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Immune to Presidential Fever

THE “URGENT” TELEPHONE MESSAGE from George McGovern on 13 July 1972 was a surprise. Nelson thought he had put the issue to rest a week earlier. During a two-hour lunch at the Monocle, a restaurant and bar near the Senate office building, the two close friends and Senate seatmates had discussed possible candidates for vice president, including Nelson himself. Nelson had made it clear he did not want the nomination. “I’d seriously consider it only if you could guarantee that I wouldn’t win,” he said. But that was a hypothetical “what if” question — Would you be interested?¹

Now McGovern was asking him again: “I’d like to have you join me on the ticket and run for vice-president.” This time the question was not hypothetical. McGovern was calling from Miami, where he had been nominated the night before as his party’s candidate for president.²

In the ten-minute conversation, McGovern reminded Nelson that their views on most issues were similar and said he had no doubt Nelson had the ability to assume the presidency “if the job were to come your way.” Nelson, doodling on a piece of paper on his desk, just listened while McGovern made his case. There was a moment when Nelson “thought I might be stampeded into doing something I’d regret. I hated to say no because I really wanted to help George with a very difficult problem.”³

But Nelson’s answer was the same as it had been a week earlier. “George, I don’t want that damn job. If I had to serve as vice-president to anybody, you’d be the guy I would do it for. But I feel that serving as vice-president would be the end of my political career.” It would be the

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end of his political independence to speak his own mind on policy, Nelson said, and he was not willing to give that up. He also suggested it could be trouble at home, because he and Carrie Lee had agreed he would not run. In fact, the Nelsons had not decided anything. Carrie Lee could never remember being consulted about Nelson's plans in his entire career. He made his own decisions. "When I told George no, I exaggerated a little. I said my wife would leave me," Nelson said later. "Hell, I needed some excuse." In the McGovern campaign chronicles, the several books written by staff members, Nelson's "inviolable pact" with Carrie Lee was always cited as one reason he declined.⁴

Nelson said he would not run under any circumstances. McGovern was not surprised and did not argue or pressure him. They discussed other candidates, and Nelson recommended another close friend: "The guy who wants it is Tom Eagleton and he's the guy I'd pick if I were in your shoes." Senator Eagleton, of Missouri, was on McGovern's short list of potential candidates. Senators Walter Mondale and Edward Kennedy had spoken well of Eagleton, but McGovern had skipped over him because he did not know him personally. Nelson, Eagleton, and their wives had become good social and political friends since Eagleton's arrival in the Senate in 1968, and spent a lot of time together. Nelson reassured McGovern: "I know Tom well. He's very intelligent, high quality, high integrity, well informed, a good speaker, very presentable, a first rate person. By any measure I'd rank him high in any situation."⁵

McGovern hung up the phone in his suite at the Doral Hotel, told his staff that "Nelson and his wife" had agreed Nelson would not accept the nomination. "Well, I guess it's Eagleton," he said, placing the call that would derail his long-shot presidential candidacy. Eagleton had publicly said he wanted the nomination and did not hesitate when the call came. "George, before you change your mind, I hasten to accept," he said immediately.⁶

Nelson had not been McGovern's first choice for a running mate, or even his second. Politically, Kennedy offered the biggest lift, despite the shadow of the 1969 Chappaquiddick tragedy. When reelected, Kennedy had pledged to serve his full Senate term, which ran until 1976. Kennedy had told McGovern in an earlier meeting that family responsibilities made it difficult to think about running, but McGovern thought

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he had left the door open a crack. McGovern continued to hope, right up until the convention, that he could persuade Kennedy to run.⁷

His backup was to be Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut, a Kennedy ally who had been a governor and cabinet member. But in June Ribicoff told McGovern he didn't want to be considered because he was too old (sixty-two) and wanted to remain in the Senate. McGovern had talked to Leonard Woodcock, United Auto Workers president, but other labor leaders were unenthusiastic and Woodcock's name was dropped. Governor Reuben Askew of Florida, also high on the list, said he could not leave his governorship after only two years. As the convention began there was no clear second choice after Kennedy.⁸

