the present situation and needed to recapture the initiative as soon as possible. It had by this time become obvious to McGovern and his staff that the goals of the two men were incompatible. McGovern selected two rhetorical strategies in his third rhetorical stage of "the week that was." First, he composed a speech to be delivered on July 29 and phoned Eagleton in San Francisco to read a portion of it to him. Wanting to emphasize that he was under a great deal

²⁸Patton, p. 282.

of pressure and that he might have to reconsider his earlier support stand, McGovern read:

I do not know how it will come out, but I do know that it gets darkest before the stars come out. So I ask for your prayers and your patience for Senator Eagleton and me while we deliberate on the proper course ahead.²⁹

Through use of the rhetorical pronoun "we," McGovern was attempting to shift the power balance back to a shared one. He was hoping to tone Eagleton down from his direct offensive behavior and sway him back into the previous compromising position. Eagleton, however, was still too involved with self-defense and self-vindication to clearly hear McGovern's implications.

The Democratic candidate was then forced to initiate the second half of his third rhetorical strategy. This strategy relied upon an indirect communication with Eagleton via the newspapers. McGovern summoned Jules Witcover of the Los Angeles Times, the same reporter who had asked that McGovern attach more significance to the choosing of a running mate at the Democratic Convention, to plant a story in the California paper that Eagleton would surely see. "What he [McGovern] wanted to see in print--in California, where Eagleton was campaigning--was a straight message that McGovern was convinced that his running mate must withdraw."³⁰

²⁹Perry, p. 200.

³⁰Perry.

To make the message even more obvious, McGovern began table-hopping between sets of reporters at the Sylvan Lake Lodge the evening of July 28 with a designed message inferring that Eagleton might be a detriment to the ticket.

Senator McGovern said there were three things he had to take into consideration in the Eagleton matter:

First, the soundness of Mr. Eagleton's health; second, the effect that his candidacy would have on the outcome of the election in the fall; and third, whether the Missouri senator should have told him about his health record when asked before his nomination whether he had any problems in his past that might be a detriment to the ticket.³¹

This latest rhetoric was a far cry from his press conference remarks a few days earlier when he vowed complete support for and confidence in his running mate. McGovern was now engaging in the rhetorical strategy of crisis jumping under pressure. "In any case, McGovern did himself no good that night at Sylvan Lake. He succeeded only in making himself look like a sneak, a man who was trying to get the press to do his dirty work for him."³² William Greider, a Washington Post staff writer having dinner in the lodge that evening, observed that "what McGovern did was either very slick or very clumsy. The people who watched still are not sure which."³³

³¹Dougherty, p. 199.

³²Timothy Crouse, The Boys on the Bus (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 332-333.

³³Crouse, p. 333.

However, the signal was still not clear to Thomas Eagleton. He was still facing jubilant crowds, smiling, and vowing to remain on the ticket through the November election. What McGovern needed at this time was a personal, honest confrontation with Eagleton on the issue rather than leaving his meanings and interpretations up to chance or distorted perceptions.

On the same day that McGovern table-hopped through a room full of reporters making inferences against Eagleton, he was not being candid on the phone with Eagleton via long distance. "McGovern was reluctant to give him [Eagleton] any indication of bad news over the phone, preferring to wait until they met in Washington"³⁴ within the next day or two. Via long distance, McGovern described the thirty-odd negative editorials concerning Eagleton, but paradoxically ended the conversation with "Remember, Tom, I'm 1000 percent for you."³⁵

Following Eagleton's course now was like watching a chicken flopping around the barnyard, pursued by a little boy (McGovern) with a hatchet trying to chop its head off, the chicken bleeding and squawking as it went, the little boy upset by his inability to strike a clean blow.³⁶

McGovern could hardly have left Thomas Eagleton in a more dangling position. It seemed a curious way for McGovern to

³⁴Weil, p. 179.

³⁵White, p. 271.

³⁶White, pp. 270-271.

do business, to verbalize that "I'm with Senator Eagleton all the way--that is, until he and I have a chance to talk."³⁷

The drama had now been exposed for four days--four pressure packed days with constant media exposure. Ernest Bormann, author of "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis," believed that one of the blunders of the McGovern rhetoricians "was in timing, in that they temporized and allowed the drama to unfold far too long in this age of electronic media."³⁸

With the week only half over, Eagleton and McGovern were totally incompatible in rhetoric and philosophy. McGovern, in a demonstration of crisis-jumping at the Sylvan Lake Lodge, was diametrically opposed to Eagleton's strategy of resistance under pressure. George McGovern was enough of a seasoned politician to reason that he could not win in November with Eagleton's health issue taking precedence over other national issues. He acknowledged that Thomas Eagleton must go, but he was unsure of how to handle this sensitive situation. His crude, indirect attempts had failed, thus his next alternative was to meet Eagleton in Washington and talk out the dilemma face to face. However, during this deliberative period in which McGovern and his advisers were deciding that Eagleton must go, the Missouri senator was working harder than ever to maintain his position on the ticket. Eagleton had grown

³⁷"McGovern's First Crisis: The Eagleton Affair," Time, 7 August 1972, p. 13.

