EDITORIAL AND OPINION PAGE COVERAGE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN OF 1972 BY FIVE MICHIGAN DAILY NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

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By

Donald James Sevener

The function of the press in a free society is to serve as the guardian of the public welfare. It achieves this noble and vital purpose through its role as informant of the people. The press can fulfill its role through a variety of devices--from television and radio news programs to newspapers and magazines. One device that is particularly valuable and appropriate for promoting understanding of events on more than a mere superficial level is the interpretation and analysis provided by a newspaper on its editorial and opinion pages. And the quality of the editorial coverage of events supplies an important measure of the degree to which the editors of a newspaper acknowledge the responsibility of the press to inform the people and the extent to which they honor that obligation.

This study is designed to evaluate the editorial and opinion page coverage of the 1972 presidential election campaign by the five largest metropolitan daily newspapers in Michigan to determine if these papers fulfilled their responsibility to inform the people. An analysis of the editorials and political opinion columns of the Detroit News, the Grand Rapids Press, the Flint Journal,

the Detroit Free Press, and the Lansing State Journal for the period July 10 through November 7, 1972 provides an edifying insight into the sense of journalistic responsibility exhibited by these newspapers as well as how they fulfilled that responsibility by furnishing understanding of the campaign for their readers.

A standard by which to judge the editorials and opinion columns of these newspapers was readily established through secondary reference material relating to the function and purpose of the editorial and opinion pages. These data enabled the postulation of criteria for evaluating the content of the editorials and columns in terms of the interpretation and analysis they provided for the reader. A critical analysis of the content of the opinion pieces based upon the insight into the campaign they offered for readers and how they matched interpretative standards set forth by various press critics served as the basis for conclusions drawn in the study.

The most salient observation to be derived from this study is that, in general, these five newspapers--representing more than 50 per cent of the daily Michigan circulation--did not, through their editorial and opinion pages, uphold the responsibility of the press to inform the people. There was a mixture of some specimens of brilliant interpretation as well as some examples of mediocre analysis. There were instances when certain editorials or opinion columns provided readers with an overall view of

all the implications and connotations of various issues or events in the campaign. But this type of perspective was usually overshadowed by less cogent and informative analyses. On balance, the editorial and opinion page coverage of the 1972 campaign by these newspapers did not supply the quality analysis or opinion leadership that would be expected of a newspaper that had a clear notion of its obligation to its readers and the determination to fulfill that obligation.

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W. Cameron Meyer

Director of Thesis

To my daffy and delightful wife, Sally, whose sacrifices, devotion, and confidence made this work possible.

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INTRODUCTION

The campaign began, in the words of one candidate, as "the clearest choice in this century" and ended in what many reporters and observers called the "non-campaign" of 1972. In many respects, the contest between President Richard M. Nixon and Senator George S. McGovern for the presidency often resembled a sort of fait accompli. Public opinion pollsters and other prognosticators forecast not only defeat but also outright humiliation for the Democratic ticket. Issues became blurred by rhetoric and accusations. Events seemed sometimes to transcend the campaign of which they were a part to become isolated incidents in themselves, independent of the candidates they represented. The president acted frequently as if there was no election being held at all--rarely leaving the White House to address the voters and dispatching Vice-President Spiro Agnew and other so-called "surrogates" to take to the hustings in search of votes. Senator McGovern criss-crossed the nation in long, frantic, peripatetic days of campaigning; but until the final days of the campaign, the more he traveled and the more he talked to the people, the less positive impact he seemed to have on the electorate. And on election day, the voters underscored all the pre-election prophesies by giving President Nixon one of the

most resounding personal victories in the history of American presidential politics.

The election campaign that concluded on November 7 was, if nothing else, one of the longest in American history. George McGovern began his quest for the presidency, officially, in January, 1971--a full year before candidacies are traditionally declared. Many of the voters in 1972 were too young to recall but one presidential election in their lifetimes in which Richard Nixon was not a candidate somewhere on the ticket. Yet, notwithstanding the longevity of the campaign and the durability of the campaigners, many voters still possessed only a superficial familiarity with the two candidates and their aspirations for the future of America. Nixon, having disposed of his image of "Tricky Dick" acquired in the 1950s, emerged as the statesman--the candidate of peace and reconciliation. McGovern, a Democratic senator from South Dakota, having embraced or flirted with positions to the left of the perceived political center of the nation, struggled to shed the image of radicalism--the candidate, some believed, of "acid, amnesty, and abortion."

In actuality, the two candidates, despite vast differences in political and social philosophy, shared several common characteristics. Both came from white, middle-class, Protestant backgrounds, and were reared on fundamentalist values and ethics. Each was a veteran of World War II and federal administrative jobs; each had

served in both houses of Congress; and each had achieved his presidential candidacy against seemingly insuperable odds.

George McGovern was so little known and so seriously underestimated as the potential nominee of the Democratic party that even in January of 1972, after a full year of presidential campaigning, many pollsters failed to include his name in their preliminary sampling of voter preferences and attitudes. But relying on the support and aid of a legion of young volunteers, McGovern had swept through the presidential primaries, winning key contests in Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and California, among others; and then with masterful (and sometimes ruthless) political skill and organization defeated credential challenges to his California delegates and unsavory radical platform measures at the Democratic National Convention in Miami to confound pollsters, pundits, and erstwhile party "pros" to become the Democratic presidential nominee of 1972.

The political odyssey of Richard Nixon was no less miraculous than that of George McGovern. For Nixon had been defeated politically on November 8, 1960, in the presidential campaign by John F. Kennedy; had removed himself from all politics by self-proclamation following his defeat for governor of California in 1962; but returned to campaign vigorously in the presidential race that ended in the landslide defeat of Barry Goldwater in 1964; and defeated Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota for the presidency

in 1968. After four years in the presidency, Nixon received in 1972 not only the virtually unqualified support of his Republican party but also its sincere and almost universal adulation.

But there were differences, as well. And these differences were as complex as they were myriad. In party politics, for example, the Republicans who united obediently behind Richard Nixon stood in marked contrast to the Democrats, many of whom, resentful of the party reform measures that bore McGovern's name and of their purge from the party leadership by the young McGovernites, bolted the party--most visibly John Connally, former Democratic governor of Texas and a secretary of the treasury under Nixon, and George Meany, president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations--or provided only token support for McGovern--most notably Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. And while congressional and state candidates on the Republican ticket scrambled to grasp the president's elusive coattails, Democratic office-seekers often shunned or ignored their national ticket.

More importantly, there existed wide disparity between the positions of the two party platforms and the two candidates on fundamental issues that struck at the essence of America's past policies and her future well-being. The question of the war in Vietnam, an issue that McGovern had ridden to prominence, dominated foreign policy debate, and illustrated the deep divisions both in the

nation and between the men who sought to lead it. Military policy, from defense spending to amnesty for draft evaders, was also a source of much attention, accusations, conflict, and confusion. Domestically, the economy--with high unemployment and inflation--was an issue that McGovern repeatedly attempted to exploit and the administration circumspectly tried to avoid. Senator McGovern, during the various state primary election campaigns, had advocated a controversial welfare reform plan that would have granted $1,000 to every citizen, but abandoned the proposal after careful scrutiny of the plan revealed its economics to be unsound. President Nixon, after endorsing a Family Assistance Plan coinciding at least in principle with McGovern's program, withdrew his support and emphasized, in his campaign, what he termed the "work ethic" versus the "welfare ethic." An issue McGovern hammered at relentlessly was that of corruption in government. The burglary and alleged wiretapping of the Democratic National Headquarters by men connected with the Committee for the Re-election of the President and some subsequent revelations of suspicious handling of Republican campaign funds provided the Democratic nominee with an issue he thought would challenge the credibility of the president. The Republicans countered with questions of McGovern's own credibility, Vice-President Agnew charging that the only consistent thing about George McGovern was his inconsistency. There were other issues, also--numerous and perplexing--such as

education, with the emphasis on school busing; tax reform; the environment; law and order; civil rights and quotas; the Supreme Court; and, perhaps most significantly, the vision Senator McGovern and President Nixon had of what America was and should become during the 1970s.

Events and circumstances peculiar to the 1972 campaign also contributed to a lack of understanding by some voters of the issues and candidates. Foremost of these events was the Eagleton affair. The disclosures, in late July, of the medical history of Senator Thomas Eagleton, a Democrat from Missouri who was McGovern's vice-presidential running mate, in which it was revealed that he had been treated on three occasions for mental depression--twice with electric shock treatment--resulted in a week-long flurry of publicity, an avalanche of unfavorable editorial reaction, and the ultimate withdrawal of Eagleton from the ticket. Even after Eagleton had been replaced as the vice-presidential candidate by R. Sargent Shriver, the entire episode continued to haunt the campaign, questioning McGovern's judgment and undermining his credibility as the "anti-politician" many of his admirers thought him to be.

