

■ George McGovern's Acceptance Speech at the 1972 Democratic National Convention

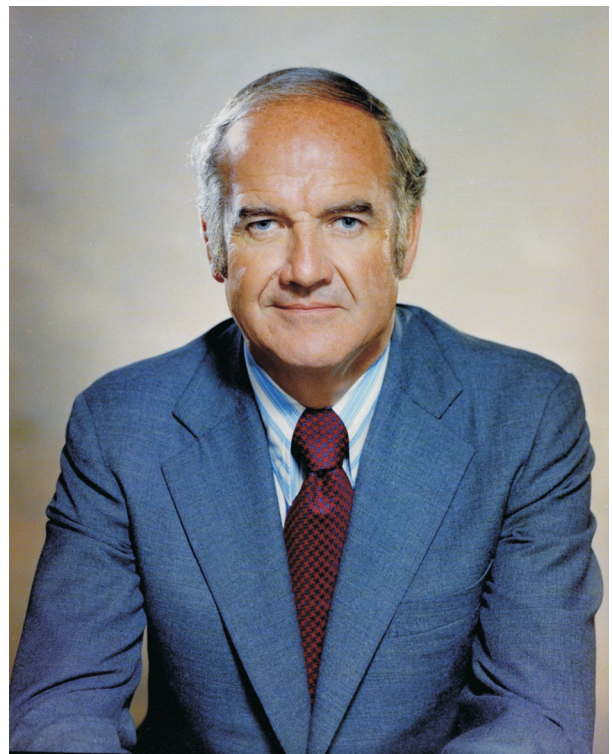
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Author: George S. McGovern

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Summary Overview

In 1972 antiwar South Dakota Senator George S. McGovern defied the odds to defeat establishment Democrats Edmund Muskie and Hubert Humphrey to win the 1972 Democratic nomination for president. McGovern ran the most liberal Democratic campaign in U.S. history, calling for an immediate end to the Vietnam War, 30-percent cuts in defense spending, full employment, a guaranteed annual wage and amnesty for draft evaders. By 1972 McGovern was the Senate's most ardent opponent of the Vietnam War. In 1970 he sponsored an amendment with liberal Republican Mark Hatfield to cut off funds for the war in Southeast Asia. After the amendment's defeat, McGovern resolved to run for president. He assembled a committed army of young, idealistic volunteers and took advantage of new, more open Democratic delegate selection rules to win key primaries. After his insurgent campaign victory, however, McGovern's campaign fell apart. The Democratic Convention in Miami was riven by factional platform fights among the many new representatives of the more diverse Democratic coalition such as feminists, peace activists, civil rights activists and Gay Liberation advocates. The balloting to nominate McGovern was not complete until after midnight and McGovern delivered his acceptance speech at 2:48 a.m. to a vastly reduced television audience. A few weeks later revelations that McGovern's vice-presidential choice, Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, had once undergone electro-shock therapy for "nervous exhaustion" led to him being dropped from the ticket, further undermining the McGovern campaign. Meanwhile, incumbent president Richard M. Nixon coasted on his growing popularity as U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam was down to 25,000 from the high of 550,000 when he took office, and as even his critics applauded his visits to the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, signaling the beginning of détente (an easing of Cold War tensions). McGovern sought to counter these Nixon strengths by raising the news reports of a burglary at the Democratic Campaign Headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C., but reports of connections to the Nixon White House would not become a major issue until the following year. On Nov. 7, George McGovern lost 49 states to Richard Nixon, winning only the District of Columbia and Massachusetts in the greatest electoral landslide in U.S. history.



George McGovern. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

Defining Moment

George McGovern was an unlikely standard bearer of political and cultural rebellion of the 1960s. Born in the prairies of one of America's least populated states, he was raised by a Methodist minister and was also a World War II hero who had flown numerous B-24 bomber missions over Germany and Italy, which earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross (the modest McGovern rarely spoke of his exemplary war record). Despite the traditional upbringing, McGovern was heir to the prairie populism and witnessed hunger and hardship among his neighbors in the Great Depression and developed a life-long commitment to those in need. Trained as a professional historian (he earned his doctorate in 1946), he brought a critical eye to Cold War America's foreign policy. Opposition to military interventionism and support for feeding the world's hungry became McGovern's signature issues.