The night he won the nomination, McGovern called Kennedy in Hyannisport, Massachusetts, and tried once more to persuade him to join the ticket. Kennedy said he would sleep on it, but told reporters the next morning he had turned it down. McGovern asked his staff and advisors for a list of possible choices, and more than twenty people assembled the next morning. The first brainstorm session produced a list of about twenty people that included television news anchor Walter Cronkite. Several more rounds of discussion and votes narrowed it to seven: Mondale of Minnesota; Eagleton; Governor Patrick Lucey of Wisconsin; Ribicoff; Sargent Shriver, a Kennedy in-law who had been director of the Peace Corps and ambassador to France; Boston Mayor Kevin White; and Lawrence O'Brien, chairman of the Democratic National Committee. McGovern knew Ribicoff was a nonstarter. He assumed that Mondale, up for reelection, would not run either, which he confirmed. Shriver was in Moscow. Lucey wanted the nomination but was eliminated because he was a McGovern loyalist who would be seen as too much "in the family."⁹

McGovern called Mayor White, who said he would accept, but McGovern did not make the formal offer and close the deal. He called Kennedy to get his sign-off, and was surprised when Kennedy was cool to White's candidacy and said he might even rethink his own availability. John Kenneth Galbraith, the Harvard economist who was a friend and advisor to both McGovern and Kennedy, ended White's candidacy when he said the Massachusetts delegation would walk out if White were nominated, because of his strong opposition to them during the

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state's primary. Kennedy called back and said no again to running himself and—apparently unaware of Galbraith's position—gave lukewarm approval to White.¹⁰

An hour before the convention deadline for nominating a vice presidential candidate, only Eagleton and O'Brien remained on the list. McGovern was not comfortable with either. "I'm going to ask Gaylord Nelson," he told his advisors. "He's a trusted friend. I've sat next to him in the Senate for ten years. I know his strengths and his weaknesses and he knows mine." Their views were compatible, Nelson was articulate and persuasive, and he had good ties to labor, environmental, and farm groups. "I had total confidence in him as a person of the most absolute integrity. I had heard Lyndon Johnson say, 'Pick a vice president you can absolutely trust,' and I had that feeling about Gaylord."¹¹

Although a close friend and ally, Nelson did not have Lucey's problem of being identified as a McGovernite. With his friends Hubert Humphrey and Edmund Muskie also on the ballot, Nelson had remained neutral in the Wisconsin primary, where McGovern had won his first victory. But Nelson helped "behind the scenes" and gave McGovern an issue besides Vietnam that would resonate with Wisconsin voters. A month before the primary, Nelson introduced the Tax Reform Act of 1972, to close loopholes of \$16 billion and provide property tax relief. Through a plan to give federal income tax credits for property tax payments, Nelson claimed it would reduce Wisconsin property taxes by 30 percent. At Nelson's urging, McGovern "jumped on it immediately, and it was one of the most helpful suggestions anyone made to me on the way to the nomination." Calling it the Nelson-McGovern property tax relief act, he "discussed it night and day in Wisconsin, second only to hammering against the continued war in Vietnam and the waste in excessive military spending."¹²

Nelson had turned down an invitation to chair the convention's platform committee. But Nelson had spoken to the convention, at McGovern's request, in a credentials battle over California's delegates. McGovern had won the winner-take-all California primary in June. Nelson had broken his personal tradition and endorsed McGovern before that primary, denouncing those who called McGovern irresponsible and radical, defending him as "a level-headed, practical, decent man."¹³ The convention's Credentials Committee, controlled by

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stop-McGovern forces, had ruled that the 271 California delegates must be split according to vote totals, which would take away 150 delegates — and perhaps the nomination — from McGovern. The issue was to be decided by the full convention.

