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Life and Times of George McGovern (Panel Discussion)

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Life and Times of George McGovern (Panel Discussion)

Abstract

Dr. Taylor's contribution to a 5-person panel discussion of the book *The Life and Times of George McGovern* by Thomas J. Knock.

Keywords

book discussion, The Life and Times of George McGovern, Thomas J. Knock

Disciplines

Political Science

Comments

Panel discussion held at the annual Dakota Conference of the Center for Western Studies at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on April 23, 2016.

Center for Western Studies
Annual Conference
Augustana College - Sioux Falls, SD
April 23, 2016

Book panel:

Knock, Thomas J. *The Rise of a Prairie Statesman: The Life and Times of George McGovern*.
Vol. 1. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016.

personal connections to place names: Knox Co. IL (ancestors), Aberdeen SD (wife), University of Iowa (first master's degree)

detailed, well-written, historically contextual

political scientist – ideological and institutional

p. 401 – In 1968, Norman Mailer compared McGovern to Henry Fonda.

p. 403 – Party bosses disregarding primary results, Humphrey sitting out primaries, RFK not on his way to nomination when assassinated – cf. Trump and Sanders (Cruz, Paul Ryan, Bush family, Romney, etc. – Clinton family)

p. 409 – Daley to Ribicoff “unquotable expletives” at Chicago convention; no mention of who seconded McGovern’s nomination

p. x – Bill Clinton on legacy of McGovern, 2006: “In the storied history of American politics, I believe that no other presidential candidate ever had such an enduring impact in defeat.” – Contrary to the implication of the author (Knock), Clinton is not completely right. Ironically, Clinton himself is a prime example of McGovern’s lack of impact. Knock alludes to this: “unlike any other Democratic presidential aspirant before or since.” True of all Democratic nominees, but not all Democratic contenders for the nomination (e.g., Fred Harris, Frank Church, Jesse Jackson, Jerry Brown, Dennis Kucinich, Mike Gravel, Bernie Sanders). Anti-establishment insurgents. (Antecedents such as Alfalfa Bill Murray, Burton Wheeler, and Wayne Morse had never come close to gaining the nomination.)

Coalition for a Democratic Majority (December 1972) → Democratic Leadership Council (Humphrey-Jackson wing vs. McCarthy-McGovern wing; Bill Clinton and others in late 1980s-early 1990s)

my specialties – prairie populism – Bryan and his mid-century counterpart Humphrey (elitist)

McGovern and Humphrey – Both born in South Dakota. Both had progressive fathers who admired FDR. Both Republicans for part of the 1940s (p. 39 – may have been anti-Third Term)

in 1940; p. 122 – for Dewey '44). Both graduate students who chose politics over teaching. Both big-government liberals. Both internationalists. But differences.

McGovern as radical – Guilt over civilian deaths while a pilot. Dissertation on Ludlow Massacre. Progressive Party national convention delegate and abstained from voting when Wallace not on Illinois ballot. Remained idealist while Humphrey became a pragmatist (compromiser). Remained more populist while Humphrey became a Wall Street Democrat. Major foreign policy differences despite internationalism of both. Even though Humphrey had previously admired Wallace, he was a red-baiter by 1947. McGovern was one of a handful of senators to vote against Kissinger for Secretary of State in 1973 (Humphrey for). Opposed Iraq War when it mattered (2002-03), while the Clintons, Kerry, Edwards, Lieberman, Reid, and most prominent Democrats supported it.

Carter Administration – Udall, Church, Brown in primaries; Mondale as VP; Vance-Brzezinski (LBJ retreats); Trilateral Commission (David Rockefeller offered Treasury post); Humphrey loyal supporter while McGovern criticized; EMK '80

CONTEXT: IDEOLOGY (resource material for possible questions)

The late 1950s sparked two Jeffersonian revivals, spanning the spectrum from the New Left to the John Birch Society. Both played important roles for the next two decades within their respective parties. On the Left, we saw '60s social activism on behalf of peace, equality, and justice, and participation in the McCarthy '68 and McGovern '72 insurgencies (“the New Politics”).

As Humphrey was growing up, William Jennings Bryan was one of the greatest heroes in his household. Humphrey's father, a small businessman in a Republican state, became a Democrat when he heard Bryan speak. Impressed with the “Cross of Gold” speech Bryan gave at the 1896 convention, Hubert Humphrey Sr. read the words to young Hubert. HH Sr. admired WW and FDR.

In 1940, Humphrey voted for Wendell Willkie for President, Harold Stassen for governor, and Joseph Ball for senator. Stassen and Ball supported Willkie for the GOP presidential nomination. Despite his Democratic upbringing and admiration for FDR, in 1942, Humphrey told Congressman-elect Walter Judd (R-MN) that he was a Republican. Humphrey's mayoral campaign literature in 1943 included a photograph of him reading Willkie's book One World. In the mid-1940s, he considered running for office as a Republican when the Cowles publishing group offered to support him if he would do so. Humphrey was supported by many “Stassen Republicans” during his years as Mayor of Minneapolis. In 1944, Humphrey sided with a

“parasitic” pro-communist group against traditional agrarian populists in pushing for fusion of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the Democratic Party.