Another event that frequently precluded any rational, fruitful debate of significant issues was the Watergate affair. After five men, one of them employed by the president's re-election committee, were arrested inside the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate office complex in Washington carrying wiretapping

equipment, the Democratic party leadership and Senator McGovern attempted to make the affair a national cause célèbre. In all, seven men, including former presidential aide G. Gordon Liddy and former White House consultant E. Howard Hunt, were indicted on charges of criminal conspiracy. Those arrested were allegedly financed in their political espionage and sabotage of Democratic headquarters and candidates by a portion of the $10 million secret campaign fund collected for President Nixon before April 7, 1972 when a new campaign spending law requiring public disclosure of donors went into effect. As a result of the supposedly nefarious spending activities of the Republicans, suspicion enveloped much of the Republican high command including former Attorney-General John Mitchell, who resigned as chairman of the president's re-election committee, and chief fund raiser Maurice Stans, the former secretary of commerce. McGovern tried, unceasingly and largely unsuccessfully, to link the Watergate episode to other scandals and embarrassments directly or obliquely related to the White House and executive departments. But his lack of concrete evidence to support his claims of high-level corruption, the apparent apathy of the public to become indignant or alarmed over the affair, and the unwillingness or inability of the administration and Republican campaign officials to conclusively and convincingly repudiate the charges of wrongdoing served mainly to heighten cynicism of the political process, obscure material issues, and

frequently reduced the campaign to name-calling and invective.

Additional events intruded into the intelligent discussion of issues and presidential qualifications and sometimes subordinated the candidates and their campaigns to more ephemeral considerations such as the public opinion polls, the contrast between the raucousness of the Democratic convention and the serenity of the Republican meeting, and the control of the party machinery by radicals or reactionaries. These were undeniably legitimate subjects of attention for the press and of concern to many citizens, but to permit these matters to interrupt and occasionally dominate the campaign, as they sometimes seemed to do, vitiated the purpose of the campaign and frustrated the function of the democratic process.

In short, the election of 1972 did become a curious kind of non-campaign. Substantive discussion of important issues was often clouded by rhetoric, shrouded in simplistic notions and solutions, or not even addressed in favor of appeals to the electorate's fears and anxieties. The candidates were frequently perceived by the public, not for what they were but, for some mythical abstraction propagated, in public relations fashion, by media manipulators with the intent of projecting or inventing an image of the candidate with which voters could identify, sympathize, and, ultimately, support. Subsidiary events, exaggerated or otherwise perverted, occasionally overshadowed larger

interests and diverted crucial attention away from issues of significant concern.

Consequently, voters went to the polls on November 7 with perhaps only a vague or distorted concept of what kind of men the two candidates seeking the presidency really were, their positions on major issues, and the relevance and importance of secondary campaign matters.

In the absence of genuine understanding of the campaign generated by the candidates or their parties, it became the responsibility of the press to provide the information, interpretation, and analysis necessary to enable the American people to determine the future of the nation on an intelligent, rational, and informed basis. And nowhere was this responsibility more evident or more essential than in the editorial and opinion page coverage of the campaign by daily newspapers.

CHAPTER I

THE OPINION FACTORY

The press, in a free and democratic society, derives its identity, its sense of purpose, its existence from its role as servant of the people. The modern press, founded in constitutional authority and protection, is beholden the responsibility, morally if not legally, of being the informant of the people. Information about the government and the governors is the lifeblood of a society that depends and thrives on the democratic principle of the sovereignty of the governed. The obligation for providing such information is fulfilled by the news media through a variety of forms and sources, from television news programs and documentaries to a multifarious collection of news magazines and opinion journals. But the most fundamental and salient outlet of information regarding government policy and policy-makers is the thousands of columns of newsprint that are produced daily in the hundreds of newspapers throughout the nation.

These columns of newsprint, however, do not in themselves redeem the responsibility of the press to the people. They represent merely a beginning--the raw material necessary for citizens to become informed about their

government. In a complex and frenetic world, complicated issues and events require explanation, interpretation, and analysis to impart a clear and comprehensive understanding of what such issues and their implications signify. The nature of news in so turbulent and anomalous a society is described by John Oakes, editor of the editorial page of the New York Times:

> News today is not merely the recitation of a succession of happenings, human or otherwise; it is a highly concentrated and broadly expansive mixture of politics, economics, sociology, and science pouring in--in largely undigested form--on the vast numbers of individuals who, through the workings of our modern political and industrial democracy, are in a position materially to influence the events they read about. Thus they need a good deal more than mere superficial acquaintance with a chronological series of facts; they need . . . understanding.[1]

A certain measure of this understanding is frequently provided in news columns through interpretative reporting and news analysis stories. This type of reporting, however, is often subject to the same limitations and restrictions that make regular news accounts incapable of rendering profound comprehension of sophisticated issues. It becomes, then, the obligation of a newspaper to provide alternative or auxiliary means by which explanation of perplexing issues can be achieved.

Traditionally, the explicative or analytical function of the newspaper has been reserved for the editorial

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[1]John Oakes, "The Editorial: What It Is and What It Aims For," in Marquette University, College of Journalism, Social Responsibility of the Newspress (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 1962), p. 27.

and opinion pages. And today, despite the increase of interpretative reporting, these pages remain the most consistent and perhaps valuable source of interpretation in the newspaper. Oakes underscores this judgment:

> . . . this, it seems to me, is one of the principal functions of the newspaper today: to try to give some understanding of the complex of events to the people of our democratic community on whom, in the last analysis, rests the burden of the great decisions.
>
> The editorial page is one of the most important . . . means of performing this task. It does it through the expression of an informed interpretation of the news and a reasoned opinion about the news.[2]

The interpretative editorial is particularly suitable for this function for, as according to Oakes, it is "designed to elucidate, to inform, to place a series of facts in their proper setting; it is the kind of editorial that, without telling the reader what to think, does help show him how to think."[3] That is not only a useful service but also it is an essential obligation and noble trust as well.

The purpose of the editorial page, its raison d'être, embraces more than simply its interpretative capacity, although, practically, that remains its most important function. A newspaper, through its editorials, should furnish leadership on sensitive and controversial questions and express constructive criticism of government policies and officials, incumbent and prospective. In short, the editorial page is the conscience of the newspaper and, more

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 29.

importantly, the surrogate conscience of the citizenry. This role is articulated by Louis M. Lyons, the former curator of the Nieman Fellowships at Harvard University, who suggests that "if one needed an excuse for an editorial page, or to try to define the primary role of the page, I think it would be to express the tone of the paper. It's a chance to represent the institution itself, as a thoughtful person, a good neighbor, one who cares."[4] Part of this good-neighbor policy involves persuading public officials or the public itself to accept or reject a particular program, or a certain candidate, or a specific approach to a problem. As Oakes points out: "One of the highest and most important functions of the editorial is . . . to examine a public problem . . . to propose a course of action regarding that problem that is in the public interest, and to try to convince the reader that such a course is right."[5] The persuasive editorial, thus, enables a newspaper to be a responsible critic and guardian of the public welfare. And if the paper fulfills this vital obligation, it enables the people to have a dependable and articulate ally in defending and promoting the public interest.

Another purpose of the editorial page, less tangible and clearly defined than the interpretative and

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[4]Louis M. Lyons, "The Role of the Editorial Page," Nieman Reports, December, 1970, p. 24.

[5]Oakes, "The Editorial," pp. 27-28.

persuasive functions, is to present an image of the newspaper itself. At a time when standardization and commercialization of daily newspapers are increasing--ranging from widespread use of syndicated columns and news stories to wire service jokes--the editorial page offers the opportunity for the newspaper to demonstrate that it has some thoughts of its own. The editorial page, John Oakes contends, is the most appropriate place in the newspaper "where individuality can be given far freer rein than is permissible within the relatively rigid guidelines of news accounts . . ."[6] He emphasizes this theme in affirming that

> To the degree that a newspaper has a lively, provocative, and informative editorial page, to that extent, I would say the newspaper has a soul; to the extent that the editorial page is given over to canned material dominated by syndicated features, submerged in banalities, and wallowing in the obvious, then that newspaper, of which such an editorial page is the mirror, has neither soul nor character.[7]

For readers to have confidence in seeking or responding to the advice and guidance of a newspaper, that paper must impart a sense of purpose and individual identity. The editorial page that is aimless, indecisive, or casual subverts its responsibility to its readers and undermines the trust of the people. A newspaper that recognizes the importance and potential of the editorial page, and uses

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[6]John Oakes, "The Editorial Page," Nieman Reports, September, 1968, p. 2.

[7]Oakes, "The Editorial," p. 23.

the page to express its own personality and singularity, inspires public faith in the newspaper as a thoughtful and responsible servant of the community.