³⁸Bormann, p. 155.

up in an atmosphere of political toughness and had received intensely favorable political feedback, evidenced by his never having lost an election. With this type of personal experience, Eagleton could not have adopted a strategy of willing resignation from the ticket.³⁹ The two men, with their opposing rhetorical strategies and philosophies, were headed into a confrontation that could only be resolved through interpersonal, rather than indirect, communication.

The second stage of the "Eagleton Affair" began with a joint press conference announcing Eagleton's three hospitalizations. It was held in South Dakota on July 25, 1972, and it was chiefly brought about by the external pressure of the Knight newspaper chain which was prepared to print an exclusive story on Eagleton's medical record. McGovern did not learn the full story concerning Eagleton's medical past until a week after the junior senator's nomination. Perhaps because of past psychiatric problems in his own family, he did not appear shaken by the news. When McGovern and Eagleton met over breakfast on July 25, McGovern alone made the decision to keep Eagleton on the ticket. He felt sympathy for the junior senator and also naively reasoned that the sensationalism of the event would fade away within a few days. The South Dakota senator handed his staff a fait accompli and thus entered into "the week that was." McGovern began the week with a full stand of both verbal and nonverbal support for his

³⁹Patton, pp. 282-283.

running mate. He announced in inflated rhetoric that he was behind Tom Eagleton 1,000 percent. However, as Jack Anderson's careless and drunk driving charges against Eagleton were aired, McGovern became nonvocal and began listening to party leaders and public opinion surveys. McGovern now realized he had lost control of the situation. He had acted hastily in his first firm stand of support and now retreated for new strategy. In the meantime, Eagleton became outraged over Anderson's allegations and began to crusade for his vindication. He became assertive and took over the role of aggressor. With the two strategies now having reversed themselves, McGovern recognized the need to initiate action putting him back in control. He attempted to communicate indirectly with Eagleton through reading him a section of a prepared speech via telephone and sending him a message via the newspapers. Both attempts were aimed at telling Eagleton the ticket was in serious trouble. McGovern was crisis jumping, for the senator and his staff viewed the ticket as totally incompatible in rhetoric and philosophy. Much had happened in the few short days since the Sylvan Lake press conference. Constant media attention mushroomed the event into a major issue. However, Eagleton had gotten personally ego-involved and could not hear McGovern's feeble, indirect attempts at ending the ticket. The two men must now meet and directly confront the dilemma that faced them.

CHAPTER IV

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF EAGLETON'S WITHDRAWAL FROM THE DEMOCRATIC TICKET

The unfolding drama of the Eagleton Affair was proceeding to its climax. The two senators scheduled a private meeting in Washington, D.C. for Monday, July 31. The announcement of Eagleton's illness via the press conference in South Dakota was not quite a week old. Yet in that brief time, the media had saturated coverage of the event and greatly intensified emotions.

Senator Eagleton flew to the east coast on Saturday, July 29, to tape a CBS "Face the Nation" interview program to be aired on Sunday. In this interview, the Missouri senator reiterated his firm intention to remain on the ticket; however, he did concede that he would "listen respectfully and attentively, and I'll weigh his [McGovern] words"¹ if McGovern asked him to resign his position on the ticket.

At this point, McGovern initiated the fourth stage of his rhetorical strategy concerning Eagleton. This stage also unfolded in two parts. Although McGovern's attempts to communicate his shifting stand via the newspapers were not seen

¹R. W. Apple, Jr., "Eagleton Is Firm Despite Pressure by 2 Party Chiefs," New York Times, 31 July 1972, p. 1, col. 8.

clearly by Eagleton, he was successful in sending this message to Democratic Party leaders and many potential voters. The South Dakota senator now initiated a similar rhetorical strategy via the airways to bring the message home to Eagleton. Through the voices of Jean Westwood, chairman of the National Democratic Committee, and Basil Paterson, party vice-chairman, McGovern delivered a national message on NBC's "Meet the Press" that same Sunday afternoon. Westwood verbalized that she was "convinced that it would be the noble thing for Tom Eagleton to do to step down."² Paterson then joined the dialogue urging the young senator to drop out of the campaign. It was obvious that the Democratic Party officials had grave reservations about the future of the present Democratic ticket. McGovern had spoken with Westwood by telephone fifteen minutes before the broadcast.³ They had agreed upon her stand against Eagleton. The senator was becoming much more firm in his messages to Eagleton.

With the two rhetorical strategies still so diametrically opposed, on this hot July weekend "some politicians foresaw the possibility of a standoff, with Senator Eagleton unwilling to accede even to a direct request from Senator McGovern to withdraw."⁴

²Apple.

³James M. Perry, Us & Them (New York: Clarkston N. Potter, Inc., 1973), p. 203.