In 1948, Mayor Humphrey was a controversial figure at the Democratic National Convention when he pressed for a stronger civil rights platform plank. Shortly thereafter, McGovern was a delegate to the Progressive Party convention that nominated Henry Wallace for president. Formerly a supporter of Wallace (when he was FDR’s vice president), by 1948, Humphrey had become a vehement opponent of Wallace and his anti-Cold War position. The more populist wing of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, led by former Governor Elmer Benson, backed Wallace because they disliked Cold War imperialism and Truman’s reliance on Wall Street.

McGovern’s “Come Home, America” slogan and his support from the New Left and the Counterculture, as well as his 1948 involvement with Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party, called into question McGovern’s commitment to the overseas American empire. McGovern questioned not only the tactics and wisdom of the Vietnam War but its motivations and morality. This was an unpardonable sin in the eyes of power-elite-affiliated Democrats. Hubert Humphrey internationalists disliked McGovern’s anti-war stance because it was too “isolationist.” George Wallace nationalists disliked McGovern’s anti-war stance because it was too “communist.” Support for the Vietnam War was still a litmus test for many grassroots conservatives because the war was an example of internationalism having been successfully packaged as nationalism, the New World Order as America First.

In terms of democracy vs plutocracy, Humphrey started out as less liberal than his father (e.g., less opposed to monopoly). He sometimes used populist language in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but by the mid-1950s he had entered into an alliance with Lyndon Johnson and the overtly pro-big business wing of the Democratic Party. Humphrey became a blatant booster of big business in 1964. By 1972, when Democratic presidential hopefuls George Wallace and George McGovern were calling attention to tax injustice, corporate foundations, illegal campaign contributions, limousine liberal hypocrisy, et cetera, Humphrey was comfortably residing in the center of these things.

There is a direct line of descent from Humphrey and the Coalition for a Democratic Majority to Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council.

“Come Home, Democrats.” New York Times, December 7, 1972, 14.

Irving Louis Horowitz. “The Operators Make Their Play.” The Nation, January 15, 1973, 72-75.

Robert Strauss is known as “Mr. Democrat.” He gained this title through the patronage of Hubert Humphrey and his allies. Strauss first came to public notice in the 1960s as a protégé of Governor John Connally (D-TX), who was himself a protégé of LBJ. During the 1968 campaign, Strauss was a “staunch Humphrey friend.” He became Chairman of the Democratic National Committee in December 1972 through the support of party leaders who had backed the presidential candidacies of Humphrey and Henry Jackson earlier in the year. The new party

chairman worked closely with members of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, a group composed of those wishing to purge the party of populist and radical impulses associated with the McGovern campaign (“New Politics”). Strauss joined the administration of Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale as Trade Representative and managed their unsuccessful 1980 reelection campaign. A Washington “wheeler-dealer” in the 1980s, he boasted a full slate of corporate clients, including Humphrey’s old friend and financier Dwayne Andreas of Archer Daniels Midland. By the 1990s, “Mr. Democrat” was serving as Ambassador to Russia under George Bush and was a close friend of Republican leader Robert Dole. Well-connected to Wall Street and transnational corporations, he has been called “The Ultimate Capitalist.” While Strauss led the Democrats in the early 1970s, John Connally--with his affinity for oil, real estate, banking, and other commercial interests--joined the Nixon administration as Treasury Secretary and eventually became a Republican presidential contender. Another Johnson-Connally protégé, Lloyd Bentsen, became a Democratic presidential contender and ended up as Bill Clinton’s Treasury Secretary.

There is a direct line of descent from Humphrey and the Coalition for a Democratic Majority to Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council.

In the 1980s, many prominent Humphrey-Jackson Democrats (“neoconservatives”) jumped on the Reagan bandwagon and either endorsed his candidacies, praised his foreign policy, or joined the Republican Party.

Within the national Democratic Party, Governor Clinton identified himself with the Humphrey-Jackson wing, not the McCarthy-McGovern wing. Prior to seeking the 1992 presidential nomination, he was Chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council, a successor of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority.

Clinton’s successful campaign for the 1992 nomination was largely fueled by contributions from investment banks, corporate law firms, and transnational corporations. Running against Clinton, former Governor Jerry Brown contended that the presidential nominating process was “debased by endless fund raising from Wall Street.” By inference, he linked Bill Clinton to John Davis: “It is very much like it was in the ‘20s, where the Democrats were, in some cases, more conservative than the Republicans.” After entering the White House, Clinton’s appointments, policies, and fundraising made clear his preference for plutocracy. In 1994, Governor Brown asserted that President Clinton had “gone as far toward business interests as any Democrat since Grover Cleveland.”