Political Rhetoric and the Media

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In a 2007 episode of C-SPAN2’s Book TV, political scientist Bruce Miroff describes the Democratic convention in Miami Beach where South Dakota senator George McGovern was nominated for president in 1972 as “a puzzling and prophetic mixture of exuberant triumph and disarray.” The campaign itself was “marked by mounting crises, by painful stumbles, and then of course, by landslide defeat” (C-SPAN, 2007). Following this, the bulk of Miroff’s discussion centers on the long-term fallout of McGovern’s campaign—in particular the ongoing Democratic Party concern that a presidential candidate who is “too liberal” will necessarily suffer a humiliating defeat along the lines of McGovern’s. Miroff is hitting the key points from his book *The Liberals’ Moment*, and given his disciplinary home base one would not expect him to discuss issues of campaign media or news coverage too much. And yet, he provides clues to help us think in that direction. For example, he points to all the dirty tricks the Nixon campaign used in 1972, and, building on this, it is important to remember that while many of those tricks were covert, Nixon’s team also depended heavily on the most public of tactics: negative publicity, usually planted in the print and electronic media.

The inflammatory notion that McGovern favored “acid, amnesty, and abortion,” for example, was exploited by Nixon’s campaign, though it was all fabrication or misdirection: McGovern took heat from feminists for abortion rights not having been included in the Democratic platform that year; he favored leniency around pot, not acid; and though McGovern did favor amnesty, Nixon himself had also approved of amnesty for draft resisters before the 1972 campaign (Miroff,
As a media historian, I would emphasize here not only the fact that the anti-McGovern triple-A slogan was dishonest but also that it was a slur spread by his opponents on bumper stickers, posters, billboards, and campaign buttons, and in TV and radio ad spots. It was, in other words, not just a political tactic but specifically a mediated tactic.

The Miroff presentation is but one of many artifacts held in the C-SPAN Video Library that provide research material to shore up arguments about the McGovern campaign as a mediated event (and one that misfired), though not all the C-SPAN lectures, interviews, original materials (that is, convention and campaign archival artifacts), and panel discussions consider it directly as such. The following pages will go to the roots of that mediated campaign, which are to be found at the 1968 and 1972 nominating conventions, and then will move on to the 1972 campaign itself.

First, some background. The quadrennial presidential conventions used to be crucial centerpieces of network TV news. The 1948 conventions were the first covered by TV and had been barebones affairs. By 1952, the networks had sunk significant resources into convention coverage, fighting tough ratings battles, and taking the opportunity to show off shiny new technologies—lighter cameras, color cameras, new headsets for correspondents—anything to get a leg up over the competition. For their part, the political parties became increasingly responsive (often resentfully so) to the presence of cameras and reporters. The networks wanted to get an angle on stories and ask tough questions; the parties would have preferred their events presented to viewers as their shows that they had invited the networks to air (Frank, 1991). As far as the Republican and Democratic National Committees were concerned, just pointing cameras at the dais constituted ideal coverage. The news teams wanted to report, while the Democratic and Republican National Committees would have preferred something closer to stenography.

This context helps elucidate the crisis of the 1968 convention (crucial background for understanding the chaos of the 1972 convention), where Mayor Richard Daley deviously attempted to prevent the networks from providing live coverage outside the convention hall in the streets. The gathering of 10,000 anti-Vietnam protesters undeniably constituted a major, newsworthy story, but Daley feared negative coverage of his police by the networks and did all that he could to censor their reporting. Of course, American TV viewers still saw the street action, just not live. In particular, late on the third night of the convention
they watched videotaped footage of Chicago police beating and arresting protesters in front of the Conrad Hilton Hotel. The images would be replayed on the nightly news in the days following the event, and still images appeared in newspapers and magazines across the country.

It is these images that have dominated media historians’ accounts of the 1968 convention, along with a few live televised crises from inside the Chicago Amphitheater, such as Daley expressing his rage when Sen. Abraham Ribicoff, in the course of nominating McGovern on live TV, referred to “Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago,” or CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite referring to the security men who had slugged correspondent Dan Rather as “a bunch of thugs.” The dominant memory of Chicago is of street violence, and, inside the convention hall, of a handful of reactions to Daley-sanctioned violence. These are the images that have circulated during the past 50 years, recounted in scholarship and recycled in documentary film and television productions, ranging from WGBH’s 1983 *Vietnam: A Television History* to Ken Burns’s and Lynn Novick’s *The Vietnam War* (2017). The 1968 Chicago police even make a cameo appearance in the C-SPAN (2011) episode “George McGovern, Presidential Contender,” an installment of a limited run, live call-in series titled *The Contenders*.