The style and tone of an editorial page is often as important as its substance. For an editorial that substitutes emotion for reason, meanders into incomprehensible distractions, or employs mercurial language risks obscuring substantive issues in a maze of irrational rhetoric. An editorial, therefore, must be readable--educated but not stuffy or necessarily erudite. It should be grounded in reason and framed in logic, dealing with emotional issues in a dispassionate and orderly manner. An editorial writer should avoid trying to be clever or witty, for the purpose of the editorial is to inform and persuade, not to illustrate the writer's literary embellishments. It must be precise and to the point, extracting key issues and arguments from extraneous or insignificant considerations and focusing discussion on substantive matters. An editorial should be forceful and unequivocal, cognizant of all points of view but unhesitant to express a firm conviction. It should "be moderate in tone because the page that continually rants and raves is actually a page that spends its force in rhetoric and not in reason, and soon loses whatever influence it might have had."[8] And finally, an editorial must be fair. That is, it should be clothed in

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[8]Ibid., p. 32.

a framework of overall editorial policy that dictates that every issue, every proposal, every candidate receives a fair and balanced accounting before editorial positions are established and stated. It is incumbent upon the editors of a newspaper to insure that their editorial policy, and the editorials that result from it, meet a standard of quality in style, tone, and substance that enables the readers to become informed and the editorial to have a maximum impact.

The editorial page of a newspaper reflects, most frequently and quite naturally, the views and attitudes of the editors themselves. The peculiar attributes that qualify editors to evaluate and make judgments on the events that go on around them do not, of course, emanate from any inherent or mystical capacity, but rather illustrate the nature of an editor's job. As Robert B. Frazier, editorial page editor of the Eugene (Oregon) Register-Guard, notes:

> One of our big jobs as editors is to stretch minds. Because we devote ourselves to the news and comments on the news, we are, as a group, better informed than most of our readers. We have a responsibility to take our readers away from their insular lives and show them what is happening elsewhere. The ordinary reader in Missoula or Eugene has little idea of the grinding poverty of the poor whites in Appalachia, the Indians in Arizona or the slum dwellers in Harlem, Watts and Detroit. We need to keep that reader thinking about these problems as well as his own, because they could be, and probably are now, his problems too.[9]

What makes an editor's reaction to news more valuable, if

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[9] Robert B. Frazier, "Arrows into the Air: The Editorial Page Challenge," Nieman Reports, September, 1971, p. 20.

not more valid, is his daily association, his almost symbiotic affinity, with the news. That is not to suggest that an editor is necessarily more correct in his judgments than a well-informed businessman, or housewife, or farmer. But just as one (probably) would not go to a newsman to learn how to plow a field, one would most likely not approach a farmer for an analysis of the national budget. John Oakes reaffirms this conclusion:

> I believe that the editorial page has not only the right but, quite literally, the obligation, to express opinions based on as objective, impersonal evaluation of the facts as is humanly possible. This is not because editors are any wiser . . . it is simply because the whole of their time and intelligence is--or ought to be--devoted to the effort to dig beneath the superficial, to understand, to weigh, to analyze and to judge the events of our world today.[10]

It is the devotion to such an effort that provides editors and other news commentators with the insight, expertise, and understanding to produce cogent and informative editorials and opinion columns for the edification of their readers.

The purpose of the opinion page, often known as the Op-Ed Page for its location opposite the editorial page, is less expansive and manifold than that of the editorial page. Its primary, almost singular, objective correlates with the interpretative role of the editorial page. Its function, through interpretation and analysis, is to provoke thinking--it acts not as a substitute for the reader's

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[10]Oakes, "The Editorial Page," p. 2.

own thinking but as a catalyst for it. The role of the columnist is to supply enlightened and intelligent opinion that will provide perspective and a sense of order to complicated and bewildering events. Or, as Louis Lyons indicates, an important responsibility of the news commentator is

> . . . adding things up that the reader may have forgotten, to give the background, to provide a continuity and so, one hopes, more meaning to events. And keeping a steady course. Walter Lippmann once told me that a columnist should write in such a way that his readers would not be too surprised at events.[11]

To eliminate the element of surprise in daily occurences and enable readers to grasp the meaning and significance of issues and events, thoughtful insight and perspective, provided by opinion columns, are essential.

The explicative nature of the opinion column is underscored, in part, by its development. While political opinion columns originated in the 1920s with the works of Heywood Broun and Walter Lippmann, their potential and impact as an interpretative device was most fully realized during the turbulent era following the Great Depression:

> The economic depression of the 'thirties seemed to give the men who were adroit in the handling of ideas their first semblance of indispensability. In a time of torment and confusion, with the smell of war ever on the air from abroad, readers sought by millions for someone who could answer all questions and explain all tangles. The columnists volunteered, each according to his gifts. If an employer or workman looked nervously toward Washington, in uneasiness or hope, he could find a daily dispatch interpreting the activity of the moment and making the future as clear and simple as a crystal bell. Another writer

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[11]Lyons, "The Role of the Editorial Page," p. 23.

> would reduce a labor problem involving three million men to seven hundred lucid words. Searching among others, the reader could find one to fan his anger or sustain his belief or support his misgivings.[12]

And today, in a society even more complex, the role that proved so useful during the 1930s is more greatly magnified and vital.

In fulfilling this role, opinion columnists can add a new dimension to the editorial page of a newspaper. For by providing the works of a variety of syndicated columnists, a newspaper can offer its readers a spectrum of opinion that will produce a greater depth of understanding through the expression of viewpoints at variance with those articulated in editorials. This potential was readily acknowledged from the outset of opinion-column writing as "it was Broun who first made a major demonstration of the weight of a single opinion entirely apart from--and often in opposition to--that of the paper which was using his stuff."[13] And it was an important discovery, since it afforded readers an opportunity to be exposed to various interpretations of the news and hence additional perspectives that broadened the awareness and comprehension of all aspects of an issue or event.

The role of the political opinion columnist manifests a sort of schizophrenic nature in which the columnist

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[12]Charles Fisher, The Columnists (New York: Howell, Soskin, 1944), p. 13.

[13]Ibid.

attempts to strike a balance between the function of a reporter and that of an editor. For the columnist is both. He reports the news and he interprets it. He covers events, candidates, and issues while concurrently analyzing them. The result of this dual responsibility is an opinion piece that is reflective in tone and character. The columnist gathers facts as the reporter does, but without the pressures and restraints of a daily deadline is able to pause for sober contemplation of what such facts signify. The result, if the columnist upholds his obligation, is a provocative and reasoned opinion that helps elucidate and inform, as it unveils fresh or alternative considerations and perspectives for the reader.

The editorial and opinion pages are, unquestionably, an invaluable source of information in satisfying the responsibility of the press to the people and the people's need to know about the affairs of their government. By providing interpretation, analysis, and guidance regarding difficult and complex issues and events, these pages are an indispensable means of insuring an enlightened and informed public.

CHAPTER II

THE EDITORIALS

A survey of the editorial and opinion page coverage of the 1972 presidential campaign by the five largest daily newspapers in Michigan illustrates both the sense of journalistic responsibility exhibited by these papers and the depth of seriousness with which they regarded the editorial page as a source of information and interpretation for their readers. Reviewing the editorial and opinion pages of the Grand Rapids Press, the Flint Journal, the Detroit Free Press, the Lansing State Journal, and the Detroit News for the period of July 10 through November 7, 1972, provides an important measure of the success of these newspapers in fulfilling their obligation to inform the people and of the dedication with which they approached that task.

Press coverage of the presidential campaign--both editorial and reportorial--focused essentially on four broad, distinct, but often interrelated areas: party politics, events and circumstances of the campaign, issues, and the candidates themselves. One of the most widespread and persistent subjects of editorial attention, if not the most significant in terms of voter education, involved

political matters, of concern primarily to state and local party officials or a relative handful of additional political stalwarts. Nevertheless, there were political subjects of interest and importance to the general public and the newspapers produced a volume of opinion to deal with them. Foremost of these subjects were the Republican and Democratic National Conventions. The Democratic convention, especially, provided virtually endless opportunities for editorial interpretation and analysis--from George McGovern's stunning victory to the party reforms that resulted in the participation of more black, women, and young delegates than ever before in the convention. This latter consideration provided the theme of an editorial in the Flint Journal, in which the editors questioned just how much reform had taken place:

> There is a touch of irony in the victory of liberal, reform forces of the Democratic party in the seating of the 100-per-cent McGovern California delegation and the ousting of the Daley delegates from Illinois.
>
> The purpose of the reform movement was to give the voters a greater control of the party convention and to reflect more accurately the voting percentages. It bore McGovern's name.
>
> Net result of the two decisions (which virtually assured McGovern's nomination) was to disfranchise the 56 per cent of California voters who approved of somebody besides McGovern and to present him with a considerable number of Illinois delegates--where McGovern chose not even to give the voters an opportunity to vote on his candidacy.[1]

The Journal had a point. It did seem inconsistent for McGovern, who had largely authored the reform measures, to

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[1]Flint Journal, July 12, 1972, p. 18.

endorse and strive for actions that, in essence, deprived thousands of voters representation in the selection of the Democratic nominee. But the issue was more complex than the Journal indicated. First, the delegation of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley had violated the guidelines set forth by the McGovern reform commission within the Democratic party, as reported by the Credential Committee's own investigator, and the fact that a substantial portion of the challenging delegates supported McGovern was only incidental to that crucial fact. Supporters of the other candidates, or of Mayor Daley for that matter, could have brought the challenge but declined. And furthermore, the Journal overlooked the fact that McGovern had sought a compromise through which both delegations would have been seated but the offer was rejected by Daley. The controversy over the California delegates arose only after McGovern had won the California primary. Although the winner-take-all formula for that primary vitiated the spirit of the reforms, all the major Democratic contenders had agreed to postpone application of the proportional representation concept to the California primary until the 1976 campaign. Thus, the indignation expressed by the Journal disregarded certain important considerations that shed a new perspective on the controversy that was not provided in the editorial.