⁴Richard Dougherty, Goodbye Mr. Christian (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1973), p. 200.

Those of the Eagleton camp watching Westwood and Paterson on "Meet the Press" were stunned. They called the performance of Mrs. Westwood--"and, by implication, of McGovern--a terrible betrayal that came without any warning."⁵

In this last rhetorical action by McGovern, Eagleton had gotten the message. With this much accomplished, McGovern initiated the second half of his fourth rhetorical stage, interpersonal dialogue between the two concerned parties. The two senators arranged a private meeting for Sunday evening. This meeting came before the previously publicized meeting of Monday, July 31. Behind closed doors, with only McGovern as an audience, Thomas Eagleton presented his case and plea for his candidacy. McGovern held firm in his resolve until Eagleton said, "George, I am no longer Tom who. I am Tom Eagleton, suddenly a very well-known political figure. George, you may not win with me, but you can't win without me."⁶ This obviously struck a chord with McGovern, for he lost that firm resolve and became inconsistent once again. Consequently, no decision to drop Eagleton was made at this meeting.

McGovern was unable to confront Eagleton directly with news that he must leave the ticket. Although he and his staff were fully convinced that the junior senator must resign, McGovern could not bring himself to break the news.

⁵Perry, p. 204.

⁶Theodore H. White, The Making of the President, 1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 274.

When the opportunity of direct communication presented itself, McGovern vacillated again. He lost his firm resolve and was once again moved by an emotional plea. McGovern lacked the decisiveness to bring the confrontation to a point of resolution. He could not handle the task alone.

On July 31, 1972, the television networks reported that Senator McGovern would announce a final decision on the Democratic ticket soon. The networks were to have their decision that very day. The two candidates plus Senator Gaylord Nelson, a friend to both and possibly the man most responsible for Eagleton's selection in the first place, met in the Marble Room of the Capitol. Nelson was present on the advice of a psychiatrist who had warned that "failure to have a third person present risked the creation of an adversary setting in which Eagleton's resistance would be heightened."⁷

The same day that the three men met in the Marble Room to decide the fate of the Democratic ticket, ABC news reported a poll of state chairmen and vice-chairmen which showed a severe split in opinion concerning whether or not to let Eagleton go.⁸ Mail to McGovern's headquarters was now running about half and half, instead of adamantly against him. Certainly not everyone was against Thomas Eagleton, as he himself argued with reports of favorable media and mail and enthusiastic crowds supporting him wherever he went. It is impossible

⁷Dougherty, p. 200.

⁸Ernest G. Bormann, "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (April, 1973), 153.

to determine whether the tide was now turning in favor of Thomas Eagleton. George McGovern did not see it in that perspective, for his rhetorical decision had finally been firmed to a point of no return. He and the politicians close to him were convinced that Eagleton was a detriment to their cause.

Whatever else McGovern might have thought about the Eagleton affair, he believed the issue could very well cost him the election. We had all seen a Gallup Poll, published Monday in Newsweek, showing that 28 percent of the voters felt that Eagleton's hospitalization would make him unfit for the Vice Presidency with 31 percent saying he should resign from the ticket. Some 80 percent agreed that he should have told McGovern about his past medical problem. As a result of the incident, some 23 percent had less confidence in McGovern and 25 percent were less favorable about the Democratic ticket. McGovern knew that he could not afford to lose one percentage point and now he stood to lose as many as 17 percent of the Democrats over this issue. Only through retrospect of the full campaign might he conclude that he had already lost them and there was no further harm to be done. But nobody, including Eagleton, made that argument.⁹

Public opinion, as evidenced through the Newsweek poll, thought that Eagleton should have been more honest with McGovern from the outset. According to Gordon Weil, McGovern had decided in his own mind that one of the major reasons Eagleton should withdraw was the lack of candor on the junior senator's part.¹⁰ Such a view is certainly ironic when one realizes that it was McGovern who was much less than candid and honest in his dealings with Eagleton most of the preceding week.

⁹Gordon L. Weil, The Long Shot (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1973), pp. 181-182.

¹⁰Weil, p. 180.

At this point in "the week that was," McGovern may have suffered from a feeling of guilt over what he must tell Eagleton. With the national political scene split over the pros and cons of Eagleton's remaining in the race, the decision ahead could only be an educated guess, with no guarantees that McGovern's answer would be the right one. In accusing Eagleton of a lack of candor and citing this lack as a major reason he should withdraw, McGovern attempted to shift the guilt of the announcement ahead from his own shoulders to Eagleton's. It was as though McGovern was blaming Eagleton for forcing himself off the ticket. McGovern purged himself and his inner feelings of guilt by accusing his running mate of the wrongdoing. This rhetorical strategy may have helped McGovern psychologically, but he still suffered an amazing loss of credibility with the American people for the way in which he handled the "Eagleton Affair."