There are no similarly resonant—or, if you will, mythologized—images or moments from the 1972 Democratic National Convention (DNC), and the ’72 convention has appeared to historians as a less impactful media event than 1968’s convention. Indeed, media historians have shown no interest in the ’72 convention (see, however, Crouse, 1973) and only slightly more in the ’68 event, a situation I strive to rectify in my book on network coverage of Chicago (Hendershot, 2022). In ’68, angry delegates decried the fact that they were enduring a “closed convention” where the candidate had been predetermined by the party’s leaders. In ’72, various reforms in the delegate selection process struck hard at the old machine players. Mayor Daley and his delegation were even ejected and replaced by Jesse Jackson’s Illinois delegates. The attendees were no less angry than those of four years earlier, but many of them were convention newcomers who did not understand the procedural basics. The result was chaos that rivaled that of ’68, though without the violence. The TV cameras once again caught it all. At times, the images clearly conveyed a party in crisis.

How did things reach this point and spin out of control so badly? So much had happened on the floor of the Chicago Amphitheater in 1968 that it was easy to lose track of the procedural ins and outs from the rostrum—the thank-you
speeches, formulaic votes, and Robert’s Rules of Order–type actions that appear in the DNC’s 640-page official transcript of the event but created not even a ripple in TV news coverage and were thus left unseen by home viewers.

One such detail was the decision to create the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection, which would revise the delegate selection process, rework party structure, and increase grassroots participation. This would eventually become known as the McGovern–Fraser Commission, after its directors, George McGovern and Minnesota representative Donald M. Fraser. The commission’s consultant committee included Richard C. Wade, a famed urban historian and University of Chicago professor who leaned liberal; he had managed the Upstate New York campaign for RFK’s 1964 senatorial run and also served as adviser to Adlai Stevenson and McGovern (Grimes, 2008). For McGovern–Fraser, Wade outlined two choices for delegate selection: the creation of national party guidelines or sticking with the current system of allowing states to decide for themselves, which had enabled procedural chaos not only in Chicago, but also going back to Truman’s nomination in 1948, when pro-segregation southern states had walked out with Sen. Strom Thurmond (Sánchez, 2020). The Democrats were now the party of civil rights, and yet southern states could still arrive at conventions with all or mostly white delegations, and they had enough votes to create trouble for the national party. Obviously, national guidelines were in the cards.

The story is complicated, but suffice it to say, McGovern–Fraser has long been seen as the force that democratized the party by allowing for representation at conventions by people who previously had been kept out by state party voting systems: women, people of color, the young. In a key revision, historian Jaime Sánchez has argued that the committee was not simply about ideological reform, as it is so often remembered, but even more importantly about institutional reform. The national party in effect saved itself from the states by creating uniform delegate selection standards. The most straightforward way of explaining this is to observe that in 1964 and 1968 the Democratic convention had been packed with southern delegates who were unwilling to support the nominee of their own party, going for Barry Goldwater and George Wallace, respectively, rather than LBJ and Humphrey. It had to be stopped. One might add, somewhat contra Sánchez, that this was not an either/or scenario of ideological vs. institutional reform. It was ultimately very much both.

The southern delegates were the ones who had staged the big, spectacular protests, with their walkouts and threatened walkouts over the years, and if TV viewers understood that there was a “delegate problem,” they were more likely to
understand it as a political problem than an institutional one. Issues like delegate selection, credentials battles, and unit rule voting were covered by the networks, but such procedural matters could quickly devolve into inside baseball. Rather than diving into such minutiae, it was easier for anchormen Walter Cronkite, David Brinkley, and Chet Huntley to explain voter suppression vs. states’ rights: who is allowed to vote for convention delegates, and who should decide, the states or the national party?

The disenfranchisement of Black voters made for good drama, and therefore good TV. Teddy White observed correctly that “the impression this open convention made on America outside, in this new age of television, would be, politically, of as much weight in the campaign of 1972 as what anyone at the convention said or did” (White, 1973, p. 159). The new rules seemed to indicate that this year viewers would witness nothing like the Mississippi crisis of 1964 or the Georgia crisis of 1968. In 1964, Black Mississippi challenging delegates had failed to seize seats at the convention. At the same time, their representative, Fannie Lou Hamer, became an icon of that moment, even though President Johnson had succeeded in shutting down her live televised testimony. In 1968, Julian Bond emerged as the icon of disenfranchised Black delegates from Georgia, and those challengers achieved a partial victory in Chicago, a chaotic event captured live by the networks. The cameras often cut to Bond, who was not only accomplished and articulate but also young and handsome, in stark contrast to his opponent, Georgia governor Lester Maddox. The political drama was real, but it was boosted by the strength of a good guy–bad guy narrative that seemed tailor-made for network news.

