

# Connections

## Electoral Politics and Street Politics

The 1960's are over but their truths go marching on. And some of their platitudes too. Right into the national conventions where we select the men who will lead their respective parties in the coming Presidential election.

Since President Nixon seems fairly sure to select himself, the most interesting convention—even before the fact—had to be the Democratic convention, where some degree of uncertainty prevailed. Now the uncertainty is over, the decision made, and Senator George McGovern has emerged the undisputed, impressive victor.

*George McGovern*??? Well, that's the response one was most likely to receive from most political sophisticates less than four months ago. And the labor hierarchy is still likely to respond—*George McGovern* #?!#. But, yes, it looks like it is going to be a McGovern-Nixon contest. Apart from the intrinsic merits of the men, their respective platforms and parties, there are a number of interesting things about this particular opposition.

Cast your mind back to the beginning of the 1960's when the confrontation was between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Practically up to the moment of truth—when voters had to enclose themselves in the ballot booth and finally declare their preference—one of the most foolish but widespread canards was that one couldn't tell the candidates apart, they were supposed to be the tweedledum and tweedledee of politics. Now it is true that the farther one moves from the center of American politics the fewer are the discernible differences between the candidates, and there are still people who would profess to see little difference between the candidates of 1960. Most voters perceived some significant differences at the time and would still do so.

Will people say about McGovern and Nixon what they said about Kennedy and Nixon? Not very likely. The sixties were a mixed decade with much ugliness, confusion, frustration and near despair. They were also years of vigorous protest and uncertain political exploration. Years when we were told once again that the "system" wasn't working, that it excluded the minorities, the poor, the young. That the old pros had things under such control that protest might have therapeutic value for the protestor but that's all.

One doesn't have to give up the role of Cassandra for that of Pollyanna in order to say that the system has shown itself to be remarkably resilient in good ways. There are still massive inequities in our society and some major issues are not yet joined by the present Republican and Democratic Presidential candidates—and may never be. Nevertheless, it seems true that George McGovern would not have been nominated as a candidate of his party had the various

protests over the last number of years not taken place and had he not declared his position on them.

The victory of George McGovern, then, attained through the due political processes of this country, owes very much to the street politics of the past years. The marches and the demonstrations, the underground papers and the slogans, the exposés, the freaks and the prophets have all played a part in creating a climate in which the candidacy of McGovern was first a faint possibility, then a probability and now a fully ratified and recognized achievement.

Over the last few years we've heard a lot of people say that they were turned off of politics. "We've had enough of the lesser of two evils." "We need statesmen, not politicians." "The system is both static and corrupt and no changes can take place inside it." Many people dismissed such statements and attitudes as jejune, lightheaded, misguided and frivolous. They knew that one finally had to make choices between alternatives that were offered rather than between the reality and some nonexistent utopian figure or platform. They tended to dismiss the people who engaged in the politics of the street as obstacles to deliberate consideration and needed change.

The truth is that any large political institution or system is conservative. It will respond only to various kinds of pressure. The street politics engaged in by so many people, primarily young people, over the last number of years provided some of that pressure. It also introduced a number of people to some of the hard realities of the political process. The results of those years and the political savvy gained were exhibited in the Democratic convention. It was a convention considerably different from the chaos of '68 or the more orderly but still vigorous confrontations of past conventions. What was most noticeable was that the people who were out in the streets in '68 were now filling the delegate chairs in '72. The nomination of George McGovern in some way ratified and stamped with approval much of their efforts over the previous years.

If it is foolish to say that working within the system won't change anything, as I think it is, it's almost equally as foolish to say that working only within the system will bring change. The truth is that at least in some periods of our history we need both electoral politics and the politics of the street. In 1972 this combination has provided the people of the United States with a choice between candidates who hold significantly different positions on significant issues.

*James Finn*