In addition to blaming the junior senator for not being candid from the outset, McGovern and his advisers also stressed the fact that no one had been allowed to see Eagleton's medical records since the whole episode began. They argued that without medical documentation and a current evaluation, "they had no choice but to drop Eagleton."¹¹ This statement may have been a second attempt to shift the burden of guilt upon Eagleton. If this was the rhetorical strategy, it was not

¹¹Perry, p. 204.

successful; for, at the Marble Room meeting, McGovern spoke by phone with two of Eagleton's doctors. "It is ironic that he McGovern finally learned something after the final decision to surgically remove Eagleton had been made."¹²

Eagleton had waged a valiant campaign to remain on the ticket. He had to be pushed from the ticket; he would not jump. This placed all of the responsibility for the decision on McGovern. Eagleton would not share it when asked candidly about the episode.

It took two hours of persuasion and argumentation in the Marble Room that Monday night before Eagleton gave in.¹³ To avoid embarrassing Nelson by forcing him to cast the decisive vote, Eagleton said:

"George, if my presence on the ticket causes you any embarrassment, or hindrance, or an impediment, I'll step aside." McGovern said "Yes." Nelson nodded. And the McGovern-Eagleton ticket was over.

Much more, however, had been lost to the Democratic ticket than Tom Eagleton. Lost was McGovern's reputation as a politician somehow different from the ordinary--a politician who would not, like others, do anything to get elected. McGovern by this time had already antagonized many Americans by his stand on issues. For the first time, after Eagleton, he would incur not merely antagonism but--far worse in politics--contempt for incompetence.¹⁴

It was exactly three weeks since the gavel had pounded on the podium in Miami Beach at the opening of the Democratic Convention. It was about 9:00 p.m. on July 31 when the two

¹²Perry, p. 205.

¹³Dougherty, p. 200.

¹⁴White, p. 275.

candidates would act out the final scene of the Eagleton affair before the media reporters and cameras.

As a condition of resigning, Eagleton insisted that he write McGovern's statement as well as his own for the media confrontation.¹⁵ Because of this condition, it was difficult to analyze the extent of McGovern's own words and attitudes in the following announcement.

Senator Eagleton and I have met to discuss his vice-presidential candidacy. I have consistently supported Senator Eagleton. He is a talented United States senator whose ability will make him a prominent figure in American politics for many, many years.

I am fully satisfied that his health is excellent. I base that conclusion upon my conversations with his doctors and my close personal and political association with him.

In the joint decision we have reached health was not a factor.

But the public debate over Senator Eagleton's past medical history continues to divert attention from the great national issues that need to be discussed. I have referred to the growing pressures to ask for Senator Eagleton's withdrawal. We have also seen growing vocal support for his candidacy.

Senator Eagleton and I agree that the paramount needs of the Democratic Party and the nation in 1972 are unity and a full discussion of the real issues. Continued debate between those who oppose his candidacy and those who favor it will serve to further divide the party and the nation. Therefore, we have jointly agreed that the best course is for Senator Eagleton to step aside.

I wish nothing but the best for Senator Eagleton and his family. He is and will remain my good friend. Further, he has generously agreed to campaign for the Democratic ticket this fall. I can assure you I welcome his strong support.¹⁶

¹⁵Dougherty, p. 200.

¹⁶Dougherty, pp. 201-202.

Eagleton then gave his prepared statement before the media reporters and cameras:

As Senator McGovern has stated, he and I are jointly in agreement that I should withdraw as the Democratic candidate for vice president.

Needless to say, this was not an easy decision for Senator McGovern or for me. Literally thousands and thousands of people have phoned, telegraphed or written to me and Senator McGovern urging me to press on.

I will not divide the Democratic Party which already has too many divisions.

Therefore I am writing to the chairman of the Democratic Party tomorrow morning, withdrawing my candidacy.

My personal feelings are secondary to the necessity to unify the Democratic Party and elect George McGovern President of the United States.

My conscience is clear. My spirits are high.

This is definitely NOT my last press conference and Tom Eagleton is going to be around for a long, long time.

I'm for George McGovern and I'm going to continue working to see him elected President of the United States.¹⁷

The drama was over at last, and it ended, perhaps appropriately, with the actors playing their roles well. Throughout the week of communications and miscommunications, ill feelings and tensions had developed between the two men and their staffs. But for the media, to present a unified Democratic front to the voting American public, the two senators donned their

¹⁷"McGovern, Eagleton Remarks," Washington Post, 1 August 1972, p. 15, col. 1

facial masks and played their roles. They vowed to leave the Eagleton affair still as close and personal friends, although they in actuality had only been introduced once previously in 1969. However, to end the ticket with dignity and some measure of grace, the senators masked their genuine feelings for the evening and pledged Democratic unity in the election ahead.

