

States of the Union

MEMOIRS OF A McGOVERN CANVASSER

BY RICHARD J MARGOLIS



“A POLITICAL canvasser does not amble,” my wife said as she passed me by. ‘He strides.’

I ran to catch up. “Don’t you think we ought to look casual?” I asked. “Just out for a stroll, sort of?”

“If George McGovern had been ‘just out for a stroll sort of,’” she answered, “where would he be today?”

“Where is he anyway?” I muttered, but Diane was out of earshot. She was striding again.

I paused to enjoy the view. red

maples, yellow oaks, clear skies. Some leaves had already fallen on our neighbors’ small, close-cropped lawns. My wife marched down the middle of the narrow street (authentic suburbs lack sidewalks), the sun putting a gaudy glow on her purple corduroys. She was clutching a manilla folder bulging with leaflets and bumper stickers. It also contained a sheet of “Basic Rules” for canvassers, which I had skimmed before we’d set out.

“No matter what the provocation,” said Rule No. 1, “be courteous. Never get into an argument.”

Rule No. 2 cautioned, “Never say anything you’re not sure of,” there by condemning me to silence. And Rule No. 3 was even more succinct: “Stay away from Eagleton.”

The leaflets had struck me as wistful. “America needs George McGovern. We can’t afford four more years of Nixon. End the war! Until we agree to withdraw, the killing will continue.”

“Bang! Bang!” A small boy behind a hedge was pointing his toy rifle at me. “Bang! Bang!”, he said again.

“Cops and robbers?” I asked.

“No, war,” he answered.

Diane had disappeared into the Barskys’ house. I knew Al wouldn’t be home, he’d be at the firehouse. Al was a faithful volunteer, an ex-chief. He was also our mailman. Whenever he handed me an envelope that seemed to contain a check, he said, “This week you eat.”

I arrived just in time to hear Mrs. Barsky tell Diane, “He keeps saying he’s going to stop the war. I don’t think he can do it.”

Diane was sitting on the edge of a very large couch. She looked small. “Well,” she said, “do you

think Nixon can stop the war? He promised he would four years ago, but we're still fighting."

"I know, I know," said Mrs Barsky "To tell you the truth, I'm not too crazy about Nixon—but he's better than the other one. At least Nixon doesn't want us to surrender." She gave Diane a diffident smile "I don't know much about these things, but people say if we surrender in Vietnam we'll have to fight a bigger war some place else."

"Do you believe that?" I asked.

"Yes, I do," she said.

We gave her some leaflets.

Outside, while Diane made notes on a card, I glanced at a broadside with McGovern's smiling picture at the top. A sentence below caught my eye: "With a strong determination that no child should ever cry again from hunger in America, Senator McGovern serves as Chairman of the Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs."

In 1970 I testified before his committee. We had met twice before, at national conferences, each time briefly and unmemorably. That day at the Senate hearing, as I stood in the back of the room and waited for the committee to gather, McGovern entered through a side door and walked over to me. "Mr Margolis," he said, shaking my hand, "I don't know if you remember me, I'm Senator McGovern."

I stuffed the broadside back in Diane's folder, and we crossed the street to the Hanson's, people we didn't know. A rusty World War II torpedo stood on the front stoop. Mrs Hanson kept the screendoor between us. "I'm not even registered," she said, "but my husband is He's a Republican."

I asked her how her husband planned to vote. "I think he's for Nixon," she said, "but he's still not sure. It's so hard to know. If the politicians would just keep their promises."

We thanked her and retreated. "Is there no one here for McGovern?" I asked Diane and the universe. Just

then Hank Cremnese, a young actor who had recently bought a house next door to us, sauntered into view.

"Wow, what a great day for a walk!" he said.

"We're not walking," I said sourly. "We're canvassing for McGovern."

"Hey, man, that's great, that's really great," Hank said.

"Well," said my wife, "it's nice to know that somebody around this place likes McGovern."

"Yeah," said Hank, "but I can't vote here. I'm registered in New York."

A COLLIE barked at us as we made our way toward a little green house where the Bancrofts lived. Mr Bancroft was out, probably at his gas station. Mrs Bancroft was in.

"Hi," I said fatuously. "We're taking a survey for the Democrats. How do you plan to vote in this election?"

She laughed. "I'm certainly not going to vote for McGovern," she said. "He's nuts."

My wife asked her to explain. "I mean he's plain nuts, that's all. He keeps changing his mind, you never know what's going to pop out of his mouth next."

Then I blundered. I asked her to give me a for instance. "Eagleton," was her prompt reply. "First he backs him, then he dumps him. Listen, I was against Nixon until McGovern came along."

I changed the subject. "Is there a Democrat you would have preferred?"

"Teddy," she said. "I'd vote for any Kennedy, no matter what." We proffered our leaflets and were grateful when she took them.

"It's interesting," Diane observed as we headed toward the Borgesons'. "Nobody seems to like Nixon either."

"The sun's going down," I said. "They don't trust either candidate so they vote for one they're familiar with."

"Let's go home," I said. But we were already at the Borgesons' door. Tacked to a slung was a small mallet and a plaque. "We're too poor for a bell," the plaque read. "Knock here." We did, and were soon drinking coffee and munching fig newtons in the Borgesons' new living room. (They had recently finished building a large addition, the Nixon years had been kind to them.)

"The war is no longer an issue," Walter Borgeson told us. "For all intents and purposes the war is over."

Walter's World War II medals were framed on the wall behind him. "People are still dying in Vietnam," I said. "The war goes on."

Flo Borgeson spoke up. "You're right. If I lived in Vietnam I'd want everybody to get out, to stop the killing. Maybe we're being a little bit selfish. Still, she went on the attack. "The Communists are moving all over the world. We have to stop them."

Diane asked Flo how she felt about McGovern. "I thought he was good," she said, "until he opened his mouth. He keeps shifting. Like the Eagleton thing. You can't tell where he stands."

"You know what he's like? He's like somebody you invite to your house and he calls you up at the last minute and says he can't come tonight but how about Saturday. Then Saturday he says maybe Tuesday. And even when he gets there he doesn't show up!"

On the way back home we picked up our mail, courtesy of Rural Free Delivery and Al Barsky. I opened a letter from Maurice H Stans. "Dear Fellow American. As you know, we are in the final stages of an historic Presidential election campaign. I believe that you, like millions of other concerned Americans, are anxious to save our Country from the radical programs that George McGovern has put forward."

I handed the letter to Diane. "It's getting chilly," she said.