After winning two elections to Congress, McGovern lost a close Senate race in 1960. President John F. Kennedy appointed him to head his "Food for Peace" program, which McGovern ran to wide acclaim. McGovern tried again for the Senate in 1962 and this time won.

McGovern spoke out against the Kennedy administration's growing support for the government in South Vietnam through the escalating number of military advisors to assist the government against the Viet Cong insurgency in 1963. McGovern questioned the military strategy and predicted prophetically that it would lead to a deepening American commitment to a war which it would have difficult winning or getting out of. He argued the Viet Cong insurgency was rooted in the colonial history of Vietnam more than international communism. These views would become common in the late 1960s but were rare in 1963.

Despite McGovern's skepticism of the war effort in South Vietnam, he reluctantly supported the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964, which authorized the use of U.S. military force in Vietnam, a vote he soon regretted.

By 1968, U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam had grown to 550,000 and the bombing of North Vietnam was in its third year. America became deeply divided

between "hawks" and "doves." 1968 witnessed Black unrest, militant campus protest, a burgeoning hippy counterculture, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and peace candidate Robert Kennedy. McGovern agreed to run in Kennedy's place as a peace candidate against prowar Democrat Hubert Humphrey. McGovern lost to Humphrey at the chaotic Democratic Convention in Chicago, where old-guard labor leaders and big city mayors prevailed in heading off the insurgents.

After the convention, McGovern was tasked with leading a commission to revise the Democratic delegation selection rules, to make them more democratic and inclusive. The "McGovern-Fraser Commission" resulted in more primaries and rules for states to include quotas for minorities, women and youth. The effect was to shift power from the old party bosses and open the nominating process to greater popular input. This ended up amplifying the influence of committed grass-roots activists, which McGovern built his long-shot 1972 campaign upon.

During the first years of Nixon's presidency, divisions over race, cultural values and the war deepened. Nixon announced a policy of "Vietnamization," to slowly withdraw U.S. ground troops while turning more fighting over to the South Vietnam Army. To buy time for Nixon's gradual troop pullout, the U.S. escalated the bombing of Vietnam and expanded the war into neighboring Cambodia and Laos. The May 1970 U.S. ground incursion into Cambodia to disrupt communist sanctuaries led to the biggest student strike in U.S. history and the killing of four students at Kent State by Ohio National Guard. Some of the antiwar movement was committed to revolution and violence. McGovern lectured widely against the war on college campuses and became concerned violence in the antiwar movement would end up helping Nixon prolong the war.

McGovern tried to end the war through Congress's constitutional prerogatives. On April 30, 1970, McGovern introduced the McGovern-Hatfield amendment to cut off all funds for the war by mid-1971. The bill sparked a massive letter-writing campaign in support. Urging passage of the amendment, McGovern gave a powerful speech on the floor of the Senate: "... every senator in this chamber is

partly responsible for sending 50,000 Americans to an early grave. This chamber reeks of blood. Every Senator here is partly responsible for the human wreckage ... all across our land—young boys without legs, or arms, or genitals, or faces or hopes... And if we don't end this foolish, damnable war, those young men will some day curse us..." His amendment was defeated 55 to 39.

McGovern decided to run for president to end the war. He announced his candidacy on January 18, 1971, the earliest announcement in a hundred years. McGovern's campaign attracted many idealistic, young volunteers, much like Eugene McCarthy's 1968 campaign, but was run more professionally. McGovern won several key states to defeat his more moderate and experienced rivals, Hubert Humphrey and Edmund Muskie, who had run as the Democratic ticket for president and vice president respectively in 1968. Segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace also entered the Democratic primaries and won Florida and did surprisingly well elsewhere until he was shot and paralyzed by a deranged assassin. Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm ran an historic campaign as the first African American woman to seek the presidency. McGovern showed surprising strength among blue collar voters more attracted to his economic platform, support which withered away in the general election as opponents associated McGovern with unpatriotic radicals and the counterculture.