After the Eagleton affair had ended, Theodore White gained access to notes that Eagleton had dictated throughout "the week that was." The notes provided a clear picture of the frustration and anxiety that Tom Eagleton felt as McGovern reversed his rhetorical strategy on him. Of July 28, 1972, Eagleton wrote:

Why in hell did he [McGovern] have to table-hop? Why in the hell didn't he pick up the phone, call me collect if need be and say, "Tom, it's over. There are too many imponderables in your candidacy. Your presence on the ticket jeopardizes my candidacy for the Presidency of the United States."¹⁸

As the two men met alone on July 30, 1972, in an attempt to solve the pressing dilemma of the McGovern-Eagleton ticket, Eagleton recalled:

Only now as I write this do I perceive the bloody irony of a situation wherein the two nominees of a major political party are alone together for the first time since their 45 minute respite in the Senate steam bath in the spring of 1969.¹⁹

Of the many articles and editorials written about these two speeches ending the McGovern-Eagleton ticket, columnist

¹⁸White, pp. 271-272.

¹⁹White, p. 273.

Gary Wills wrote perhaps the most devastating lead paragraph.

He began:

Senator McGovern is giving sanctity a bad name. While he blessed the crowds with his right hand, his left one was holding Eagleton's head under water till the thrashing stopped. We'll all know we're in for trouble if he should be elected and take his oath of office by saying he supports the Constitution by 1,000 per cent.²⁰

McGovern sought free major network television time the next evening to make what he termed "an important announcement." Inferences were made that this important announcement might concern an attempt at self-vindication for the previous week. However, McGovern suffered a rebuff from the three networks and was forced to postpone his broadcast until he could be assured of live coverage. "Faced with the certainty that he McGovern would defer the choice of his new running mate for a few days, the networks dourly decided that what he had to say was not that important, and offered only film coverage for later transmission."²¹ McGovern quickly found that his personal position as Democratic presidential nominee did not control automatic attention from the media. The networks apparently had a soured taste of McGovern from "the week that was."

In the third and final stage of the "Eagleton Affair," the two senators made a joint announcement indicating that the

²⁰Perry, pp. 205-206.

²¹Fred Emery, "McGovern Broadcast Put Off After TV Networks' Rebuff," London Times, 2 August 1972, p. 6, col. 1.

junior senator would resign his place on the ticket. According to a general consensus of media reports from this time, McGovern's vacillating rhetorical strategies and indecisiveness during "the week that was" were devastating to his ethos and credibility as a potential national leader. Once McGovern had reached his decision to remove Eagleton, he was not able to convey that message directly to Eagleton. He relied on Westwood and Paterson to deliver the message via the airways. When Eagleton did hear what McGovern indicated, the two men met in private to discuss the matter. This would have been the opportune time for McGovern to address Eagleton with his decision; however, the South Dakota senator vacillated once again. McGovern appeared unable to verbalize his inner resolve to remove Eagleton from the ticket. He was again moved by an emotional plea from Eagleton and postponed announcing his decision to the junior senator. McGovern began placing blame on Eagleton for not being candid from the outset and not revealing his medical records in an attempt to purge himself from any guilt feelings over making the political decision to "dump" Eagleton. When the time of decision-announcing arrived and the situation could no longer be postponed, McGovern took a third party into the meeting with Eagleton. Gaylord Nelson's presence lowered the possibility of a direct confrontation and/or stalemate between the two men, plus his presence provided McGovern with an added amount of nonverbal support to face Eagleton. After two hours of discussion, Eagleton initiated

his own departure from the ticket. He later recorded bitter feelings and reactions to the way McGovern rhetorically handled his presence on the ticket; however, none of this bitterness was evident in the prepared announcements each man read to the waiting media. Eagleton wrote both rhetorical announcements and carefully inserted that his health was not the reason the two men jointly agreed to dissolve the ticket. The drama of the "Eagleton Affair" was finally over. McGovern had lost three precious weeks of campaigning time; however, more importantly, he had lost his major assets of credibility and candor in facing the Republicans in November.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

George Stanley McGovern had spent eighteen months of exhausting time and effort securing the Democratic nomination for the presidency. He had come from the long shot position in fifth place among party hopefuls to the front runner as the Democratic Convention opened its doors in July, 1972. The senator had amassed an impressive record of primary victories and a vote-getting ability that commanded Democratic attention. McGovern presented promise, hope, a new face, and a new image to the party. His supporters argued that his "new politician" image of honesty, sincerity, and directness would win him the White House. It was McGovern himself who stated: "The kind of campaign I intend to run will rest on candor and reason."¹ It was through these values that McGovern sought to establish his credibility with the American voting public. This credibility was McGovern's biggest asset. It worked a two-fold role in contrasting McGovern to the present Republican Administration in the White House and enticing more grassroots workers to his own campaign organization.