By 1972, revisions in the rules would theoretically help party leaders control convention coverage, in part, by preventing the need for challenges against white supremacist voting policies of state delegations. Further, from the media spin angle, a positive element for 1972 was Black presidential contender Shirley Chisholm, whose very presence, party officials must have hoped, would help to defuse any brewing complaints regarding Black disempowerment. TV interviews with Chisholm would, theoretically, convey an evolution since Hamer and Bond: the Black outsider was now an insider. Perhaps predictably, things did not play out so smoothly. In fact, 1972 would lay bare the fact that crises of disenfranchisement were not confined to southern states. Daley—mayor of the most segregated city in America, a northern city—was the key operative in attempting to ensure that the Illinois delegation was filled by machine-approved, mostly white candidates.
Even if Georgia had gotten the most airtime for delegate selection conflicts in 1968, Illinois had been just as culpable. In 1972 the McGovern–Fraser reforms would bring this all to the surface, and to American TV screens, when Daley—the party player, the kingmaker, the man nicknamed “Mr. Democrat” by politicians and DNC operatives—was shut out. As per McGovern–Fraser recommendations, at the Miami convention in 1972 “Blacks, women, Spanish-speakers, and people between the ages of eighteen and thirty had to be represented as delegate candidates in proportion to their population in each congressional district. The new rules also required that delegate selection be done in public, with the time and place of the sessions publicized in advance” (Cohen & Taylor, 2001, p. 521). This last rule hit the southern delegations particularly hard, as the segregationists had succeeded in the past by keeping their state party meeting times and locations secret from people of color.

Daley responded that the new rules simply were not valid under Illinois law. And so, his machine selected a slate of 59 candidates, which Chicagoans could vote for or not, with no attention paid to the party’s new diversity rules. Independent Chicago alderman William Singer, with Rev. Jesse Jackson, selected an alternative delegate slate confirmed via caucuses held throughout Chicago, with “informal, voice-vote elections, where voting was conducted over the heckling of machine representatives who had infiltrated the meetings. The Daley slate and the Singer-Jackson slate represented two extremes of the cultural chasm that had split the Democratic Party four years earlier” (Cohen & Taylor, 2001, p.522). As usual, Daley’s slate won in a citywide election, capturing the vote of white ethnics and others who followed the lead of their precinct captains. There was a complicated legal fight, and ultimately the national party’s Credentials Committee voted 71 to 61 to seat the Singer–Jackson alternative slate. Daley and his people complained that this violated the will of the 900,000 Chicago voters who had gone for the machine’s slate. Except they didn’t call it the “machine’s slate” and implied that open elections were standard operating procedure in Chicago.3 Daley’s narrative, suggesting that democracy had been defeated by quotas and radical leftists, gained substantial traction in the national media.

The Singer–Jackson slate thereby seemed extremist, while the Daley slate appeared to be the product of fairness and moderation. Even Chicago’s best anti-Daley newspaperman, Mike Royko, disapproved of how the alternative Jackson slate had been selected, wisecracking that “anybody who would reform Chicago’s Democratic Party by dropping the white ethnic would probably begin a diet by shooting himself in the stomach” (Royko in White, 1973, p. 165). Daley was
ultimately both loser and winner: loser because his own party shut him out, a grand humiliation that took him completely by surprise, winner because he played the indignant victim so well. He was ice-cold toward candidate McGovern and took the “I told you so” line when he lost to Nixon in a landslide. Teddy White, who had been a voice of liberal moderation back in 1964, and who was by 1968 more of a centrist and even a booster for the “New Nixon” of that year, was appalled by the ouster of Daley in 1972: “Whatever one’s sympathies, how, now, could one avoid wondering what the political effect would be, on the television audience, of the sight of Black people jumping up and hugging each other with glee as Dick Daley was humiliated, or the sound of Spanish-speaking ladies jubilating over their triumph at this session” (White, 1973, p. 166). White’s condescension is galling (and he wasn’t really “wondering”), but he was probably on the mark about the effect that the televised proceedings would have on the so-called silent majority of home viewers. All the McGovern–Fraser positive spin seemed to unravel at once with Daley’s ejection from the Miami convention.

Between the Chicago and Miami conventions, the national party had worked carefully to present its reforms to the public in a positive light—and to convey those reforms via magazine and TV interviews with high-profile Democrats. In 1969, on NBC’s Meet the Press, DNC chairman Sen. Fred Harris argued that what Americans were witnessing was “not a movement of [party] fracture . . . but rather of reinvention” (Harris quoted in Sánchez, 2020, p. 11). In 1970, McGovern wrote in Harper’s that “amidst the madness in Chicago” few had noticed the vote for procedural reform, but now he and his compatriots were “in the process of invigorating our party with a massive injection of democracy. The day of the bosses is all but over” (McGovern, 1970). And in June 1972, McGovern and Humphrey appeared on ABC’s Issues and Answers to convey party unity, confirming they would support whoever the party’s nominee was. The problem was, there were three other candidates, all of whom declined to pledge support for the nominee in advance. The national party’s public relations efforts were already faltering, with little more than a month before the convention.

By the time candidates and delegates assembled in Miami, the image of party unity could no longer cohere. Part of the problem was that democratization brought in new inexperienced delegates who didn’t understand convention procedures any more than they understood the importance of at least trying to look like a unified party on national television. In 1968, the McCarthy delegates understood both procedural issues and the televisual impact of their protest, which they tried to work to their advantage, with uneven success. The youth, women,
Blacks, and other newcomers to the 1972 convention in Miami didn’t know the procedural ins and outs or care about most of that image stuff. If the Singer–Jackson victory against Daley played out as a radical left-wing takeover of the Democratic Party on national TV, the late-night debates on the dais over feminism, Black empowerment, and gay rights were also a crisis for a party trying to defeat a conservative incumbent with strong approval ratings.