The Journal returned to the subject of the Democratic party reforms in an editorial on the following day.

But the newspaper seemed more concerned with the political effect than with the nature and purpose of the reforms or the conditions that initiated them. After briefly reviewing the Democrats' gloomy electoral prospects, the Journal noted:

> Despite the unfavorable outlook this year for the Democrats, the Republicans would be unwise to ignore the changes wrought in the opposition party. The awkwardness that is apparent could prove deceiving.
>
> The most apparent sign from this week's convention is that broader representation within the structures of our major political parties is the wave of the future.[2]

Presumably the Journal applauded this "wave of the future" but there was no clear evidence in the editorial of this. The political impact of the reforms in terms of achieving electoral success was secondary, or should have been, to what the reforms themselves really meant. Why did the Democratic party undertake to reform its delegate selection process? What, precisely, were the reforms designed to accomplish? What defects existed in the new selection system and how could they be remedied? What did the reforms mean in a historical sense in the way presidential nominees were selected and what did such reforms portend for the future? These questions were ignored by the Journal editors, or at least during the week of the Democratic convention when they were most timely, and as a result, important considerations of vital interest to readers were not addressed.

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[2]Ibid., July 13, 1972, p. 10.

On July 14, the Detroit Free Press also editorialized about the reform movement that had created such changes in the Democratic party. Viewing from a historical perspective in an editorial entitled "New Dems Here to Stay, Despite Meanys and Daleys," the Free Press likened the attitude of the old party professionals such as George Meany and Richard Daley to the attitudes in the South following the Civil War: "The old thing sat there . . . like a mummy, content to nurse its wounds, not realizing all the while that it was a mummy, dead beyond hope of resurrection." Acknowledging the analogy between McGovern's candidacy and the disastrous one of Barry Goldwater in 1964, the Free Press went on to discount the likelihood that McGovern's reform movement would meet the same fate as the conservative capture of the Republican party eight years earlier:

> McGovern cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called a throwback [like Goldwater] . . . he is a reformer. The platform, which is almost his creation, does call for changes in the tax structure, the welfare program, the defense budget and a new attitude toward U.S. involvement in foreign affairs. It sets a new direction for the party but a direction in which the country is already going. The only question is one of speed.

The editorial reviewed, briefly, the history of other reform movements--Andrew Jackson, William Jennings Bryan, Franklin D. Roosevelt--and concluded:

> Possibly, even probably, the new coalition McGovern has put together will not come to power this year. It

> may never come to power in its present form as parts sluff off like old skin and are replaced by others. But the ideas will exist--not necessarily, McGovern's precise ideas, but their thrust and emphasis.[3]

Though not dealing with the reforms specifically, the editorial did serve as an explanation for the much heralded opposition to the reforms by Meany, Daley, and the forces devoted to Senator Hubert Humphrey, a Minnesota Democrat, who also sought the nomination, as well as providing a historical sense of how the McGovern proposals matched other reform movements.

One month later, however, the Free Press was less sure of the potential durability of the Democratic reforms. The Free Press called on McGovern to strike a balance between the reform and regular factions of the party:

> The trick for McGovern in the next three months is to somehow reconcile both wings of the party. It would be a terrible step backward if the control of the party were to revert completely in November to jaded old kingmakers like George Meany who would run it like a private fiefdom--if Democratic reform in 1972 turns out to be a brief aberration like the seizure of the GOP by its right wing in 1964.
>
> But it will certainly happen if the reformers don't make room in the campaign and policy council for loyalists whose experience and past contributions entitle them to a place.[4]

This editorial was a direct contradiction of the comments made by the Free Press on July 14. Perhaps the events of the intervening month had convinced the editors that the reforms were not as secure as they had earlier believed,

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[3]Detroit Free Press, July 14, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

[4]Ibid., Aug. 14, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

but the prior historical perspective notwithstanding, this editorial hedged conspicuously on a position the Free Press had taken without qualification. The reader could only wonder why the earlier editorial had neither the insight nor foresight to predicate the success of the reform movement on the ultimate support of the Meanys and Daleys, as the Free Press now seemed to be doing.

A consideration more important for voters than the reform measures of the Democratic party was what the Democrats and Senator McGovern said in their platform about the issues confronting the nation and the policies they would pursue to deal with them. In an editorial regarding McGovern's acceptance speech, the Free Press seemed less concerned with what the senator said than with how he said it. The editorial offered oblique praise for the forceful and charismatic delivery of the speech but provided no analysis of any specific McGovern proposals. The only allusion to substantive issues in the editorial was in quotations from the text of the speech, which readers could readily have found in news accounts. Nevertheless, the Free Press declared: "The distinctions between the two programs have rarely been clearer, and we do not believe for a moment that those who vote for McGovern will get a Nixon in disguise . . ."[5] Probably so, but the Free Press certainly made little effort to make the distinctions

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[5] Ibid., July 15, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

between the two programs clear to its readers.

In contrast to the sketchy Free Press editorial, the Detroit News furnished a detailed analysis of the Democratic position on foreign policy and defense spending, stating that the party platform contained contradictions. The News cited, for example, the platform position calling for a United States withdrawal from Vietnam while expressing unqualified support for Israel. The editorial noted:

> The Democrats obviously see no relationship whatsoever between the present U.S. commitment to South Vietnam and the U.S. commitment to Israel. However, the Israelis obviously see it. They fear that one demand to end a commitment may trigger a demand to end another commitment.

Another conflict the News alleged involved the intention to reduce American military forces in Europe while maintaining a military presence in the Middle East to deter any use of arms by the Soviet Union.

> Nor does the Democratic platform recognize the relationship between a commitment and the power to defend it.
>
> It is true the Democrats say they want "adequate military forces for deterrence and effective support of our international position," but their nominee, Senator George McGovern, wants to cut $30 billion a year or more from the defense budget.[6]

In this editorial, the Detroit News raised some pungent questions, for it did appear as if the Democratic platform was trying to walk on both sides of the fence at the same time. It was a solid, substantive editorial, giving readers a provocative analysis of significant issues.

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[6]Detroit News, July 15, 1972, sec. A, p. 4.

The following day, the News ran another issue-oriented editorial; this one about Vietnam. The News declared that McGovern's choice of Vietnam as the central issue in his campaign was "a calculated risk." McGovern's promise to halt the bombing of North Vietnam and withdraw the remaining U.S. troops if elected was, according to the News, an "abject retreat," which in effect invited Hanoi to wait until after the election to negotiate a settlement to the war. This was a specious argument at best. The American people were entitled to a thorough and public expression of the positions of candidates on significant national concerns and there was no concern more momentous than the question of Vietnam. The voters had been duped in the two previous presidential elections regarding the war in Vietnam and the News might better have served its readers by insuring, through the endorsement of candidates making such policy statements, that it did not happen again. The editorial also claimed that McGovern's pledge to bring prisoners of war home within ninety days of the inauguration raised hopes he could not fulfill. This was a legitimate charge. Though McGovern had historical precedent on his side, he could produce no conclusive evidence that he could redeem this promise. The News asserted that McGovern was pursuing the war as an issue "in the face of persuasive signs that the war has been defused."[7] What signs?

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[7]Ibid., July 19, 1972, sec. C, p. 3.

Reduced American combat involvement had not lessened the intensity of the war, and the bombing of Vietnam and the mining of North Vietnamese harbors raised doubts about just how much the American role had been reduced. It was a curious statement by the News and it merited some explanation. The editorial further contended that when McGovern spoke of troop withdrawal, Nixon could point to his record of returning more than 500,000 soldiers from Vietnam. Or when McGovern complained about American bombing of North Vietnam and the mining of the harbor of Haiphong, the president could answer, as the News did, that those measures weakened the North Vietnamese ability to fight, thus hastening the end of the war. But the Nixon record was precisely the whole thrust of the entire debate over the war. The Democrats contended that the administration had attempted to stop the war by waging increased war at the expense of additional lives sacrificed, and that the proper way to extricate the United States from the conflict was to declare peace. The News failed to grasp this crucial distinction and thus misrepresented the essential issue of difference in the Republican and Democratic positions.

