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S.D. Moments: The what-ifs of the McGovern campaign

Missteps marked senator's run for president in 1972

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It was 38 years ago today that Thomas Eagleton was asked whether he had anything in his background that might embarrass the presidential campaign of U.S. Sen. George McGovern.

The first-term Democratic senator from Missouri said no.

What might have happened had Eagleton revealed on that Friday afternoon that he had been hospitalized for depression three times and undergone electroshock therapy twice, allowing the McGovern campaign to either go public with the news or pick a different vice presidential candidate?

That's one of the what-ifs that continue to swirl around the presidential bid of the man who was, at the time, South Dakota's senior senator. His try for the presidency ended in overwhelming defeat. Massachusetts was the only state to support McGovern over President Richard Nixon.

But McGovern's campaign had other problems: a party battle over the seating of delegates; the frivolous nominating of 75 candidates for vice president, sending McGovern's acceptance speech into an early morning time slot devoid of audience; a dirty tricks campaign by Nixon that already had begun.

"It was bad for the country to lose McGovern that year," says Sioux Falls attorney Jim Abourezk. "How things would have been different in America if he had won."

In 1972, Abourezk was in the middle of his own, ultimately successful campaign, seeking to move from the U.S. House of Representatives. But he had flown down to Miami Beach to attend the first few days of the Democratic convention.

He flew home July 14, 1972, and, like most of the United States, did not see McGovern's acceptance speech, which began at 3 a.m. in Florida.

"I stayed up waiting for him to make a speech, but I fell asleep and never got to see it," Abourezk says. "That was his campaign people that screwed that up terribly."

Don Simmons, director of the McGovern Center at Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, says McGovern's campaign was beset with difficulties.

There was a squabble over the delegates from California, and that had to be settled. Illinois' delegation also battled McGovern supporters.

Nixon had a group of people on staff that had as their job assignment keeping the McGovern campaign off balance.

"There was a series of events that did not allow the McGovern campaign to focus on their game plan," Simmons says. "They were always being distracted and forced on issues. That is always difficult for a political campaign. You want the other side to be playing defense, not you."

But for most people, the debacle that followed the choice of Eagleton as McGovern's vice president is most closely associated with the '72 campaign.

Convention delegates treated the nominating process frivolously, putting 75 names up for election, names as unlikely as CBS newsman Roger Mudd and Martha Mitchell, wife of Nixon's attorney general.

By the time Eagleton was chosen, few people were awake to listen to McGovern's anti-Vietnam War speech.

McGovern had asked Ted Kennedy to be his running mate, but Kennedy declined.

Simmons and Abourezk don't think Kennedy's acceptance of the nomination would have resulted in a McGovern win.

"It would have helped, but I'm not sure it would have put him over the top," Abourezk says. "People were gunning for Kennedy. He would have been a big target because of Chappaquidick."

"I think McGovern's advisers had mixed emotions whether Kennedy should have been selected as a running mate," Simmons says.

Traditionally, political candidates pick a partner that will help them win a state that is wavering, he says. Massachusetts, Kennedy's home, already was solidly in McGovern's camp.

Eagleton had much of Kennedy's appeal, young and Roman Catholic. But that was overshadowed July 25 when Eagleton had a news conference in Custer to confirm the rumors: He had received psychiatric counseling and electric shocks.

Eagleton had offered to withdraw, Abourezk says.

"McGovern, being the generous guy he was, said, let's hold on and see how bad this sounds," he says.

McGovern supported Eagleton that day. Several days later, McGovern said he was "1,000 percent for Tom Eagleton."

But, after being pressured by party leaders and campaign contributors, McGovern asked Eagleton to withdraw. Eagleton stepped down after being the vice presidential nominee for 18 days.

In 2006, McGovern told The New York Times, "If I had it to do over again, I'd have kept him."

The furor about Eagleton drew voters' attention away from what McGovern wanted to accomplish, Simmons says.

He also says the news media in 1972 failed to focus on what later became simply known as Watergate.

"Maybe if the Watergate issue had come to light and gotten the attention of the mainstream media a little earlier," Simmons says. "But as I said, it was a series of things that just about made it impossible for the campaign to get traction."

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