Throughout the primaries and up to the time of the Democratic Convention, McGovern appeared to have carried out his

¹Ernest R. May and Janet Fraser, eds., Campaign '72: The Managers Speak (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 31.

campaign promises of candor and reason. The media picked up on this "new image" and emphasized the new face and new kind of politician emerging from the Democratic ranks. McGovern, indeed, was a man on the rise--that is, a man on the rise until he met a rhetorical challenge from the "Eagleton Affair." McGovern's close adviser, Gary Hart, dramatically explained it this way:

The events surrounding the selection of Senator Eagleton and his subsequent departure from the ticket cost McGovern any chance he had to win the Presidency. In retrospect, all that took place thereafter was anticlimatic and politically inconsequential in terms of the final results of the election. The campaign was doomed when Eagleton was selected. We could not win with him or without him. There was no way out. Neither the manner in which the decision was made to keep him on the ticket, nor the negotiations which led to his departure were well-handled.²

What did McGovern and his rhetoricians do in the three-week period of the Eagleton affair that subsequently set back their cause and ruined the previous eighteen months of work? The answer could only be found in analyzing the political candidate himself and the intense personal and political pressures that came into play during this unique situation in American politics.

As the Democratic Convention convened, McGovern and his staff found themselves struggling to beat back the California challenge. Next they found themselves struggling to keep their coalition together. After eighteen grueling months of road

²Gary Warren Hart, Right from the Start (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Company, 1973), p. 264.

work in the primary states, the Democratic Convention did not prove to be the rosy, relaxed victory they had hoped it would be. Internal pressures from the coalition and external pressures from the anti-McGovern forces created tensions, anxieties, and utter exhaustion. Theodore White accurately depicted the physical and emotional state of George McGovern during this convention week:

Thus of all those exhausted at the convention, none could possibly have been more exhausted than George Stanley McGovern, who for three days had been practicing simultaneously the roles of executive, politician, and saint. The events of the next forty-eight hours, and even more of the next two weeks, can be understood only through the exhaustion of George McGovern.³

Once the nomination was his, McGovern was faced with choosing a running mate. Being new to the national political race, the South Dakota senator was still a bit naive and felt a vice-presidential candidate would be his for the asking. The man who had shown excellent leadership and organization in the primaries, lacked both in his new role as the Democratic presidential nominee. The McGovern camp was unorganized and impromptu in its selection of a vice-presidential candidate. After several rejections and mounting external time pressure, McGovern was forced to call Thomas Eagleton. It was he who took the initiative to call Eagleton, even though some members of his camp were asking for more time to consider. McGovern acted hastily and independently. This, "the longest day in a

³Theodore H. White, The Making of the President, 1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 240.

long campaign," saw several mistakes in timing. First, there was not enough time devoted to compiling a list of possible choices or feeling out their intentions; second, there was not enough time allotted to checking into the backgrounds of the serious nominees; and third, McGovern gave in to time pressure by impulsively calling a compromise vice-presidential choice as the filing deadline approached.

Using the strategy of positive reinforcement, the McGovern camp fed to the media a glowing picture of the newly formed ticket. Whereas in actuality the McGovern rhetoricians knew extremely little about the junior senator, they colored his qualifications beautifully. Time pressure had not allowed a meeting between the two staffs so that a joint statement could be made.

McGovern asked his supporters to accept the little known junior senator on his word alone and his credibility. The public did so, on the assumption that extreme care and consideration had been spent in choosing Eagleton. Thus McGovern's credibility as a decision-maker and leader became associated with his first task as the Democratic presidential nominee, that of choosing Tom Eagleton as his running mate. Later McGovern's credibility would suffer severely as accounts of his unorganization and ineffectiveness in that first task became known.

As rumors of Eagleton's health began circulating on the convention floor and taking the form of anonymous phone

messages, the McGovern staff did nothing to show immediate concern. Physical and mental exhaustion shifted new priorities to vacations and relaxation. If only McGovern and his rhetoricians had taken a direct offensive action in these next few days, they would have been much more rhetorically prepared to deal with Eagleton's past illness.

When external pressures forced McGovern and Eagleton to hold a press conference announcing the Missouri senator's three hospitalizations, the air surrounding the situation was tense and anxious. The Knight newspaper's readiness to break an exclusive story on Eagleton triggered the eventual explosion. However, timing was to play a critical role in this particular press conference. McGovern made the decision to support Eagleton solely on his own without taking the precautionary time to confer with advisers; he made the announcement hastily without consulting Democratic Party leaders; and, he initiated an independent, full stand of support for his running mate that very day, before a sampling of party and public opinion could be gathered. McGovern was in a new role as a presidential nominee, and he played that role aggressively and independently, much to the displeasure of old party regulars.

McGovern and Eagleton both acted under the futile hope that the illness issue would die down and fade away within a few days. Neither of them realized how truly sensational the past illness was. And neither of them realized the powerful impact the media could have on such a story.

"The week that was" revealed a devastating inconsistency in the persuasive strategies of George McGovern. From a 1,000 percent vow of support, McGovern turned to silence. Then he began to shade his rhetoric in the opposite direction through indirect communications. Finally, as his support dropped to zero, McGovern paved the way for Eagleton's withdrawal through direct communication with his running mate.

