

The Eagleton-for-Vice President Affair

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Love may make the world go 'round, but politics makes it interesting. In no other arena of human activity is the confluence of altruism, avarice, facts, figures, good intentions, ideology, insolence, personality, and revenge so evident -- and so downright combustible -- as in electoral politics.

Bringing his powers of perception to bear on politics, Ralph Waldo Emerson scribbled in the mid-19th century that "A party is perpetually corrupted by personality." If pressed, political junkies of Emerson's era and our own might concede that the reverse also holds: a personality is, from time to time, corrupted by a party -- or at least by the duties and pressures of public office.

No politician in recent American history has paid a higher professional price than Thomas F. Eagleton for falling victim to this twist on Emerson's aphorism. When it was revealed in the summer of 1972 that Eagleton had been hospitalized -- and undergone electroshock therapy -- for depression, the embattled U.S. Senator from Missouri abandoned his post as the Democratic Party's Vice Presidential nominee. A brief review of the Eagleton affair reminds us of the singular and salutary contributions that psychology makes to the study of politics and political leaders.

Tom Eagleton won election to the U.S. Senate in 1968. He was a rising star in his first term, but hardly a heavyweight. George McGovern, the 1972 Democratic Presidential nominee, plucked Eagleton as his running mate for several reasons -- not the least of which was that party stalwarts like Ted Kennedy and Walter Mondale had declined McGovern's offer. For his part, Eagleton was young, bright, Catholic, chummy with organized labor, and perceived as tough on law-and-order. And he said "Yes."

Compared to the violent protests that convulsed the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the summer 1972 quadrennial affair in Miami was as calm as, well, summer in Miami. The real fireworks shot off after the convention. Within days of the Democrats' formal endorsement of the McGovern-Eagleton ticket, newspaper reports surfaced that Eagleton had undergone psychiatric treatment, including electroshock therapy.

After some foot-dragging, Eagleton came clean. On July 25, 1972, he disclosed that over the past dozen years he was hospitalized on three separate occasions (1960, 1964, and 1966) for bouts of nervous exhaustion and depression.

The story, predicted R.W. Apple, Jr. of *The New York Times* ("The Question Raised by Eagleton") on July 27, 1972, "may be a political event of the first magnitude or it may not." Such journalistic self-restraint did not linger for long. The Eagleton drama dominated the headlines and airwaves for an entire week until its fateful denouement. First the *New York Post*, then the *Washington Post* and the *Baltimore Sun*, and finally *The New York Times* called for Eagleton to step down. Navigating a course between sensitivity and cold political calculus, the *Times* editorialized that the Missourian should "unquestionably" continue his work in the U.S. Senate, but the Vice Presidency, with its peculiar demands, was a different kettle of fish: "The regrettable fact is that the state of scientific knowledge in the field of mental illness is not such that anyone can speak with certainty on [whether], as Senator McGovern has said, 'there is no one sounder in body, mind, and spirit' than his running mate." Eagleton suffered a few bruises to his character, too. Many sided with the *Times'* position that "Senator Eagleton was himself grievously at fault in not revealing his medical history to Mr. McGovern when the nomination was first offered" ("Candidate Eagleton," July 28).

Privately, George McGovern was incensed and bewildered. Incensed, because Eagleton had put him in a nasty predicament. Bewildered, because the issue of his running mate's suitability for office emerged like a bolt from the blue. Democrats expected to be battling Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew in the fall of 1972 -- not dueling with the skeletons in Tom Eagleton's closet.

Eagleton defended his non-disclosure on the grounds that he viewed it as part of the past -- as no more relevant to his qualifications for the Vice Presidency than a broken arm. This may be true. But it revealed, at a minimum, a gross political miscalculation by someone who had been around politics long enough to know how damaging such information could be if suddenly discovered, as opposed to willingly disclosed.

Even more harmful was how -- and how quickly -- the episode eroded McGovern's Presidential credibility. Critics lambasted him and his staff for failing to sniff out the Eagleton baggage in the first place. McGovern initially declared his

support for Eagleton "1,000 percent" (Theodore White, *The Making of the President*, 1972, p. 203) and then backpedaled when pressure mounted to replace the Missourian. Complicating matters further was Eagleton's insistence on plodding ahead, and the not-so-incidental fact that, legally, only Eagleton could remove himself from the ticket. Fairly or not, it all had become a litmus test as to how McGovern might respond to a crisis as President.

"It was," McGovern wrote in his 1977 autobiography, "the worst political week of the campaign or, indeed, of my political life" (*Grassroots: The Autobiography of George McGovern*, p. 205). Eagleton had surely arrived at the same conclusion. On July 31, 1972, he quit the ticket on the grounds that the brouhaha over his mental health imperiled the Democrats' chances for victory against Nixon-Agnew in November. But the genie could not be put back in the bottle. When, in the midst of the fray, McGovern phoned Dr. Karl Menninger for advice, the psychiatrist spelled out the awful dilemma. "Millions of Americans," he said, "are so frightened by mental illness that they will not support you for the Presidency in the knowledge that your Vice President has had a history of mental problems. On the other hand, if you now ask Senator Eagleton to resign from the ticket, millions of other Americans will turn against you for persecuting a man who has suffered mental instability" (*Grassroots*, p. 210). It was not only the most unforgivable, but the most unforeseeable, of political hiccups.

McGovern and his new running mate, Sargent Shriver, went through the motions of campaigning in the fall of 1972, but history's mold had been cast. The Democrats suffered a drubbing at the polls, as Nixon-Agnew coasted to a second term. "Either through a failure on my part to handle these developments with sufficient skill or through a failure of the press to discern the issue fairly," wrote McGovern years later, "the Eagleton affair destroyed any chance I had of being elected President in 1972" (*Grassroots*, p. 191).