By far, the most important developments of the political conventions were the nominations of the candidates for the presidency. Yet, only the Detroit News, the Grand Rapids Press, and the Flint Journal apparently considered the nomination of Senator George McGovern noteworthy enough to warrant an editorial comment, and none of

these papers gave serious attention to the nature or characteristics of the man that might qualify him to become president. The News described the Democratic nominee as a shrewd and tough strategist and admired his organizational skill. The News wondered, however, if McGovern's "computer-like coolness and unerring instinct" could mold a successful campaign for November in light of his positions on welfare reform and school busing, which alienated what the News called "the moderate middle, where the votes are."[8] The Grand Rapids Press echoed the sentiments expressed in the News editorial in praise of McGovern's vaunted organizational acumen. In an editorial entitled "The Measure of McGovern," the Press gave no measure of the man but rather only a measure of his chances of being elected president.[9] Likewise, the Flint Journal gave more attention and space to assessing the candidate's electoral prospects than to assessing the candidate. On the basis of comments listed in the editorial from Journal correspondents in Lansing and Washington, the Journal advised readers not to take the McGovern candidacy lightly, but offered no hints as to what presidential qualifications or attributes McGovern possessed.[10]

This lack of concrete, substantive editorial

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[8]Ibid., July 13, 1972, sec. B, p. 10.

[9]Grand Rapids Press, July 17, 1972, sec. A, p. 12.

[10]Flint Journal, July 18, 1972, p. 12.

response to the most significant product of the Democratic convention belied a serious shortcoming in the editorial coverage of the convention. The absence of comment by the Detroit Free Press and the Lansing State Journal and the paucity of analysis provided by the Detroit News, the Grand Rapids Press, and the Flint Journal left newspaper readers in the five largest metropolitan areas in Michigan sadly uninformed and underinformed about a man who sought to lead the nation during the next four years.

On balance, the editorial coverage of the Democratic convention by these five newspapers was inadequate in providing the interpretation and analysis essential to informing the public about the complex of issues and events that transpired during the Democratic National Convention at Miami Beach in July. And if such coverage could be described as inadequate for the Democratic convention, it was nothing short of mediocre when the Republicans convened in the same city six weeks later.

The Republican convention offered less overt conflict than its Democratic counterpart and as such perhaps less substantive news to analyze. Nevertheless, there existed issues and events worthy of editorial attention and yet there was an astounding lack of comment and interpretation. For example, only the Detroit News and the Detroit Free Press provided any analysis of the Republican platform and the president's acceptance speech, which was as close to an appraisal of Nixon's presidential qualifications as

any of the papers supplied their readers. An editorial in the News regarding the Republican platform consisted primarily of listing the contrasting party planks on key issues, and as a result served mainly as an exercise in "our word against theirs." The News editorially asserted that the Democratic platform "takes a left-leaning stance on many domestic issues and an isolationist position in foreign affairs." In both instances, the News attributed unfair labels to the Democratic position relying on the Democratic endorsement of school busing and a guaranteed annual income program to support its first judgment (though admitting President Nixon favored such a proposal himself), and supporting its second claim with quotations from the Republican platform statement, a hardly unbiased source. The only interpretation the News undertook in its analysis of the Republican position was to suggest that "objective observers" would not describe the Nixon years as "a golden age of American diplomacy," as the platform did, when evaluating the president's performance in Vietnam and the Middle East. The News, however, tempered this oblique criticism in the same sentence by declaring that "Mr. Nixon's critics would have to agree that his negotiations with Communist China and the Soviet Union have reduced tensions between the United States and the Communist giants." The editorial neglected the inconsistency of the new Nixon attitude and his erstwhile reputation as one of the coldest of the Cold War anti-Communist advocates. The

editorial concluded:

> All in all . . . the GOP foreign policy planks reflect the Nixon doctrine of a lower U.S. profile in world affairs but a continued U.S. strength sufficient to make U.S. negotiations and interests meaningful anywhere in the world. It contrasts with a Democratic defense and foreign policy plank that is isolationist in tone and seeks to make a virtue of national weakness.[11]

Yet, nowhere did the editorial list any factual evidence, other than excerpts from the Republican platform to suggest that the Democratic position was isolationist. The newspaper did not explain in any words but those of the Republicans what made the Republican platform acceptable and the Democratic stance intolerable. As such, the News presented its readers not with a reasoned, analytical, provocative editorial, but rather with little more than a press release from the Republican National Committee. The News stated not what that newspaper thought of the two platforms, but what the Republicans thought of them.

The Detroit Free Press, in an editorial on the same day and the same subject, presented a far more critical analysis than the News, and as a result reached far different conclusions. In a wide-ranging editorial, the Free Press declared that the Republican platform was not one "which the Republicans would have accepted four years ago, and certainly not one on which Mr. Nixon would have run." The Free Press cited, for example, that the platform promised:

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[11]Detroit News, Aug. 23, 1972, sec. B, p. 12.

> . . . that the GOP "will press for expansion of contacts with the peoples of Eastern Europe and the People's Republic of China." Four years ago Richard Nixon was the most energetic exponent of the cold war, and for anyone to have suggested rapprochement with communist nations would have invited screams of "treason."

The Free Press, like the Detroit News, took issue with the platform hyperbole describing the Nixon era as "a golden age of American diplomacy," but in more forceful and detailed language than the News employed. The Free Press charged:

> . . . it's hardly a golden age when the war in Vietnam goes on because of [Nixon's] obsession with saving face or relations have soured with India because of his "tilt" to Pakistan while professing neutrality, or Japan feels less secure and Latin America more neglected.

The Free Press granted the president credit for his diplomatic successes but sought, at the same time, to put those successes in perspective. Similarly, on domestic issues, the editorial attempted to indicate that the self-congratulatory tone of the Republican platform ignored certain aspects of the administration's record.

> The GOP platform promises "to continue to pursue sound economic policies that will eliminate inflation, further cut unemployment, raise real incomes and strengthen our international economic position."
>
> The facts, of course, are that unemployment is higher than it was four years ago and that the cost of living went up faster in Mr. Nixon's first 30 months than it did even in Lyndon Johnson's full term . . . the pace of inflation did not begin to abate until Mr. Nixon adopted the Democratic policies he and the Republican party had earlier denounced and sworn to avoid. Wage and price controls were anathema and Mr. Nixon repeatedly said he would never devalue the dollar.[12]

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[12]Detroit Free Press, Aug. 23, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

The Free Press also allowed that Nixon had made modest gains in reducing unemployment and the rate of inflation, but the thrust of the editorial sought to discount the boasting of the Republican platform with an examination of the record of the president and his administration. It was a model of editorial interpretation--balanced but not equivocal; revealing, insightful, and to the point.

The Free Press also applied, in part, the same writing graces and interpretative skill to an analysis of the president's speech accepting renomination. The editors noted that Nixon "ripped into the proportional representation of the Democratic convention, yet those who attended the Republican convention were not nearly so representative. They were the classic middle American, the 'unyoung, the unblack and the unpoor.'" Moreover, the editorial asserted, Nixon "attacked 'the McGovernites' . . . for their welfare reform program, without mentioning his own which is the most radical ever proposed by a President." These statements demonstrated a properly focused sense of responsibility of the press to inform the people. They also represented, curiously, the only attempt of the editorial to fulfill that responsibility. The Free Press never returned to the pungent analysis of the speech, the remainder of the editorial being a mere recitation of the president's remarks. For example, the editorial noted that "he sliced skillfully at civil libertarians by repeating his promise to appoint judges 'who would recognize that the

first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence.'"[13] Yet, the Free Press did not point out, as it could have, that Nixon's judicial policy had not stemmed the rise in crime. The Free Press recited Nixon's accomplishments in foreign affairs without challenging those successes with the failures it had noted in its editorial on the Republican platform. Unexplainably, and unfortunately for its readers, the Free Press did not extend the interpretative excellence it had displayed in that earlier editorial, and to a certain extent in this one published two days later, to a thorough analysis of the president's speech. As such, it provided its readers with only token understanding of a significant event.

The editorial by the Detroit News on the president's speech provided more glorification than analysis of what he said. For instance, the News commented:

> As he sees it, his visits to Peking and Moscow opened the door to an unparalleled opportunity for world peace. He was the man who courageously pushed that door open; he now deserves a vote of confidence permitting him to pursue the opportunity which he created.[14]

The News, however, failed to point out that Nixon had been one of the most steadfast champions of keeping that door closed before he became president. This failure was typical of the treatment the editorial gave the president's entire speech. The News provided its readers with no

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[13] Ibid., Aug. 25, 1972, sec. A, p. 8.