Nelson told the delegates the question was: “Can we rule ourselves by law, or will power be our only guideline?” A party reform commission, chaired by McGovern, had made the rules for delegate selection. Nothing prohibited a winner-take-all system and everyone understood that was the rule in California. “Everyone played by those rules. Nobody questioned their validity until somebody won and somebody lost,” Nelson said. “The question before us is fundamental. We are being asked to surrender party reform to political expediency . . . to throw out the window this party’s commitment to law over force.” What was at stake, he concluded, was “the heart and soul of the Democratic Party. What do we stand for if we don’t stand for simple justice? What do we care about if we don’t care about basic fairness? What are we about if we are not about the rule of law?” It was a strong speech but had little to do with the convention’s vote to overturn the Credentials Committee and seat McGovern’s delegates. The vote was a show of strength by McGovern forces, augmented by a small number of other delegates whose consciences were offended by the power play — among them the leader of Wisconsin’s Humphrey delegation.¹⁴ The outcome virtually assured McGovern’s first ballot nomination. Nelson flew back to Washington on Tuesday. On Wednesday night, McGovern was nominated. On Thursday afternoon, he called Nelson.

Nelson’s polite refusal did not surprise McGovern. He hoped Nelson might say yes, but understood why he didn’t. Nelson loved the Senate, was comfortable and influential in his role there, and was finally beginning to see real progress on environmental issues. He knew McGovern’s campaign against Nixon was a long shot, and a losing effort could damage his own reelection campaign for the Senate in 1974. Finally, “he had seen enough of the vice presidency that he didn’t want the job. Hubert Humphrey had told everybody who would listen that it was a lousy job,” McGovern said.¹⁵

“I would do anything for George McGovern except run for vice president,” Nelson told a reporter. That included pleading McGovern’s case with organized labor, which was cool to his candidacy. Nelson,

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whose rapport with the unions was excellent, agreed to help. Nelson called Steelworkers President I. W. Abel, whom he considered a “good, intelligent, thoughtful labor leader,” and made a pitch for a McGovern endorsement, saying, “he’s got as good a record as I do.” Abel snapped back, “Don’t demean yourself.” Abel and his AFL-CIO brethren were upset with McGovern on three counts—his early opposition to the Vietnam War, which many unions, especially the building trades, supported; a vote he had cast against the AFL-CIO six years earlier on an antiunion provision of the Taft-Hartley Act; and the fact that the reform commission he headed had replaced many union delegates to the national convention with bearded hippies, women’s libbers, and kooks, in the hard hats’ view. Nelson and other Democrats with good labor credentials could not budge the AFL-CIO, which remained neutral.¹⁶

Nelson said he would actively campaign for the ticket. But the McGovern-Eagleton ticket remained intact for only eighteen days. Nelson, who was instrumental in bringing the two candidates together, also played a key role in their separation.

The Eagleton Problem

The disclosure, ten days after the convention, that Eagleton had been hospitalized three times for depression and twice had received electroshock treatment, had stopped the McGovern campaign in its tracks. In the glare of the national media spotlight, McGovern responded erratically, declaring he was behind Eagleton “1,000 percent” one day and beginning the process of getting him off the ticket the next. The campaign was paralyzed for nearly a week, as the political and public pressure mounted and McGovern agonized about whether to ask Eagleton to leave the ticket.

McGovern’s first inclination was to stand by Eagleton, and Nelson initially agreed. But the tide of public opinion, expressed publicly in newspaper editorials and privately by Democratic donors, was turning against Eagleton—and against McGovern’s handling of his selection. Two days after the disclosure, McGovern called Nelson for advice. Nelson, in Washington himself, offered to take an informal sounding in Wisconsin, where Sherman Stock, his top staff member in the state, was making several appearances on Nelson’s behalf that day. Wherever he went, Stock sought out Democrats he knew to ask for their appraisal

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of the situation, talking “very pointedly” with them. Every person he spoke to was “edgy” about keeping Eagleton; not one spoke up strongly in favor of keeping him on the ticket. Stock told Nelson, who relayed the information to McGovern. Nelson told McGovern he had changed his own mind and believed “a reconsideration was required” of Eagleton’s candidacy.¹⁷