As one member of the Platform Committee put it, critiquing the newcomer delegates, “Their struggle is between the wild wing and the mild wing; what they’re doing is selling out their true believers on things like pot, amnesty, and abortion. There won’t be any riots in Miami because the people who rioted in Chicago are on the Platform Committee—they outnumber us by three or four to one” (Wattenberg quoted in White, 1973, p. 161). The longhairs were on the convention floor now. Even Yippies Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman had endorsed McGovern (“M’Govern Endorsed by 2,” 1972).

Consider three books written from rather different political orientations, by powerhouse authors chronicling the impact of the neophytes at the 1972 convention. In The Making of the President 1972, Teddy White supported the cause of women’s rights but saw the homosexual activists’ cause as “nonsense” (1972, p. 182). In St. George and the Godfather, Norman Mailer felt pretty much the reverse on those two issues (1972, pp. 53, 57). And in Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72 Hunter S. Thompson didn’t even mention the gays and understood the feminist activists correctly as pawns in McGovern’s tactical maneuvers. That is, the gonzo journalist was the one who just focused on the convoluted political game, producing what McGovern operative Frank Mankiewicz described 25 years later on a C-SPAN panel discussion show, with only a little exaggeration, as “the most accurate and least factual account of that campaign” (C-SPAN, 1997).

None of them could altogether clearly explain the procedural crises with South Carolina and California, but Thompson nailed it when he said that *even the networks*, well versed in procedural minutiae, couldn’t understand that McGovern needed to *lose* the South Carolina credentials challenge in order to later *win* the California credentials challenge: “What an incredibly byzantine gig! Imagine trying to understand it on TV—not even Machiavelli could have handled that” (Thompson, 1973, p. 288; c.f. Navasky, 1972). The one thing that all three had a handle on, though, was the fact that it was a disaster for McGovern, and the newly reformed party in general, for home viewers to see these sorts of crises play out on TV, and that the only break the nominee got was when the most radical stuff happened outside of prime time. What a blessing, from the perspective
of the McGovern campaign, that the gay rights plank was only debated and ultimately rejected by delegates at 5:00 a.m. The newspapers mentioned it, and the bleary-eyed NBC and CBS correspondents reported it live, but most Americans missed it completely (‘‘Gay’ People Bitter,’’ 1972).5

From the media angle, McGovern’s luck was the worst on the final day of the convention, when he was scheduled to give his acceptance speech. White observed that “even at Chicago in 1968, with all the violence, bloodshed, and dissension, the party had pulled itself together well enough to let Hubert Humphrey speak to the nation when the nation was ready to listen” (White, 1973, p. 184). Humphrey’s speech had started at 10:30 p.m. Chicago time—11:30 p.m. on the East Coast and 8:30 p.m. on the West Coast—airing at the same time The Tonight Show would have been broadcast in the East. In Miami in 1972, by contrast, McGovern’s acceptance speech began at 2:48 a.m. It was a little before 6:00 p.m. in Guam, making that the only place where U.S. citizens watched the speech at a reasonable hour. (Nixon of course was up late watching in San Clemente. [White, 1973, p. 239].) A prime-time speech would have reached 17.4 million homes, but the senator’s ill-timed speech hit about 3.6 million. Today, interested viewers could seek out such a speech on C-SPAN or YouTube. In 1972, though, when you missed a TV event, you missed a TV event. A few clips aired on the news later, and that was it.6

One might think it didn’t matter much; the candidates were so different, and it’s not as if a diehard liberal or conservative would have been likely to switch allegiances based on either half-hour speech. But it did matter. The DNC had made all of its revisions not only to seize national control of the party away from the states and to make the convention more open but also to regain control over its own mediated image. Network coverage of Chicago had shown a party out of control and rife with dissension, even if one subtracted the 3% to 5% of coverage that had centered on street violence. Four years later in Miami, the party still seemed out of control. McGovern’s speech had aired absurdly late because feminists, Black activists, the young—all the new delegates who weren’t seasoned political operatives—exploited procedural rules to make symbolic nominations for the vice presidential slot. Each nomination was allotted a 15-minute speech.

The riotous nominations had the momentum of a runaway train. Finally, the nominations were done, and the roll call began, with the chairman of each state standing up and announcing its delegates’ votes. It was a foregone conclusion that McGovern’s choice, Thomas Eagleton, would win, yet symbolic votes came in for Dr. Spock, the Berrigan brothers, Jerry Rubin, and Ralph Nader—even a
few for Roger Mudd, Chairman Mao, and Archie Bunker. (The most oddball vote in 1968 had been for Alabama football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant.) These scattered protest votes in 1972 made the newly “open” party look silly. McGovern’s late-night speech was also a media disaster because this should have been a golden moment to reach a wide audience for an entire half hour of free airtime. If the crisis of 1968 was that “the whole world was watching,” the crisis of 1972 was that it was not.