[14] Detroit News, Aug. 25, 1972, sec. B, p. 14.

analysis, no perspective, no understanding of what Nixon's remarks signified, and as such demonstrated not an enlightened sense of journalistic responsibility, but rather an unparalleled display of partisan cheer-leading.

There were additional editorials on the Republican convention but they uniformly avoided any substantive discussion of issues or candidates for more transitory considerations such as the serenity and harmony and unity the Republicans exhibited. They were straightforward, almost news story-like editorials that were as negligent in analyzing what the Republican party and ticket sought for the future of the United States as they were in serving the interests of readers.

On the whole, the editorial coverage of the two party conventions, two of the most important events of the campaign, could be classified only as dismally deficient. The Detroit Free Press, despite a sparkling example of interpretation of the Republican platform, failed to consistently and thoroughly provide cogent analysis of the programs of both parties and both candidates. The Detroit News acted more as a mouthpiece for the Republican cause than as an interpreter of it, and seldom applied the same close scrutiny of the proposed Republican program as it gave to the Democratic proposals. Two of the newspapers--the Flint Journal and the Lansing State Journal--provided no editorial comments on the Republican convention, and the State Journal ran no editorials on either convention. The

Grand Rapids Press published some editorials relative to politics but none dealt with substantive issues or candidate qualifications. In short, the newspapers examined, for the most part, were editorially unmindful of the needs of their readers and of the obligation to satisfy those needs.

Perhaps the absence or sparsity of substantive editorial comment on issues and candidates of the two national conventions can be attributed, in part, to the overemphasis on considerations of less potential value of informing voters. For the newspapers seemed almost to be preoccupied with how various segments of the population were going to vote in November. How blue collar workers would vote, or to which candidate young voters would rally, or how Senator McGovern would fare in Illinois without the energetic support of Mayor Daley, or how many Democratic strays John Connally could corral for President Nixon often dominated editorial debate at the expense of positive discussion of issues vital to the entire electorate. The Grand Rapids Press, for example, concluded that the president could capture a sizable portion of the youth vote as a result of the disillusionment and resentment generated among young idealists by the forced resignation of Senator Thomas Eagleton from the Democratic ticket.[15] The Detroit News agreed that the Republicans could win many youth votes if

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[15]Grand Rapids Press, Aug. 23, 1972, sec. A, p. 14.

the president could "penetrate the 'peace' aura which surrounds McGovern and make young people aware of the cold facts," which, according to the News, were that Nixon had reduced American troop levels in Vietnam as well as "dramatically" reducing draft calls.[16] The Flint Journal also noted the public opinion polls indicating that the youth vote may not have been as monolithic as once imagined. "One reason," the Journal observed, "may be the relatively little attention given to noncollege [sic] students by political analysts compared to that devoted to their campus brethren." Despite the faulty usage of "noncollege"--a "non-word"--the editors obviously meant to say "noncollege" youths rather than "noncollege" students since the latter category would contain few eligible voters, but it was a careless error that undermined the credibility of the entire editorial. That credibility was further strained by the conclusion drawn by the Journal editors that the indication that the youth vote had not been "sewed up after all . . . is extremely refreshing, just as the thought of youth marching lock-step behind a McGovern-style Pied Piper without even listening to Nixon's tune was appalling."[17] Who was to say that the young people had not "listened to Nixon's tune" or had not been listening for the past four years? Asserting that young people had

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[16] Detroit News, Sept. 11, 1972, sec. A. p. 14.

[17] Flint Journal, Aug. 9, 1972, p. 14.

been mysteriously and universally deaf to Nixon's record was tantamount to saying all young people would vote in a gigantic bloc, which the Journal now denied would happen. The contradictions of the editorial were possibly exceeded only by the confusion it engendered in its readers.

The other newspapers, to their credit, ignored the question of how voters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four were going to cast their ballots; the editors having apparently decided that young voters, like their middle-age and elderly counterparts, could not be so neatly categorized by largely useless editorial conjecture.

Nevertheless, all of the newspapers in the study succumbed to the temptation to examine, define, develop, and thoroughly exhaust the subject of labor support, or lack of it, for Senator McGovern. The most pervasive concern of the editorials on this topic seemed to be the political impact of George Meany's failure to endorse either candidate, or the net effect of Teamster Union President Frank Fitzsimmons' support of President Nixon, or whether the factory workers even cared who their union officials liked or rejected. Only the Grand Rapids Press, in one of four editorials on the subject, attempted to evaluate the reasons behind the labor leaders' reticent attitude toward McGovern. The Press asserted editorially that a measure of labor's disenchantment with the McGovern candidacy stemmed partially from his senate votes against the supersonic transport proposal and a government loan to

the financially troubled Lockheed Corporation. But, the Press went on, such votes should not be regarded as anti-labor: ". . . the first duty of a senator or representative is to the public interest--and high on the list of things he is expected to do is to hold a tight rein on federal funds."[18] The Press touched only briefly on some of the other issues that contributed to the disaffection of George Meany and other labor leaders with the Democratic nominee, most notably McGovern's vote against repeal of Section 14B of the Taft-Hartley Act; but the editorial was, on the whole, informative and dealt in more concrete terms than any editorial in any of the four other newspapers on the subject of the labor vote.

Another non-issue that received unwarranted, if only meager, editorial attention was the defection of well-known and reputedly powerful Democrats away from their national ticket. The Grand Rapids Press ran editorials on John Connally's endorsement of Richard Nixon and George Wallace's silence regarding George McGovern.[19] But neither editorial reached any conclusions more substantial than that the Press editors did not understand Texas politics and that Wallace would probably not formally support either McGovern or Nixon. These were not particularly surprising or meaningful revelations and the space undoubtedly could

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[18] Grand Rapids Press, Aug. 7, 1972, sec. A, p. 10.

[19] Ibid., Aug. 11 and Sept. 7, 1972, sec. A, pp. 10, 14.

have been more profitably used on issues with some measure of consequence. Similarly, the Detroit News expended valuable editorial space to tell its readers that Chicago Mayor Richard Daley really did not mean it when he said he supported the McGovern candidacy.[20] The News may have been correct in this judgment but just how many Detroit voters were interested or needed to be editorially informed of that useless information is a matter of questionable value.

One issue of critical public concern that went practically unnoticed was that of campaign financing. The publicized mishandling of Republican campaign funds and the equally publicized insolvency of the Democratic campaign would have seemed to warrant a flood of editorial opinion on the subject, yet only the Grand Rapids Press furnished its readers with an analysis of the problem and a suggestion for a possible solution; and it did so with a remarkably solid, superb editorial. After reviewing examples of various candidates who were forced to abandon their campaigns because of a lack of funds, the Press concluded:

> It is difficult if not impossible to mount a strong challenge against any incumbent, regardless of how good the challenger may be.
>
> This is not in the best interests of the people. There can be no real contest, no testing of ideas in the market place, if the advantage is heavily on one side simply because one candidate, by virtue of his office or his ties with groups and individuals who have large financial resources, can raise money easily and greatly outspend his competitor.

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[20] Detroit News, July 20, 1972, sec. B, p. 10.

The Press then offered a remedy to the problem:

> The obvious answer to the problem is public funding of political campaigns at all levels of government. So far the taxpayers have displayed little taste for the idea. But it is conceivable that public financing would cut the cost of campaigns and ultimately result in lower cost of government by giving candidates with sound ideas but little money a chance to win office.[21]

This may not have been a unique or original or even the ultimate panacea to the problem of campaign financing, but the Press demonstrated a conscientious concern for the public interest and a sound and responsible solution to a legitimate, pressing public need.

Occasionally, sometimes relentlessly, events of the campaign got in the way of the campaign itself, obscuring issues and clouding rational, fruitful consideration of the candidates. Often the intrusion of these peripheral events was caused by the candidates themselves, sometimes it was due to circumstances beyond their control. In the former category, the tone of the campaign became an issue in itself and a legitimate topic of editorial concern. President Nixon, confidently standing polls apart from Senator McGovern, disdained even to mention his opponent's name throughout the campaign. McGovern, on the other hand, reflecting perhaps his low standing in the public opinion surveys, lashed out persistently, and often bitterly, against Nixon in an attempt to conjure up the old image of Nixon as a crafty and not entirely scrupulous politician.

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[21] Grand Rapids Press, July 26, 1972, sec. A, p. 8.