McGovern's campaign began to fall apart at the Democratic Convention in Miami. The new rules led to a large number of inexperienced delegates rooted in activist movements, not party politics, and debate over the platform deteriorated into infighting. Old-guard labor and from big city Democrats felt

marginalized by the activists (the reverse of the 1968 Convention) and were shocked by the prominence of long-haired peace activists, feminists and Gay Liberationists, all of which were considered outside of the American mainstream at that time. The convention was more open than any before, but on TV the proceedings came across as chaotic and some of the speeches incendiary. McGovern wasn't nominated until after 2 a.m. on July 12, 1972. He gave one of the best speeches of his career, the "America Come Home" speech, but beginning at 2:48 a.m. his audience had dwindled from a prime-time viewership of 70-million to 15-million late-night viewers.

Author Biography

George Stanley McGovern was born in Avon, South Dakota on July 19, 1922. He attended Dakota Wesleyan University in 1940 then joined the Army Air Corps and flew bombing missions over Europe, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross. He graduated Wesleyan in 1946 then received a Ph.D. in history from Northwestern University and taught for several years before winning a seat in Congress in 1956 and 1958. McGovern led President John F. Kennedy's "Food for Peace" program until his election to the U.S. Senate in 1962, where he served until his re-election defeat in 1980. After a failed bid for the Democratic nomination for president in 1984, McGovern returned to teaching and writing until 1997 when President Bill Clinton appointed him to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in 1997. In 2000 McGovern received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He married Eleanor Stegeberg in 1943 with whom he had five children. McGovern died on October 21, 2012.



Historical Document

Chairman O'Brien, Chairwoman Burke, Senator Kennedy, Senator Eagleton and my fellow citizens, I'm happy to join us for this benediction of our Friday sunrise service.

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...

So tonight I accept your nomination with a full and grateful heart.

This afternoon I crossed the wide Missouri to recommend a running mate of wide vision and deep compassion, Senator Tom Eagleton.

I'm proud to have him at my side, and I'm proud to have been introduced a moment ago by one of the most eloquent and courageous voices in this land Senator Ted Kennedy.

My nomination is all the more precious and that it is a gift of the most open political process in all of our political history.

It is the sweet harvest of the work of tens of thousands of tireless volunteers, young and old alike, funded by literally hundreds of thousands of small contributors in every part of this nation.

Those who lingered on the brink of despair only a short time ago have been brought into this campaign, heart, hand, head and soul, and I have been the beneficiary of the most remarkable political organization in the history of this country.

It is an organization that gives dramatic proof to the power of love and to a faith that can literally move mountains.

As Yeats put it, "Count where man's glory most begins and ends, and say: My glory was I had such friends."

This is the people's nomination and next January we will restore the government to the people of this country.

I believe that American politics will never be quite the same again.

We are entering a new period of important and hopeful change in America, a period comparable to those eras that unleashed such remarkable ferment in the period of Jefferson and Jackson and Roosevelt.

Let the opposition collect their \$10 million in secret money from the privileged few and let us find one million ordinary Americans who will contribute \$25 each to this campaign, a Million Member Club with members who will not expect special favors for themselves but a better land for us all.

In the literature and music of our children we are told, to everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven. And for America, the time has come at last.

This is the time for truth, not falsehood. In a Democratic nation, no one likes to say that his inspiration came from secret arrangements by closed doors, but in the sense that is how my candidacy began. I am here as your candidate tonight in large part because during four administrations of both parties, a terrible war has been chartered behind closed doors.

I want those doors opened and I want that war closed. And I make these pledges above all others: the doors of government will be opened, and that war will be closed...

And this is also a time, not for death, but for life. In 1968 many Americans thought they were voting to bring our sons home from Vietnam in peace, and since then 20,000 of our sons have come home in coffins.

I have no secret plan for peace. I have a public plan. And as one whose heart has ached for the past ten years over the agony of Vietnam, I will halt a senseless bombing of Indochina on Inaugural Day.

There will be no more Asian children running ablaze from bombed-out schools. There will be no more talk of bombing the dikes or the cities of the North.

And within 90 days of my inauguration, every American soldier and every American prisoner will be out of the jungle and out of their cells and then home in America where they belong.

And then let us resolve that never again will we send the precious young blood of this country to die trying to prop up a corrupt military dictatorship abroad.

This is also the time to turn away from excessive preoccupation overseas to the rebuilding of our own nation. America must be restored to a proper role in the world. But we can do that only through the recovery of confidence in ourselves...