There was a lack of honesty and candor in McGovern's rhetorical utterances about Eagleton. The media openly and severely criticized the senator for his lack of truthfulness and directness. Shana Alexander, in her lead paragraph in Newsweek, struck out at McGovern:

When the state was in crisis in ancient times, the priests used to sacrifice an animal to study its entrails for signs and portents. The all star sacrificial goat of our own state and times seems to have been Thomas Eagleton.

The one advantage that George McGovern had over his opponent from the beginning was his aura of rock-like integrity. McGovern's handling of the Eagleton affair destroyed that advantage, and destroyed him as well. It was probably the most shattering blow to any Presidential candidacy in America's 200-year history.⁴

The Chicago Tribune also printed a harsh criticism of McGovern's tactics:

In the name of political expediency, Senator Thomas F. Eagleton has been thrown to the wolves. Senator George McGovern's "1,000 per cent" support of his choice for the Vice Presidency has dwindled to zero. Thus ends an episode unprecedented in American Presidential politics, an episode marked

⁴Shana Alexander, "Eagleton's Saintly Revenge," Newsweek, 13 November 1972, p. 41.

by amateurish bumbling, cynicism, bad judgment, and deceit--in all respects a tragedy of errors.⁵

The editorial writer, Jim Naughton, sounded shocked as he described the less-than-straightforward way McGovern had disposed of Eagleton. He argued in a July 31, 1972, article that such rhetoric shattered McGovern's image as an idealist:

The biggest political casualty in the Eagleton affair may prove to be not Senator Thomas F. Eagleton but the man who chose him to seek the vice-presidency. Mr. McGovern appeared, even to disillusioned members of his campaign staff, to be saying one thing and doing another--which was the charge he had been preparing to make against President Nixon. It all seemed to illustrate, as have other events since McGovern won the Democratic nomination, that he is, after all, a politician.⁶

Approximately one week later, Naughton's feelings toward McGovern had not cooled. In the New York Times' "Week in Review," Naughton reflected, on August 6, 1972, "the view of virtually all the media"⁷:

What appeared to matter most was not that McGovern had dropped Eagleton but that he had gone about the whole affair in such a way as to cast doubt on his ability or willingness to meet his own test of public performance. "Truth is a habit of integrity," he said in his acceptance speech at Miami Beach . . . /so/ critics asked whether he could now expect ready

⁵ Edward W. Knappman, Evan Drossman, and Robert Newman, eds., Campaign 72 (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1972), p. 136.

⁶ Timothy Crouse, The Boys on the Bus (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 67.

⁷ Richard Dougherty, Goodbye Mr. Christian (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1973), p. 203.

acceptance of, say "one thousand per cent" support for Israel or tax reform.⁸

While McGovern was dropping Senator Eagleton as a running mate and pondering the choice of a successor, the national press was giving the senator "a roasting that would have made Voltaire wince."⁹ Columnist Tom Braden accused the senator of being a "school teacher who couldn't keep the class."¹⁰ Columnist William S. White wrote that "the episode unalterably establishes the profound weakness of the whole McGovern movement."¹¹ A third notable columnist, James Reston, agreed that "the issue in this whole sad Eagleton business is not only Senator Eagleton's health but Senator McGovern's judgment."¹²

While editorials and media articles were sound ways of expressing individualized personal opinion concerning McGovern, polls were an excellent source for locating mass generalized opinion on the man and the current issue. In a Time survey in August, 1972, 302 citizens chosen at random were questioned about the Eagleton affair. "More than half of the voters questioned, including both Republicans and Democrats, thought less of McGovern because of the Eagleton debacle. The reasons,

⁸Dougherty.

⁹"Feet to the Fire," Newsweek, 14 August 1972, p. 42.

¹⁰Theodore H. White, The Making of the President, 1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 275.

¹¹William S. White, "The McGovern Method," Washington Post, 29 July 1972, p. 17, col. 1.

¹²James Reston, "Blame for McGovern, Too," San Francisco Chronicle, 28 July 1972, p. 8, col. 1.

however, were mixed."¹³ The Harris Poll, taken during the darkest hours of the Eagleton affair, "found McGovern trailing Nixon by 23 points."¹⁴

Three Gallup Polls were clearest in reporting a McGovern drop.

The first, just after the Democratic convention, showed Mr. Nixon leading by 19 points, 56-37. The second--part of the Newsweek survey--was run after Senator Thomas Eagleton's disclosure of his psychiatric history but while he was still on the Democratic ticket. That result was 57-32--a clear drop in McGovern strength. The latest trial heat, run mostly after Sargent Shriver's new designation as the new running mate, results in a score of 57-31, which is another low for McGovern.¹⁵

If the McGovern camp and friendly Democratic party leaders were easily swayed by public opinion polls and surveys, these polls made it clear that the Eagleton affair presented a handicap to the ticket. What the multitude of indignant critics burned McGovern for was not the political move he made, but the way--through indecisiveness, vacillation, and lack of candor--in which he made the move. The media followed each stage of McGovern's inconsistent persuasive strategy and communication with the Eagleton staff and displayed it for the entire nation to see.