Consequently, McGovern's harsh and vitriolic denunciations of the president became the target of some well-aimed attacks by indignant editors. For example, the Flint Journal observed in a brief, tightly written editorial:

> While we can understand the need for Sen. George McGovern to find a spark for his campaign and his growing frustration at his failure to arouse the voters, we must object to his falling back on the use of such name-calling as "Tricky Dick."
>
> The changes in policy positions of President Nixon are fair game for McGovern. He is free to question whether Nixon's record should raise doubts of Nixon's consistency.
>
> But he only further erodes his image of a man above petty partisanship when he turns back the pages and sinks to resorting to such a petty device for a few transient cheers.
>
> It is certain to do him more harm than good at the polls.[22]

The Journal was correct--name-calling and invective contributed nothing to intelligent debate in the campaign and served solely to undermine the people's faith in the candidate's judgment and sense of decency; and the Journal was equally correct in not reserving all its criticism for the Democrats. A week later, the Journal noted:

> President Nixon perches in his lofty "above-politics" roost while his lesser lights do the street fighting and get mixed up in embarrassing situations such as Watergate. One gets the impression the . . . Dirty Tricks Department of the Committee to Re-elect the President has been working ovetime.[23]

These two editorials marked a laudable concern by the Journal for keeping the campaign focused on issues rather than distracting vituperation. Deploring the use of negative

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[22] Flint Journal, Oct. 9, 1972, p. 8.

[23] Ibid., Oct. 17, 1972, p. 10.

appeals to unsupported invectives and imploring candidates to emphasize positive debate on issues represented an appeal to the best interests of the people.

One of the methods for focusing campaign discussion on issues rather than personalities would have been for the two candidates to confront each other in face-to-face debates. It had become traditional since the 1960 presidential election for the underdog candidate to request or demand that his opponent appear in nationally televised joint debates; it was just as traditional for the favored candidate to refuse. The 1972 campaign was no exception. But the editorial reaction to President Nixon's decision to avoid direct confrontation with Senator McGovern was somewhat surprising. The Flint Journal concluded that "when the only thing the nation remembers of the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates is which candidate had the better make-up man, there is good reason to question the merit of such confrontations."[24] Similarly, the Detroit News declared: "From the standpoint of political strategy, and probably from the standpoint of national interest, the White House makes good sense in rejecting Senator McGovern's challenge to President Nixon to engage in debates."[25] What these papers seemed to be ignoring was the public's interest in having substantive issues aired by the candidates, and public debates offered an ideal forum to

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[24] Ibid., July 26, 1972, p. 6.

[25] Detroit News, July 29, 1972, sec. A, p. 4.

accomplish that purpose. The News would have better served the interests of its readers, and by extension the "national interest," by paying less attention to political strategy and showing more concern that issues were addressed by the candidates. There would, of course, have been no guarantee that issues would have been discussed had Nixon and McGovern shared the same platform; but the chance that they might be discussed was certainly worth an editorial endorsement of the idea. The concern expressed by the News that sensitive negotiations in foreign affairs might be jeopardized by "bitter debates" could readily have been assuaged by prior arrangement of the candidates. Thus, it appeared that it was not the national interest that motivated editorial opposition to presidential debates but perhaps the interests of the Republican party.

The Flint Journal recognized early in the campaign that charges and counter-charges were blurring understanding of the issues for the electorate. On August 13, the Journal, in a lengthy editorial, attempted to counteract the false images attributed to each candidate by his opposition and place in perspective the positions of the two nominees on the major issues. It discounted the image of Nixon as "an inflexible, unreconstructed archconservative, thriving on anticommunism demagoguery and hung up on outdated economic viewpoints" by pointing to his policies of wage and price controls and his foreign policy ventures to China and the Soviet Union. The Journal also sought to

discredit the notion of McGovern's so-called radicalism by illustrating his senate record of sponsoring legislation for government incentives to business and price supports for farm products. The editorial reviewed, briefly, the primary differences between the philosophies of the two men in domestic and foreign affairs and suggested that voters who based their decisions on how each candidate faced the issues would "be sustaining the highest traditions of democratic government."[26] That final judgment was precisely what the Journal had achieved in this interpretative editorial.

The Lansing State Journal also acknowledged how the false images of the candidates and the rhetoric of the campaign had the effect of obscuring substantive issues. The State Journal told its readers:

> Electioneering is a necessary part of the democratic process. But it has sadly become more of a public relations campaign than an effort to present sound, rational information with which the voter can make a logical decision. It is, even at best, more rhetoric than fact.

That was hardly informing readers of anything they did not already know, but the editorial steadfastly maintained the same approach in observing that "a candidate should be elected because he can do the best job, not because he is just another pretty face or able to sling more mud than his opponent."[27] This was not a particularly startling

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[26]Flint Journal, Aug. 13, 1972, p. 10.

[27]Lansing State Journal, Oct. 10, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

revelation either, but nonetheless typlified the character of the entire editorial. If the State Journal editors seriously regarded the low state to which political campaigns had fallen, they might have produced a more thoughtful, issue-oriented editorial for their readers, rather than the banal, shallow opinion reflected here.

One controversy that pervaded the entire campaign and stained the credibility of the president's re-election efforts was the Watergate affair. Senator McGovern consistently charged Nixon and his White House and campaign staffs with corruption and called on the president to make a public airing of any Republican complicity in the break-in at the Democratic headquarters. Some editorials echoed that appeal. The Detroit Free Press, for example, claimed that:

> . . . the evidence accumulates that at least some important people at the headquarters of the Committee to Re-Elect the President were in telephone contact with the footpads who were caught bugging the offices of Democratic National Chairman Lawrence O'Brien.

As a result, the Free Press wrote:

> We think it important not merely that the real culprits in this little fiasco be found . . . but that the President try to create a new respect for freedom and for civil liberties. Among some of the Republican troops, at least, there is an obvious need for some basic civics lessons.[28]

The Free Press repeated its demand for President Nixon to publicly disclose any information of high-level wrongdoing in an editorial on September 15: ". . . while no one has

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[28]Detroit Free Press, July 27, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

accused the President of having a part in the sordid affair, or even of knowing about the secret transfers of large sums of money, he is where the buck stops."[29] The play on words was probably unintentional, but the Free Press was right in stating that the president owed the public an explanation. And these editorials, like others in the Lansing State Journal and the Detroit News, demonstrated, through their focus on the facts of the Watergate case and their protests against Republican silence, a genuine concern for the public interest and a responsible effort to protect that interest.

The event that caused the most furor in the campaign and perhaps the most ultimate impact on the election, was the resignation of Senator Thomas F. Eagleton from the Democratic ticket after revealing a history of treatment for mental depression. All of the newspapers provided editorial comments on the event, but only the Flint Journal directly and unequivocally called for Eagleton to withdraw as the vice-presidential nominee. In an insightful and rational editorial, the Journal reached this judgment on the basis of Eagleton's own admission of his necessity to "pace" himself, and the potential and unpredictable stresses that might confront him should he have to assume the presidency.[30] It was a valid consideration and one that needed to be brought to the attention of the public.

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[29] Ibid., Sept. 15, 1972, sec. A, p. 8.

[30] Flint Journal, July 28, 1972, p. 6.

Many readers of the editorial undoubtedly reached a conclusion different from the Journal regarding Eagleton's capability for national office, but the editorial was nonetheless a valuable source of perspective and analysis of a difficult and sensitive issue. The Detroit News raised the same issue as the Flint Journal in questioning Eagleton's qualifications, in light of his disclosures, to become vice-president. The News also accused the senator of poor judgment in concealing the information of his medical history from Senator McGovern when he was selected as McGovern's running mate.[31] Yet the editors did not declare, categorically, that Eagleton should remain in or resign from the race as a result of his medical record, resorting instead to vague inferences that they had doubts about his qualifications. It was not an example of bold, forceful editorial leadership. The same was true of the Detroit Free Press, which appeared more concerned with the political impact of the revelations than with the effect of Eagleton's medical condition or his capacity to function in a position of national leadership. The Free Press editorial, like that of the Detroit News, observed that Eagleton displayed bad judgment and a lack of candor in not revealing his treatment earlier, but failed to indicate if this, along with the history of the illness itself, disqualified him for national office.[32] The Grand Rapids

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[31]Detroit News, July 27, 1972, sec. B, p. 10.

[32]Detroit Free Press, July 27, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

Press and the Lansing State Journal also demonstrated a lack of editorial leadership in their discussion of the Eagleton affair. The Press was preoccupied with the political consequences of Eagleton's disclosures on the McGovern campaign and gave only scant notice to the substantive consideration of the senator's health.[33] The State Journal ignored the issue of Eagleton's capacity to be vice-president in view of his prior illnesses, and concentrated on condemning the method by which vice-presidential candidates were selected and suggesting alternatives.[34] That was, unquestionably, a worthwhile subject that merited editorial attention, but at that moment it was beside the point. In sum, the editorial treatment of the Eagleton affair fell short of enlightened and unequivocal opinion leadership that readers had a right to expect.

One of the most significant areas of concern to the American people in a presidential election campaign is a measure of the men who seek to lead the nation. An informed and educated electorate requires a thorough accounting of the background and characteristics that qualifies the candidates to be entrusted with the responsibility for the public welfare. Citizens must be made aware of the experience and attitudes that each candidate can offer in service of the public interest. But to make intelligent

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[33] Grand Rapids Press, July 31, 1972, sec. A, p. 12.