Interviewed on C-SPAN almost 20 years later, McGovern said that the 3:00 a.m. speech was “a dreadful mistake, I think possibly the most costly single mistake that we made in 1972, even more costly perhaps than the vice presidential selection.” He added, “It was the first opportunity for me as a junior senator from South Dakota to make an imprint on 75 or 80 million Americans who were watching the convention at 9:00 or 10:00 in the evening when I should have been giving that speech. . . . All we had to do was to call the national chairman Larry O’Brien and say, ‘Look, let’s put the acceptance speech on now and hold all this other business until after I speak.’” McGovern described it as “the best speech I ever gave in my life.” The interview was the introduction to C-SPAN’s airing of the speech, and McGovern closes out wrenchingly with, “I’m going to be glad to see it in prime time!” (C-SPAN, 1988b).

One might speculate that if millions more had seen the convention speech, as they would have if it had been shown at a reasonable time, it could have helped to reframe McGovern as a candidate who was both critical of current American policies and patriotic. Kathleen Hall Jamieson argues that broadcast spots of five minutes or less tend to “entice the unsuspecting viewer,” whereas half-hour productions such as biographical campaign films and election eve programs “attract true believers” (Jamieson, 1996, p. 321). The one exception is the half-hour nomination acceptance speech, because conventions draw voters from both parties, not only because people watch such programming, theoretically at least, out of a sense of civic duty but also because conventions preempted other programming during the network era; if you wanted to watch TV, the convention was the only game in town. A half-hour opportunity in prime time to actually pull in new voters, even the much-coveted “undecided voters,” makes the convention speech a prized moment. Excerpts from that precious half hour are typically included in TV spots, and of course, McGovern did include excerpts, but he had lost his initial golden opportunity. Notably, Humphrey had delivered a very good acceptance speech in 1968, but the convention had been so chaotic (both on the floor and in the streets) that his campaign reused as little convention imagery as
possible and did not recycle much of the speech. The 1972 convention had also been an unruly spectacle, but without the violence, and the McGovern campaign had nothing to lose in recycling bits and pieces of the otherwise unseen McGovern acceptance speech.

Although one often hears (as per Miroff’s description) that McGovern was too liberal, his actual speech reveals a politician who was a carefully measured liberal populist. He points to the numerous small donations received by his campaign, and he emphasizes his desire to end the war with not a “secret” plan (a dig at Nixon) but a public plan: he will halt the bombing on the day of his inauguration. He graciously gives a good word to all the others who had vied for the nomination, even George Wallace—a move that could have been awkward, but McGovern pulled it off, saying: “I was moved . . . by the appearance in the Convention Hall of the governor of Alabama, George Wallace. His votes in the primaries showed clearly the depth of discontent in this country, and his courage in the face of pain and adversity is the mark of a man of boundless will, despite the senseless act that disrupted his campaign. And, governor, we pray for your full recovery so you can stand up and speak out for all of those who see you as their champion” (C-SPAN, 1972). Wallace had recently survived an assassination attempt, and this gave McGovern a hook upon which to hang his profession of empathy.

The pro-segregation Wallace was, of course, the polar opposite of McGovern regarding civil rights issues, and southern Democrats had for some time been migrating to the Republican Party, which welcomed them with open arms. McGovern’s reaching out in his acceptance speech could only have happened at this transitional moment in the Democratic Party, which is to say that the moment was tightly sutured to the hard GOP shift right that had been signaled by Sen. Barry Goldwater’s nomination in 1964, was advanced by Nixon’s election in 1968, and became the party’s unequivocal destiny with Nixon’s reelection in 1972—even if we take Reagan’s 1980 election as the culmination of the death of moderate Republicanism. McGovern’s carefully scripted references to Wallace indicated his eagerness to retain any southern votes still available to him, and the speech is thereby symptomatic of this moment in which the South defected from the Democratic Party, but equally importantly, the candidate’s nod to the primary votes for the right-wing populist Wallace resonated with his own liberal populism.

It was the calculated move of a politician (and his speechwriters) to sidestep all that was undesirable in the candidate Wallace, but McGovern was also spinning the primary votes for the Alabama governor as a voicing of discontent, as a shout-out from the little people—a classic populist gesture. Consider
that in the Wisconsin primary McGovern had won 30% of the votes by “tapp[ing] deep wells of economic discontent” and garnering support from “liberals, conservatives, blue-collar workers, farmers, suburbanites and the young,” while Wallace had also appealed to “the little man” and “came in second, with twenty-two percent of the vote.” Time magazine concluded that “adding the Wallace and McGovern totals, fifty-two percent of [Wisconsin] voters cast ballots for anti-Establishment candidates.” Both candidates focused on taxes and inflation ("Message of Discontent," 1972).

Viewing McGovern’s acceptance speech 50 years later on C-SPAN, we see a candidate who is more complex than the caricature of the immoderate leftist who ruined the party. He is a liberal, but also conveys himself as a team player for the party. He’s a populist and an antiestablishment candidate who would alienate the hawks by virtue of his Vietnam stance but was also more than a single-issue candidate, not simply a dove opposing Vietnam, even if the hardest of cold warriors would inevitably perceive only that aspect of his candidacy. He was critical of the status quo but optimistic about change. Arguably, McGovern’s most radical move in his 1972 speech is to close out by quoting lyrics from Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” a heartfelt song about equality and inclusion that was considered a sort of left-wing alternative to the national anthem. Watching the speech, in sum, reveals a nuanced picture of McGovern, rather different from the now-petrified, simplified image of him as the candidate who ruined future prospects for liberal Democratic presidential candidates. Notwithstanding his gutsy closing moments, McGovern did not come across as radical, in large part because he was a careful, measured speaker, not a bellowing fist-pounder, though that was the image that Nixon successfully hammered home in the months that followed.