¹³"The Voters Assess the Two Tickets," Time, 21 August 1972, p. 14.

¹⁴Paul R. Wieck, "Regaining Momentum," New Republic, 19 and 26 August 1972, p. 10.

¹⁵"What America Really Thinks of Nixon," Newsweek, 28 August 1972, p. 16.

"The week that was" presented a serious exchange of communications and miscommunications between the two political groups. Many of the miscommunications were the result of distorted perceptions, anxieties, and pressures. To many in the Eagleton camp, the junior senator's withdrawal came as a welcome relief; to others, it came as a bitter relief. One Eagleton associate said bitterly in mock relief at being out of the campaign: "The Titanic was sinking, and we were on the last lifeboat leaving."¹⁶

Gordon Weil wrote perhaps the clearest and most accurate summary of the "Eagleton Affair" in his narrative of the 1972 campaign, The Long Shot. Weil asserted that the greatest damage done to McGovern was in the public's perception of him. Of the tragedy Weil wrote:

The Eagleton Affair was to remain with us throughout the campaign. McGovern turned out to be the villain of the piece, while Eagleton was the hero. It was believed that McGovern had failed to check adequately on Eagleton, but even more important he had turned his back on him when the chips were down. The "1,000 percent" support entered into the national political vocabulary as a synonym for betrayal and I could not help but wince every time I heard it. Had McGovern dropped Eagleton immediately, he probably would have suffered less political damage than resulted from his apparent change of mind.¹⁷

In aspiring to the presidency, McGovern sought the support and votes of millions of Americans. Since individual,

¹⁶"Behind Eagleton Withdrawal: Confusion and Division," New York Times, 2 August 1972, p. 20, col. 5.

¹⁷Gordon L. Weil, The Long Shot (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1973), pp. 182-183.

interpersonal contact with these millions of people was impossible, the McGovern tacticians proceeded to sell their candidate to the voting audience through all forms of the media. They attempted to create an image that a vast majority of the populace would support. They assumed that the general public expected a presidential contender to possess high degrees of integrity, credibility, trustworthiness, and sincerity. It was also important that he show leadership, intellect, and reasoning ability. In 1972, the McGovern staff tried to promote the image that McGovern was not really a politician. Instead, they wanted the audience of potential voters to see him as an honest, sincere, decent man who just happened to be in politics.

In order for a speaker's rhetoric to be effective, he must live up to the reputation and image that has been created for him. McGovern was unable to fulfill those expectations. The very image which McGovern forces tried to nurture, was ruined by the senator's indirect communications, miscommunications, and ineffective communications. He violated the image of what a good presidential candidate should be.

The conclusions derived from the Eagleton affair suggest six generalizations about political speaking.

First, when a politician's utterances portray him as not being candid and honest, he suffers a loss of credibility with his audience of voters. McGovern's credibility as a potential leader suffered a devastating blow as members of

the media lashed out at the manner in which McGovern removed Eagleton from the ticket.

Second, when an audience perceives a potential leader has not spent adequate time in research and deliberation, it begins to doubt the leadership qualities of the rhetorician. As his impromptu selection of a vice-presidential nominee and his hasty, independent decision to keep Eagleton on the ticket became known, the audience expressed its doubts in McGovern as shown in falling percentages in public opinion polls and surveys.

Third, when a rhetorician is swayed by an emotional appeal rather than a logical one, it suggests a weakness in reasoning ability. McGovern was swayed twice by a pathos appeal, as the logical appeal emphasized by advisers and Democratic Party leaders went unheeded.

Fourth, when a rhetorician acts hastily out of an emotional appeal, he may later regret his utterances. The 1,000 percent stand of support for Eagleton was given in anger. This inflated rhetoric, which he later reversed, haunted McGovern through election day.

Fifth, when a rhetorician is assumed to be a competent manager, rhetorical vacillation is destructive to the speaker's image. McGovern completely reversed his persuasive strategy concerning Eagleton in a span of one week. He moved too quickly without taking time for adequate explanations of

his reasoning. His inconsistent, vacillating rhetorical strategy cost him countless support in money, volunteer workers, and votes.

Sixth, when a politician is given a choice between two difficult alternatives, it may be better for him to be consistent in his rhetoric than make the assumed "better" decision. Rhetorical inconsistency may be more damaging in the long run. It may be presumptuous to assume that McGovern should have taken a more positive stand in Eagleton's favor and dismissed psychiatric history as unimportant, but it is obvious that his failure to do so was fatal to his campaign.

When the episode ended, McGovern was viewed by many people as the "loser." His rhetorical handling of the episode had severely crippled his attempt at the presidency. The media blasted his handling of the situation; his campaign plummeted to a new low. McGovern, now more than ever, was truly "the long shot" for the presidency. It is hoped that future political contenders will profit from the rhetorical errors that McGovern made during the "Eagleton Affair."

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