Now, to anyone in this hall or beyond who doubts the ability of Democrats to join together in common cause, I say never underestimate the power of Richard Nixon to bring harmony to Democratic ranks. He is the unwitting unifier

and the fundamental issue of this national campaign and all of us are going to help him redeem a pledge made ten years ago—that next year you won't have Richard Nixon to kick around anymore.

We have had our fury and our frustrations in these past months and at this Convention, but frankly, I welcome the contrast with the smug and dull and empty event which will doubtless take place here in Miami next month.

We chose this struggle, we reformed our Party, and we let the people in. So we stand today not as a collection of backroom strategies, not as a tool of ITT or any other special interest. So let our opponents stand on the status quo while we seek to refresh the American spirit.

I believe that the greatest contribution America can now make to our fellow mortals is to heal our own great but very deeply troubled land. We must respond—we must respond to that ancient command: "Physician, heal thyself."

Now, it is necessary in an age of nuclear power and hostile forces that we'll be militarily strong. America must never become a second-rate nation. As one who has tasted the bitter fruits of our weakness before Pearl Harbor in 1941, I give you my pledge that if I become the President of the United States, America will keep its defenses alert and fully sufficient to meet any danger.

We will do that not only for ourselves, but for those who deserve and need the shield of our strength—our old allies in Europe and elsewhere, including the people of Israel who will always have our help to hold their Promised Land.

Yet I believe that every man and woman in this Convention Hall knows that for 30 years we have been so absorbed with fear and danger from abroad that we have permitted our own house to fall into disarray..

National security includes schools for our children as well as silos for our missiles.

It includes the health of our families as much as the size of our bombs, the safety of our streets, and the condition of our cities, and not just the engines of war.

If we some day choke on the pollution of our own air, there will be little consolation in leaving behind a dying continent ringed with steel.

So while protecting ourselves abroad, let us form a more perfect union here at home. And this is the time for that task.

We must also make this a time of justice and jobs for all our people. For more than three and half years we have tolerated stagnation and a rising level of

joblessness, with more than five million of our best workers unemployed at this very moment. Surely, this is the most false and wasteful economics of all.

Our deep need is not for idleness but for new housing and hospitals, for facilities to combat pollution and take us home from work, for better products able to compete on vigorous world markets.

The highest single domestic priority of the next administration will be to ensure that every American able to work has a job to.

That job guarantee will and must depend on a reinvigorated private economy, freed at last from the uncertainties and burdens of war, but it is our firm commitment that whatever employment the private sector does not provide, the Federal government will either stimulate or provide itself.

Whatever it takes, this country is going back to work. America cannot exist with most of our people working and paying taxes to support too many others mired in a demeaning and hopeless welfare mess.

Therefore, we intend to begin by putting millions back to work and after that is done, we will assure to those unable to work an income fully adequate to a decent life.

Now beyond this, a program to put America back to work demands that work be properly rewarded. That means the end of a system of economic controls in which labor is depressed, but prices and corporate profit run sky-high.

It means a system of national health insurance so that a worker can afford decent health care for himself and his family.

It means real enforcement of the laws so that the drug racketeers are put behind bars and our streets are once again safe for our families...

So let us stand for justice and jobs and against special privilege.

And this is the time to stand for those things that are close to the American spirit. We are not content with things as they are. We reject the view of those who say, "America—love it or leave it." We reply, "Let us change it so we may love it the more."

And this is the time. It is the time for this land to become again a witness to the world for what is just and noble in human affairs. It is time to live more with faith and less with fear, with an abiding confidence that can sweep away the strongest barriers between us and teach us that we are truly brothers and sisters.

So join with me in this campaign. Lend Senator Eagleton and me your strength and your support, and together we will call America home to the ideals that nourished us from the beginning.

From secrecy and deception in high places; come home, America

From military spending so wasteful that it weakens our nation; come home, America.

From the entrenchment of special privileges in tax favoritism; from the waste of idle lands to the joy of useful labor; from the prejudice based on race and sex; from the loneliness of the aging poor and the despair of the neglected sick—come home, America.

Come home to the affirmation that we have a dream. Come home to the conviction that we can move our country forward.

Come home to the belief that we can seek a newer world, and let us be joyful in that homecoming, for this “is your land, this land is my land—from California to New York island, from the redwood forest to the gulf stream waters—this land was made for you and me.”