The Nixon team’s attacks clearly worked, but the McGovern campaign ultimately failed for a number of reasons. The one most often singled out is that his first vice presidential candidate, Thomas Eagleton, was forced out of the race when it was revealed that he had a history of mental problems and had received electroshock therapy. A running mate switch mid-campaign was a massive crisis, and choosing a poor candidate in the first place (in a world in which mental illness is stigmatized) made McGovern look bad as well. But the ill-timed acceptance speech was also a huge snafu, a point driven home on numerous panel discussion programs aired later on C-SPAN.

C-SPAN’s open discussion format often results in people going “off script” and making more revealing comments than those made in one-on-one interviews. A revealing 1997 panel discussion on the ’72 campaign includes Frank Mankiewicz,
Morris Dees, and Hunter S. Thompson, and ends with an audience Q&A session in which panelists get into intricate, wonky policy issues about polling and direct mail campaigns. There's also a question about news bias against Nixon, which is shot down with vigor by the panelists—still furious about the media's having ignored lies in Nixon campaign ads, which they note contrasted sharply with McGovern's more honest ads. Here, a declining Thompson still manages to pull out all the stops in suggesting that Nixon “was a lying dog and had every reason to fear the press,” while Mankiewicz sharply observes that any sympathy for Nixon had to be balanced against the deviousness of his suggestion upon learning of the shooting of Wallace that his men should immediately break into the would-be assassin's home and plant McGovern campaign literature there (C-SPAN, 1997).

In addition to the panel shows, for both teachers and researchers the most useful C-SPAN material on the 1972 convention and election is probably the rebroadcasts of material from the time, specifically advertisements, campaign films, and nominating and acceptance speeches. Of course, all who work on media and American political campaigns are aware of the Museum of the Moving Image's Living Room Candidate website, which offers viewers campaign ads going back to 1952, but C-SPAN holds additional materials such as the half-hour biographical campaign films that used to circulated on TV between the conventions in the summer and the election in the fall, and, equally valuable, the half-hour election night campaign films. These are widely forgotten artifacts of the network era of mass audiences, before the rise of narrowly targeted, micro-managed advertising that dominates in the age of niche media and, more specifically, social media.

The McGovern campaign hired Charles Guggenheim to make its ads and documentaries. Guggenheim had made the JFK memorial film for the ’64 Democratic convention, and also the ’68 memorial film for Bobby Kennedy. Even Hunter S. Thompson, alienated by most aspects of political campaigning, and particularly TV ads, was impressed by Guggenheim's work for McGovern in ’72, writing that the candidate's “thirty-minute biography was so good that even the most cynical veteran journalists said it was the best political film ever made for television . . . and Guggenheim's sixty second spots were better than the bio film” (Thompson, 1973, p. 252). The TV spots are indeed excellent, and some run a full four minutes, unthinkably long for a post-network ad spot. As for the biographical film (see Guggenheim, 1972c), it is a careful balancing act, conveying both patriotism and critique. The first part of the film includes images of parades and American flags, but then McGovern narrates his encounters with
a range of people struggling to make ends meet. The father of a family of four complains about tax loopholes for millionaires and says, “The poor man is paying for the nation. . . . A lot of people want to be millionaires . . . because they don’t have to pay taxes.” His wife clips coupons and explains how every week her budget is tight “down to the nickel.” Nixon’s wage and price controls were “a total failure,” McGovern explains, and then continues with segments centered on the financial challenges of farmers and the elderly; a laid-off engineer who feels a loss of self-esteem now that his wife is the breadwinner; and, finally, disabled Vietnam vets seeking to improve their lives. McGovern laments the plight of Americans “caught in the whipsaw of our war-based economy.” The overall message is strongly liberal, but one must also note a total disengagement from the student moment, civil rights, Black power, and the women’s liberation movement. There is not a single person of color interviewed or even prominently visually featured in the film; a solitary Black boy is shown waving a flag at a parade.

The failure of the McGovern campaign can be chalked up to a few key factors: the Eagleton crisis; the loss of control of the TV image as the Miami convention spun out of control, coupled with the early morning acceptance speech; the break with Daley in Miami and concomitant loss of him as a campaign ally; and the dirty tricks of the Nixon campaign. Taken together, these factors tell the big story. On the other hand, one can also take a more fine-grained approach to understanding his defeat by examining how Guggenheim’s films positioned the candidate. In particular, Guggenheim found a positive angle on the openness of the convention. In fact, one of his four-minute ads focused entirely on the little-d-democratic nature of the convention as a strong point. One interviewee, a respectable looking young lady with a modest bouffant, observed, “A lot of people said, oh, you lost prime time by being up all night. Well, that to me was great, and every delegate that was there stayed there and stayed with it.” The point here, also made by other delegates in the ad, was that these newcomers were not in Miami to party: they were there to work. Another interviewee singled out the fact that delegates were making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on the convention floor because they couldn’t afford to eat in the hotels, and, anyway, “it wasn’t a convention to play” (Guggenheim, 1972a).

