

The Eagleton Affair: When a VP Selection Went Terribly Wrong

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Description

When George McGovern arrived at the 1972 Democratic convention, his campaign priority was to fend off rival Hubert Humphrey's last ditch attempt to win the nomination through an obscure rule change. Picking a running mate was relegated to the backburner. But after officially winning the nomination, McGovern hastily chose Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri as his vice presidential candidate, a man with whom McGovern had only spoken twice. The Eagleton affair, as it soon came to be known, would ultimately change how vice presidential running mates are vetted and chosen today.

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Transcript

The Eagleton Affair – When a VP Selection Went Terribly Wrong

JOHN CHANCELLOR, anchor (File): For the first time ever, a vice presidential candidate has resigned after accepting his party's nomination.

WILL RABBE reporting:

The year was 1972. South Dakota Senator George McGovern was running an underdog campaign for President against incumbent Richard Nixon with the support of the anti-war left. But as the campaign entered that summer and had to pick a democratic vice presidential candidate, a drama of McGovern's own making overshadowed his message, damaged his credibility and doomed his campaign. The events that unfolded were remembered as "The Eagleton Affair".

When the 1972 Democratic National Convention kicked off in Miami, the party hadn't yet settled on a candidate, let alone a vice presidential pick.

JOE TRIPPI (Democratic Campaign Strategist): It's got to be the most important decision up to that point in the campaign that you can possibly make. 'I'm picking the person that would replace me, should something should happen.'

RABBE: But McGovern Campaign Manager Frank Mankiewicz had his hands tied.

FRANK MANKIEWICZ (McGovern '72 Campaign Director): So, we weren't serious until the convention. You don't go around asking people if they'll run for vice president when you may not win the nomination.

RABBE: Further delaying the process was Teddy Kennedy, who withdrew at the last minute.

Sen. TED KENNEDY (File): There were overriding personal considerations by which I would not consider it.

CHANCELLOR (File): The convention rules say the announcement of a vice presidential choice must come three hours before the gavel falls to open the final session.

RABBE: With only an hour and half before the deadline, McGovern needed to think fast.

MANKIEWICZ: We had a meeting and we came up with some names and Tom Eagleton seemed a reasonable choice.

CHANCELLOR (File): Here now is Frank Mankiewicz, McGovern's national political director, making the announcement.

MANKIEWICZ: (File): We'll ask the convention and those delegates who support him and who respect his wishes in this matter to nominate as the Democratic nominee for Vice President in 1972 Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri.

MANKIEWICZ: Border state, Catholic, anti-war, union guy, hardworking, and successful. He'd been elected four times.

RABBE: Senator Eagleton was both surprised and ecstatic as the press mobbed him at the Ivahoe Hotel.

Sen. THOMAS EAGLETON (File): Senator McGovern was on the phone and he said, 'Tom, I'd like you to be my running mate.' Then there was a long pause when I said, 'I'm flabbergasted,' I think I said something, 'You must be kidding.' He said, 'No, I'd be-- very much like to have you as the running mate,' and I said, 'Before you change your mind, I accept, unqualifiedly.'

Sen. GEORGE MCGOVERN (File): 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 very beginning.

RABBE: But for McGovern, it was a hasty decision he would soon come to regret.

MANKIEWICZ: And I realized that Eagleton held back some important information. One of his staff people started to tell me that right after he had been nominated. He'd been hospitalized, and then it turned out he had been hospitalized twice, and then three times, for what he called melancholy. I said, 'Well, Tom, that's not a word anymore the doctors use. We call that depression.' 'Oh yeah,' he said, well OK. But of course, it was much worse.

EAGLETON (File): I think it is a legitimate question that the press has to ask of me as to whether my health is such that I could hold the high office of Vice President of the United States. On three occasions in my life, I have voluntarily gone into hospitals as a result of nervous exhaustion and fatigue.

TRIPPI: Eagleton had taken electric shock therapy for depression or some other mental ailments that McGovern was not aware of and Eagleton certainly didn't make him aware of when they were doing that vice-presidential interview thing.

EAGLETON (File): I now wish because it would have been a finer thing for me to do that I had had the opportunity to fully inform Senator McGovern.

MANKIEWICZ: Very hard-- to convince George McGovern to take him off the ticket.

MCGOVERN (File): I've watched him at very close range in the United States Senate for the last four years. As far as I'm concerned there's no member of that Senate who is any sounder in mind, body, and

spirit than Tom Eagleton.

MANKIEWICZ: He was very reluctant to make it seem as though treatment for a mental illness was grounds to disqualify you from that job.