So let us close on this note: May God grant each one of us the wisdom to cherish this good land and to meet the great challenge that beckons us home.

And now is the time to meet that challenge.

Good night, and Godspeed to you all.



Document Analysis

McGovern opens his speech with humor, joking about the lateness of the hour and the contentiousness of the convention, specifically the number of challenges to his choice for vice-president. McGovern then takes pride in the openness of the convention and contrasts it to presidential nominations in the past which took place in proverbial smoke-filled rooms behind closed doors. It is a secrecy he finds inimical to democracy and which in his view gave rise to the Vietnam War and economic inequality. McGovern turns next to his main issue, the Vietnam War, evoking powerful images of the human toll the war has wrought, and promising to end the bombing on Inauguration Day and have the last U.S. troops home soon thereafter.

The speech then focuses on domestic issues which McGovern ties to America's war in Vietnam. As America withdraws funds will be made available for human needs at home such as full employment, national healthcare, education and more. McGovern returns to foreign policy, asserting that his withdrawal from Vietnam and rejection of military invasions around the world does not mean having a weak defense or the abandonment of allies in Europe or Israel.

McGovern concludes with a powerful peroration in which he ends each sentence with "Come home, America." The refrain is a call to come home not only literally from Vietnam, but to neglected domestic issues and to lost American values. He calls on America to transform itself into a more just, equitable and democratic society, and argues that in so doing, America will become a stronger nation and enhance its influence and stature in the world. McGovern ends a raucous convention with an inspirational appeal to the delegates' shared vision for an America at peace abroad and pursuing economic justice at home.

Essential Themes

In contrast to the free-wheeling Democratic Convention, the Republican Convention, also in Miami, was an orderly, professional, slick advertisement for the re-election of Richard Nixon. Nixon was portrayed as an experienced statesman who had steered America

out of the turbulent divisions of the late 1960s, was close to withdrawing the last U.S. troops from Vietnam, and had opened up a new era of peace with his visits to China and the Soviet Union.

McGovern meanwhile made historic stumbles. Having poorly vetted his vice-presidential pick Senator Thomas Eagleton, it was revealed Eagleton had once undergone electric shock therapy for "nervous exhaustion." At first McGovern proclaimed he stood behind Eagleton "1000%" but then he reversed course and dropped Eagleton. This undermined McGovern's image for integrity and made him appear indecisive. After his offer of the V.P. slot was refused by several Democrats, including Ted Kennedy, McGovern settled on former Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver as his running mate.

McGovern ran on an economic platform of full-employment, a guaranteed annual wage, medical insurance for all, and a 30-percent defense spending cut over three years to fund domestic spending. He promised an immediate withdrawal from Vietnam and an end to U.S. military adventures around the world. Nixon supporters sought to portray McGovern as the candidate of radicals, hippies and Women Liberationists, charging McGovern of standing for "Acid, Amnesty and Abortion." (McGovern did support amnesty for draft evaders, but saw abortion as a state issue and did not advocate drug legalization.) McGovern sought to raise his flagging campaign by drawing attention to the June break-in of Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate Complex in Washington, D.C., but the issue that ultimately destroyed the Nixon presidency never gained traction in 1972. On Election Day, June 7, 1972, Richard Nixon won the popular vote 60.7 percent to McGovern's 37.5 percent, a near mirror image of the Goldwater defeat of 1964. McGovern only won Massachusetts and the District of Columbia.

Many historians consider McGovern's 1972 campaign as the last gasp of 1960s liberalism and antiwar activism. At the time, countercultural journalist Hunter S. Thompson even described McGovern's campaign as a "sixties campaign in the seventies." Nixon's landslide over McGovern is also considered a consolidation of the political realignments begun in the 1960s which saw many white Southerners, urban

northern ethnic groups and some labor union voters of the old New Deal coalition abandon the Democratic Party for the emerging Republican Party majority in national electoral politics (it should be noted, however, that although McGovern lost badly, Republicans picked up few seats in Congress where the Democrats held their majority). Still, McGovern's campaign signaled the rise of hitherto excluded groups as major players in electoral politics, such as peace activists, feminists and Gay liberation supporters. It also marked a general Democratic move away from interventionist policies and the loosening of the bipartisan Cold War consensus of the last two-and-a-half decades.

—Robert Surbrug, PhD

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