Like the other Guggenheim ads, this one was shot mostly with a handheld camera to convey immediacy and authenticity. One shot even includes lens flare, the halo effect from sunshine that before Easy Rider (1969) and other countercultural films was understood by cinematographers as “ruining” a shot. Jamieson argues in Packaging the Presidency that the cinema vérité style that dominated
McGovern’s campaign ultimately worked against him, as his statements were often extemporaneous, whereas Nixon was consistently tight, scripted, professional, and above all *presidential* in his ads (Jamieson, 1996, p. 322). That may be true; Guggenheim’s style was risky. That vérité was even used in McGovern’s convention-centered ad points strongly to the campaign’s strong desire to spin its convention as a huge success because it spoke not just to the young but also to the *sensibilities* of the young, sensibilities that could theoretically be shared by voters of all ages. That didn’t play out, obviously, in the voting booths in November. Still, McGovern leaned into his convention imagery about as hard as Hubert Humphrey had avoided his own four years earlier.

The most moving Guggenheim spot was a four-minute ad titled “Youth Vets” (Guggenheim, 1972d), which opens with a male voice-over explaining that the men pictured have “shattered lives and broken dreams. And they’re looking for all the help and understanding they can find.” Following this, the vets express some complaints about wheelchair accessibility and the complications of seeking government assistance, all under the veil of a “lost feeling.” McGovern responds by explaining how he was able to get through school on the GI Bill after three years as a World War II bomber pilot, and he goes on to advocate for government programs to educate and employ vets. One vet responds that the government should offer vets jobs: “Some of them can’t use their arms and fingers, but that doesn’t make them a nonproductive individual.”

McGovern has reached a tricky moment here; he’s having an honest discussion with the young men—an honesty conveyed not only by the dialogue itself but also by the style, a single camera swishing back and forth, a zoom lens moving in and out, and a few barely noticeable cuts (this is a meticulously edited piece, though designed to look spontaneous). The senator responds, “You love your country, there’s no question about that. But I bet you’re about halfway mad at it, aren’t you?” This is a delicate tightrope act; the candidate wants to be honest with his constituents, but he doesn’t want to seem unpatriotic, or to make the disabled men appear as such. The veteran’s response to the “halfway mad” query is really rough, and worth citing in its entirety:

> Believe me, when you lose the control of your bowels, your bladder—your sterility, you’ll never father a child—when the possibility of you ever walking again is cut off for the rest of your life, you’re twenty-three years old, you don’t want to be a burden on your family. You know where you go from here? To a nursing home. And you stay there until you rot. Why isn’t there places like this that the government could set up? Nobody thinks of a disabled veteran, or a
disabled anybody, but another disabled person. If you fall out of your wheelchair, you know who’s the first one to come try to get you some help? A guy in a wheelchair. And not somebody who’s walking. (Guggenheim, 1972d)

McGovern answers that “it’s one of the most unconscionable facts in this country today . . . that there are people who are desperately in need of help that can’t qualify for it under the present system,” and the veteran interjects “to stay alive.” McGovern closes out with, “That’s right. I love the United States. But I love it enough so I want to see some changes made. The American people want to believe in their government. They want to believe in their country. And I want to be one of those that provides the kind of leadership that would help restore that kind of faith. . . . The president can help set a new tone in this country. He can help raise the vision and the faith and the hope of the American people. And that’s what I’d like to try to do” (Guggenheim, 1972d).

McGovern has tried to end on a high note, a hopeful note. To produce an honest ad about the frustrations of Vietnam vets, and then to convey optimism and love of country was an almost impossible task. McGovern attempted it by suggesting that he could make changes, and by suggesting that one of the young men loved his country but was “about halfway mad at it,” a painful understatement. Again, the style of natural lighting and you-are-there handheld camera work also worked to convey the candidate as honest and in touch with voters, especially young voters.

In McGovern’s half-hour “election eve” film (see Guggenheim, 1972b), a recurrent genre for presidential candidates in the network era (accessible now thanks to C-SPAN’s American History TV), Guggenheim mixes the vérité style with a more conventional documentary approach featuring swelling dramatic music and a narrative voice-over. The end of the film, though, includes excerpts from the shorter ads, ads that Guggenheim had drawn from for his half-hour biographical film (see Guggenheim, 1972c). The most wrenching footage Guggenheim shot during the whole campaign was the rap session between McGovern and Vietnam vets. Here in this final film, though, Guggenheim uses only short clips of the vets and minimizes and tempers the impact of that footage with soaring, inspirational music. The idea was to amplify the candidate’s patriotism in order to balance out his criticisms.