TRIPPI: In fact, you know, said 'I'm with you,' 'I'll back him up a thousand percent', you know, 'I'm not kicking him off the ticket.' You've now stuck yourself in cement, saying you absolutely under no circumstances-- a thousand percent, 'I'm not going to back down just because of this shock therapy thing.' Well, that didn't last too long.

CHANCELLOR (File): A number of newspapers today carried editorials on the Eagleton story and several influential newspapers suggested it would be better for the Democrats if Eagleton stepped down.

EAGLETON (File): And if you think I'm going to drop out of this race, or if anybody thinks I'm going to drop out of this race, they've got a long thing coming. I'm not quitting, I'm not getting out, we're going to win this election, and I'm going to be the next Vice President of the United States.

MANKIEWICZ: I said finally to Eagleton, I said, 'Look, let's say that these sharpshooters in the Nixon Whitehouse are looking at your medical records, as I'm sure they are, what do they see? What's the language?' Well, he didn't know.

RABBE: Not only was the Nixon campaign following the Eagleton affair closely, but they had already known about Eagleton's hospitalizations before McGovern, as evidenced by this conversation between Chief of Staff Haldeman and Campaign Chair Clark MacGregor.

H. R. "BOB" HALDEMAN (File): You've seen the Eagleton news, I assume.

CLARK MacGREGOR (File): No, I have not.

HALDEMAN (File): You haven't?

MacGREGOR (File): I've been closeted here for an hour and a half.

HALDEMAN (File): Oh, Jesus. Well, Eagleton went out and had a press conference today and announced that he'd been hospitalized three times. Mental disorders.

MacGREGOR (File): Yup.

HALDEMAN (File): That he'd had electric shock treatment and psychotherapy.

MacGREGOR (File): Yup.

HALDEMAN (File): And that he had not told McGovern this and McGovern had not known it when he nominated him.

MacGREGOR (File): Yup.

HALDEMAN (File): It's rather a devastating blow.

MacGREGOR (File): It sure is. I don't know if you knew this Bob, but I knew that this was the case. I'd seen the [unintelligible] sheet. I think I indicated it to you.

HALDEMAN (File): Right.

MANKIEWICZ: I called I think nineteen psychiatrists at that time and without exception they said, 'This man is entirely capable of performing any job of any kind.' Pause. 'Except President of the United States. And you must take him off the ticket.' And I think that was ultimately the deciding factor.

McGOVERN (File): We have jointly agreed that the best course is for Senator Eagleton to step aside.

EAGLETON (File): Therefore tomorrow morning, I will write to the Chairman of the Democratic Party,

withdrawing my candidacy.

CHANCELLOR (File): When the time came to sign it, he did it in the way a president signs a bill into law, using several pens, which are usually passed out to Congressmen who helped to write the bill. In this case, which was somewhat different to say the least, the pens were given to members of Eagleton's staff. They were souvenirs.

Reporter: Do you think that you should have volunteered it?

EAGLETON (File): I'm not going to try to relive the days in terms of what questions should have been asked or what I should have answered. You know, I could have said I had four grey suits and three blue ties and what have you. You can only ask the questions that are propounded to you.

MANKIEWICZ: He's a smart politician. He must have known the impact that three hospitalizations would have.

RABBE: Unfortunately for the McGovern campaign, the damage was already done.

GARRICK UTLEY, anchor (File): McGovern returned to Missouri where he dealt with a problem that just won't go away in many voters' minds-- his dumping last summer of Senator Thomas Eagleton.

TRIPPI: Dude, you picked a guy with electric shock therapy. Back in 1972, that was like, you might as well have said you were a vampire.

McGOVERN (File): The disclosure of psychiatric treatment stirred a powerful sense of uneasiness among many Americans.

TRIPPI: I mean he never really did recover from the Eagleton mess.

McGOVERN (File): I do not say that this matter was handled every step of the way as wisely as possible. But if there were mistakes, they were mistakes of the heart, and they were honest mistakes.

RABBE: The blunder helped Nixon win in a historic landslide, and changed the vice presidential vetting process forever.

TRIPPI: Because of Eagleton, we've now entered a situation where you have to be purer to be Vice President than you do to be President of the United States.

RABBE: And while hindsight is twenty-twenty, Frank Mankiewicz still wonders if his own first pick would have fared better on a McGovern ticket.

MANKIEWICZ: The one I kept suggesting and I think we would have won with him was Walter Cronkite, who later told us that he would have accepted in a minute if we had we asked.

RABBE: And as for Eagleton?

EAGLETON (File): My spirits are high. The world will go on, and so will I.