McGovern already had signaled the news media, within forty-eight hours of his “1,000 percent” support, that he was reconsidering. Theodore White, who chronicled the campaign, later called the 1,000 percent statement “possibly the most damaging single faux pas ever made by a Presidential candidate.” McGovern now felt he had no choice but to ask Eagleton to leave the ticket. On Sunday, 30 July, McGovern and Eagleton met privately. Eagleton made his case for staying on the ticket and McGovern gave the counterarguments. They agreed to sleep on it.¹⁸

The next morning, McGovern was aboard *Air Force Two*, with a delegation of senators en route to New Orleans for the funeral of Senator Allen Ellender. Nelson was still at home shaving when McGovern called him from the plane. “If Tom hasn’t announced his withdrawal by 10 A.M., would you go over and tell him I called and would like him to announce it?” McGovern asked.¹⁹

“I sure as hell don’t want to, but I will convey what you have told me and let him make up his own mind,” Nelson replied. “The last thing in the world I wanted to do was convey that message to my friend Tom,” Nelson recalled. About 10:10, having heard nothing about an Eagleton decision, Nelson reluctantly made his way to Eagleton’s Senate office, which was staked out by photographers. Eagleton was on the telephone when he came in, and Nelson could hear the conversation while he waited. Eagleton seemed in good spirits and told whoever was on the telephone that he had decided to withdraw. “That was the end of that. I never did have to tell him George called me,” Nelson recalled. When he hung up, the two discussed the issue, and although Nelson downplayed his role and said he did nothing to influence the decision, Eagleton and his staff credited Nelson for the help he gave his friend in thinking it through. “Senator Nelson is a very wise and intuitive person about the ways of politics, and he was of great assistance to us in this decision,” Eagleton said. Eagleton “values Senator Nelson’s advice and counsel probably more than any other member of the Senate,” an Eagleton aide said. “It was clear when Nelson left, Eagleton knew what his decision

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would be.”²⁰ Nelson would say Eagleton’s mind was made up before their conversation, but Eagleton clearly relied on him for support and advice even after the fact.

Nelson participated in one more painful meeting upon McGovern’s return to Washington. He and Eagleton met in the Marble Room, the private, senators-only room off the Senate floor, next to the Democratic cloakroom. The national press corps crowded into the nearby Senate Caucus Room to await an announcement. Nelson, whom both McGovern and Eagleton would describe as their closest friend in the Senate, was the only other person present. McGovern had invited him “on the assumption that the presence of a mutual friend respected by both Eagleton and me would be helpful in reaching a final understanding.” Nelson asked Eagleton, who said he, too, would like to have him present. The decision on Eagleton’s fate had been made, but he and McGovern once more went through the pros and cons. Eagleton said he was resigned to leaving the ticket, provided that his physical or mental health was not the reason given.²¹

Eagleton and McGovern went into the next room. Eagleton got two of his doctors on the telephone and put McGovern on the line, returning to sit with Nelson while McGovern spoke to the doctors. Afterward, they agreed on the statements they would make to the news media a short time later. “I didn’t have to do anything. I was just there,” Nelson said, insisting he was a passive observer, not an active participant. Nelson had “very little to say,” Eagleton said. McGovern said Nelson “was in on the crucial conversation just before we went out to meet the press.” In any event, as Theodore White put it, when the conversation ended, “the McGovern-Eagleton ticket was over.”²²

Any hope for McGovern’s long-shot candidacy was over as well. McGovern went through the list of potential running mates again, and Kennedy, Ribicoff, Humphrey, Askew, and Muskie all declined before Sargent Shriver agreed to join the ticket. He knew better than to ask Nelson again. Even if Nelson had a change of heart—a highly unlikely development—he could never agree to replace his friend Tom Eagleton.

Nelson for President

The 1972 campaign was not the first or last time Nelson’s name was touted for national office, although it was the only time he had to