Needless to say, it didn’t work. Nixon was ahead in the polls, and he remained there, successfully painting McGovern as an extreme left-winger. McGovern gave
him fodder for this line of attack by virtue of being critical of America at all, by
even implying in the four-minute ad that a veteran might be “halfway” angry and
that people “wanted” to believe in their government. In his C-SPAN book talk,
Bruce Miroff quotes Sen. Herman Talmadge of Georgia, saying, “What was wrong
with George in the campaign was that he gave the impression that he was mad at
the country. He was condemning her policy in Vietnam, and he was complain-
ing about the poor and talking about women’s rights. . . . If you get up there and
preach day and night against America, you’re not going to be elected” (C-SPAN,
2007). Miroff hastens to add that “McGovern was not preaching against America”
but that he was caricatured as unpatriotic. Indeed, campaign ads such as “Young
Vets” bent over backward to convey concern, critique, and compassion. Further,
when bits of the vet interviews were recycled in the biographical and election eve
half-hour films, they were infused with music and carefully worded voice-overs
to compensate for the realism and cinema vérité edge conveyed in the shorter ads.
But Nixon’s spin machine had successfully pushed home the idea that McGovern
was anti-American, and Guggenheim’s efforts to present a somewhat more mod-
erate image were too little, too late.

As media studies scholars and teachers, we should consider all of the McGov-
ern campaign media—not only the shorter ads, but also material such as the lon-
ger biographical and election eve films and the convention speech itself, all held
by the C-SPAN Video Library. Only by doing so can one craft a holistic picture
of the campaign’s media use. The 1972 convention and campaign can thereby be
understood as both political and televisual events, on their own and also in re-
relationship to the events of 1968. More than a reaction against the chaos of 1968,
the 1972 DNC was a continuation of the crises of that convention, also suffused
with chaos, though of a different valence. Following McGovern’s nomination,
the campaign thought it could tap into the wild energy of the delegates and con-
voy that energy in its ads and films. But as former North Carolina governor and
1972 Democratic presidential contender Terry Sanford noted in a 1988 C-SPAN
interview, the milk had already soured: “We gave the public the impression that
the Democratic Party had gone wild” (C-SPAN, 1988a), and there was no going
back. To make matters worse, Sanford added, all those new delegates were not
the sort of “regular Democrats” who “would build a consensus when they went
back home.” Between that tactical failure and the Nixon campaign’s effective neg-
ative advertising and dirty tricks, no amount of brilliant media could rebalance
the scales for McGovern.
NOTES

1. CBS's coverage of the second, third, and fourth days of the Democratic convention are available for viewing at the Paley Center for Media, New York City. Excerpts from the third day of CBS's coverage are available in the C-SPAN Video Library. NBC's full coverage is available from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive.

2. Recall also the 1924 Democratic convention, which lasted 16 days; votes were cast 103 times before a candidate was selected. “The convention is often called the ‘Klanbake’ because one of the front-runners, . . . William G. McAdoo, was supported by the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was a major source of power within the party, and McAdoo did not repudiate its endorsement. The other front-runner [was] New York Governor Al Smith, a Catholic who represented the party’s anti-Klan . . . wing . . . and his faction failed by a slim margin to pass a platform plank condemning the Klan” (Shafer, 2016). See also Murray (1976). “After 1936, blacks shifted their allegiance to the Democratic Party in spite of the Party’s poor record in regard to blacks. And as their numbers began to increase in the conventions their influence in the conventions grew” (Walton & Gray, 1975, p. 277).

3. Daley and his followers allowed only that there was an “organization” in Chicago; in a 2005 C-SPAN symposium, Richard J. Daley and American National Politics, Daley’s system was praised as “representative democracy” by Adlai Stephenson III (C-SPAN, 2005). Dan Rostenkowski argued that the old system allowed for “talent” to be nurtured outside of a political system driven by mass media. For all the unfairness of the machine, this argument has some merit. Within the machine system, unlimited media spending was simply not an issue. If you were on the slate, you had a good chance of being elected. While not fair to those outside the machine, the system also did not privilege the most wealthy, telegenic, or sensationalist candidate.

4. White was roundly attacked by the Left for his 1968 book. He saw it as a blame-the-messenger situation, because Nixon had won, but the book reveals an author completely taken in by the “New Nixon,” a candidate whom White (1969) esteemed as newly “carefree, jovial . . . hoisting drinks” with the press, “quite candid in his talk,” and offering a basically positive law-and-order message (p. 150). See also Buckley (1969).

5. ABC reduced its coverage from gavel-to-gavel for the 1968 convention and continued this in 1972. Both years, ABC gave nightly 90-minute summaries. My focus is on CBS and NBC because ABC was the underdog network, the weakest player in terms of both news and entertainment programming in this era.
6. At the GOP convention in August of 1972, by contrast, over 20 million homes
tuned in for Nixon’s 10:30 p.m. acceptance speech (White, 1973, p. 186).
7. Media and the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention (see C-SPAN, 2018), for ex-
ample, is an excellent 2018 C-SPAN panel that includes David Farber, Bernardine
Dohrn, Frank Kusch, and Hank DeZutter.

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