Franklin Delano Roosevelt once famously noted that the Presidency was pre-eminently a place of moral leadership. The emergence of the Eagleton matter served as a necessary corrective: the Presidency was, first and foremost, pre-eminently a place of human leadership. A human being, subject to the frailties and ineptitudes of all human beings, sits in the Oval Office. And though Eagleton was not being elected President, he was

asking voters to place him close enough to the position that his psychological health mattered enormously. 1972 might have been an election year when policy issues would have dominated: the economy, civil rights, Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union. Indeed, Eagleton hoped his resignation would bring such matters to the fore. But, even after his departure, news of the Missourian's mental health history lingered and irreversibly altered the political landscape.

Of course, questions as to the mental health and suitability of Presidential candidates was not new in 1972; indeed, Richard Nixon had faced such charges in 1968 and Barry Goldwater had endured them in 1964. What was new was that they stuck this time, forcing Americans to consider whether and at what cost persons with a history of mental health disorders should serve as President. George McGovern took pains in his July 31, 1972, news conference to convey that Eagleton's removal from the Democratic ticket was no indication "that anyone who has ever seen a psychiatrist is a second-class citizen" ("McGovern, Eagleton Statements and News Parley," *The New York Times*, August 1, 1972). But even at a time when most Americans conceded they would seek professional help for a mentally ill relative ("The Question") and when, by some estimates, 25 percent of Americans "suffered gusts of mental depression, instability, or incapability," retaining Eagleton as the Vice Presidential nominee was too much of a wager (*Making*, p. 198).

Presidential power has waxed and waned over the course of American history. Seldom had it reached greater heights than in the post-1945 decades. Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon all bestrode the world stage with enormous resources at their disposal. They could dip their ladle into what is sometimes called the Imperial Presidency -- a reservoir of immense Presidential power that eroded in the wake of the Vietnam and Watergate experiences. The Eagleton affair is often eclipsed in our collective memory by these larger tragedies, but it is no less instructive. To scholars toiling to understand the contours of American politics, the Eagleton affair is a powerful reminder of the limits of structural, systemic explanations and of the importance of psychological considerations. Any portrait of the past or prediction as to our future that ignores the centrality of individuals -- their uniqueness, their *Weltanschauung*, and even their psychoses -- does so at its peril.

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The Character of Hillary Clinton

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As Hillary Rodham Clinton runs for the United States Senate from New York State, issues about her character abound. In this essay I will document some of the enduring personal characteristics that provide the empirical basis for my assessment of Hillary Clinton's dominant, ambitious personality pattern.

"Can you be a misanthrope and still love and enjoy some individuals? How about a compassionate misanthrope?" That enigmatic thought, expressed in the spring of 1967 by Wellesley sophomore Hillary Rodham in a letter to a friend, provides a valuable clue to the character of Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Last fall, my student Aví Bahadoor and I conducted a study of the political personality of Hillary Clinton. We collected personal data from published biographical materials and political reports, and synthesized these public records into a personality profile using the second edition of the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (MIDC), which I adapted from the work of contemporary personality theorist Theodore Millon.

The evidence I have collected supports the hypothesis that Hillary Clinton fits what Millon (*Index of Personality Styles*, 1994) labels the ambitious and controlling type of political leader. His scale finds ambitious personalities to be self-assured, competitive, and bold people who readily assume leadership, while expecting others to acknowledge their unique qualities. It is common for them to feel entitled. Controlling or dominant personalities enjoy directing others from whom they expect respect and obedience. They often are ef-

fective leaders, characterized by unsentimental, tough competitiveness. This amalgam of adaptive narcissism and dominance in Hillary Clinton's personality profile parallels the recollection of high school classmate Art Curtis, as quoted in Gail Sheehy, *Hillary's Choice* (1999): "Hillary was very competitive at everything. Even pugnacious. She was very ambitious."

After interviewing many of Clinton's associates for a *New Yorker* article ("Hillary the pol," May 30, 1994), Connie Bruck concluded, "In the end, the sureness about her own judgment -- at its extreme, a sense that she alone is wise -- is probably Hillary's cardinal trait." Evident in Bruck's assessment is the dogmatic inflexibility characteristic of the cognitive style of highly conscientious, dominant personalities, tinged with the hubris of high ambition.

Commenting on the leadership implications of these traits, Stanley Renshon, in his 1996 book, *High Hopes* (winner of the American Political Science Association's Richard E. Neustadt Award in 1997 for the best book on the Presidency, and 1998 recipient of the Grady Award, presented by the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis for the best biography that advances psychoanalysis), had this to say: "The view that one knows better than others -- period -- can lead to imperiousness and cause trouble in one's relations with others. It has done so in Hillary's case."

Renshon's contention seems to be borne out by Elizabeth Drew. In her book, *On the Edge* (1994), she wrote that Hillary Clinton's presence at health care meetings early in the Clinton Presidency was a "source of discomfort," with some attendees finding her "intimidating -- hard to argue with and uninterested in the points they made. Mrs. Clinton's style was very direct. She told people straight out what she thought.... Mrs. Clinton displayed a certain impatience. And her humor was biting."

Drew's reporting provides evidence of dominant behavior, but what evidence do we have that this is indicative of an enduring, consistent personality pattern rather than a situationally determined response simply reflecting Hillary Clinton's seriousness of purpose concerning comprehensive health care?

Childhood nicknames sometimes provide a useful index of an individual's ingrained, central personality traits. Among their mock predictions for seniors, Hillary Rodham's high school newspa-