[34] Lansing State Journal, July 30, 1972, sec. C, p. 2.

decisions regarding those candidates, the voters need perspectives into the men who are to be elected to important national offices. Particularly when selecting a president and vice-president, they must know whether a candidate has the wisdom, insight, and judgment to hold such an office. They must have no doubts about the candidate's stability, courage, and compassion or his grasp of national problems and his vision of how to deal with those problems. In the 1972 presidential campaign, the five largest Michigan daily newspapers were largely remiss in providing this kind of essential measure of the candidates who sought the voters' trust.

The most widespread editorial interest in the four candidates was expressed, with some justification, about the candidacy of R. Sargent Shriver, the ultimate vice-presidential nominee of the Democratic party. Shriver was the brother-in-law of President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, both victims of assassinations, and of Senator Edward M. Kennedy, who almost certainly would have been the Democratic presidential candidate had he sought the nomination, or the vice-presidential nominee had he accepted McGovern's offer to join the ticket. Although he had held various government positions, Shriver had never been elected to any office and as such was the greatest unknown quantity to the voters. None of the newspapers, however, attempted to explain what qualifications Shriver possessed for the office of vice-president, but

instead focused virtually all comment about his candidacy on the potential political impact he might have on the presidential contest. The Flint Journal was preoccupied with the fact that Shriver was related to Senator Edward Kennedy, with whatever questionable political effect that might have meant.[35] The Grand Rapids Press concluded that Shriver "is a likeable man . . . and indefatigable worker, a known quantity and a man who has access to financial resources."[36] How important these attributes were to voter knowledge of Shriver's qualifications to become president, should that need arise, were undoubtedly a source of mystery to readers of the editorial. Moreover, the extent to which Shriver was a "known quantity" was certainly not greatly enhanced by this editorial. The Detroit Free Press announced in the headline above its editorial that "Shriver Could Help Cure McGovern Campaign Ills," but provided no concrete evidence in its editorial that he could help cure the ills of the nation. Rather, it outlined Shriver's political assets as a moderate Democrat with ties to party professionals like Richard Daley and key party fund-raisers.[37] Even the Lansing State Journal considered the Shriver candidacy significant enough to break its almost total editorial silence on the campaign, at least indirectly. In a guest editorial--a device the State Journal

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[35]Flint Journal, Aug. 8. 1972, p. 10.

[36]Grand Rapids Press, Aug. 9, 1972, sec. A, p. 10.

[37]Detroit Free Press, Aug. 8, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

employed in its Saturday editions when its editors evidently had no thoughts of their own--written by the Rochester (New York) Times-Union, the State Journal provided a sketchy insight into the political aid Shriver brought to the McGovern campaign and no insight into the potential aid he could bring to the nation.[38] A few days later, the State Journal, in an editorial of its own origin, applauded the frankness with which Shriver had admitted that Senator McGovern had not been his personal choice for the Democratic nomination.[39] Such candor may have been, as the State Journal suggested, refreshing, but it nevertheless provided readers with nothing tangible with which to evaluate Shriver's capability to hold high national office--and neither did the State Journal. The Detroit News decided that Sargent Shriver was "a plus" for the Democratic campaign, but based that judgment on no more substantial criteria than his association with the Kennedy family, his Catholicism, his ties with the business and black communities, and his "boundless energy."[40] The News neglected to mention if it thought Shriver would be a plus for the nation as vice-president as well. The News, however, did make one solid attempt to evaluate the Democratic vice-presidential nominee. In an editorial entitled

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[38]Lansing State Journal, Aug. 12, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

[39]Ibid., Aug. 16, 1972, sec. A. p. 14.

[40]Detroit News, Aug. 8, 1972, sec. A, p. 16.

"Shriver Had Trouble with Facts," the News challenged the candidate's claim that federal taxes paid by Detroit residents to support the Pentagon could have provided the city with millions of dollars of schools, parks, water facilities, hospitals, and middle-income housing. Shriver's figures, according to the News, did not match with estimates of the Internal Revenue Service and, in any event, the editorial contended, following Shriver's "line of reasoning, there would be no defense budget at all."[41] This represented an effective effort to confront rhetoric with reason, as it did appear that Shriver was either misinformed or consciously misleading his audience. It was the type of editorial that readers had a right to expect from a responsible press and a type that was so infrequently provided.

Editorial opinions regarding Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew followed much the same pattern as those about Sargent Shriver, focusing primarily on Agnew's political utility to the president, or praising Agnew's abandonment of his previous abrasive rhetoric. Only the Detroit Free Press furnished any tangible examination of Agnew the vice-president as opposed to Agnew the politician. The Free Press noted, for example, that "if Mr. Agnew has demonstrated anything in his four years as Vice President, it is that he is a divisive and heavy-handed man who is a discredit to the nation's second highest office." The

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[41] Ibid., Sept. 1, 1972, sec. A, p. 22.

editorial also charged that "the Vice President's fatuous fulminations against the young and emotional harangues and distortions of truth have been instrumental in polarizing this nation when it most needed unity." The Free Press supported its accusations by asserting that:

> It is Mr. Agnew who repeatedly demonstrated a total lack of sensitivity and tact with his cracks about "fat Japs" and similar ethnic slurs, and his remark that "If you've seen one slum, you've seen them all." It is Mr. Agnew who has on his travels abroad heaped praise and endorsement on dictators in Asia, Africa and Europe, doing untold damage to America's reputation as a supporter of democracy. His general impact as an emissary abroad for the United States has been, as the New York Times put it recently, "a jet propelled embarrassment."
>
> At this crucial time in our nation's growth, reason, truth, and restraint are needed above all else. Mr. Agnew injects a dangerous amount of emotional nonsense and venom into our atmosphere, and the political process is contaminated by it.[42]

There was hardly much restraint present in this editorial, but it accomplished its objective of stating a strong point of view, and in so doing gave readers, as no other paper did, a detailed perspective and insight into Agnew's qualities as a vice-president.

As sketchy as informative discussion of the vice-presidential candidates was, substantive comments regarding the two presidential candidates was virtually nonexistent. Aside from the editorials provided during the two party conventions--not exactly models of journalistic expertise--only the Detroit News presented any single editorial designed specifically to measure or to compare the leadership qualities of Senator McGovern and President Nixon.

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[42]Detroit Free Press, July 26, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

The News concluded that McGovern's handling of the Eagleton affair illustrated an indecisiveness that raised doubts about his capacity to be president.[43] Only in the editorial endorsements of the candidates did such considerations receive notice and then only in fleeting appraisals subordinated to other concerns. Perhaps the editors of these newspapers believed that the two presidential nominees were well enough known by voters without such editorial assessment. But that would have been a tenuous assumption, at best, and in any case, not particularly sound or responsible journalism.

Of all the subjects of the 1972 campaign given editorial interpretation and analysis, the most vital for the voters was the consideration of issues that affected Americans in their day-to-day living. For the president of the United States has the power to make decisions, initiate or reject programs, and carry out policies that have a direct impact on virtually every aspect of American life. The president can determine war and peace, the price of goods Americans buy, the quality of education, housing, health care, the pace and substance of environmental control, even what basic rights and freedoms the American people will enjoy. The power of the presidency is awesome, and there is probably no more certain measure of how that power will be used by men seeking the office than their perceptions of and solutions for the varied and vast problems and issues

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[43] Detroit News, Aug. 2, 1972, sec. B, p. 6.

that confront the nation. And when such perceptions are as shrouded in ambiguity, vacillation, and expediency as they were in the 1972 campaign, it is the responsibility of the press to impart to its readers as clear an understanding of the issues as possible.

The issue that had dominated American politics, polarized the nation, and caused so much personal tragedy and collective agony for so many years continued to prevail over all others in 1972. As the debate over the war in Vietnam intensified, some informative and illuminating editorials attempted to provide some insight and perspective into it.

One source of controversy was the contention by supporters of the administration policy that a Communist victory in South Vietnam would result in a bloodbath of revenge. Senator McGovern discounted this claim and, according to an editorial in the Flint Journal, "called his view that Communists would seek accommodations rather than revenge on their opponents 'a policy of hope.'" The Journal replied that "the records very strongly suggest that it might be more accurately labeled a 'policy of wishful thinking.'" The editorial continued with an elaborate documentation of the terrorism that had been routinely inflicted upon innocent villagers by the Viet Cong, and then asserted: "It certainly is destructive of his reputation as a straight-forward candidate to try to slough off Hanoi's proven policy of mass terrorism with a bland

statement such as: 'They may have picked out a village chief who was cooperating with Saigon to shoot,' as though cooperating with one's elected government is a punishable crime." And the Journal concluded: "The rows of bodies of men, women, and children found just outside Hue are mute but overwhelming testimony to the falseness of the implications in Sen. McGovern's words."[44] This editorial provided readers with a superb analysis of a position that was simplistic and evasive. It was a credit to the newspaper and a service to its readers.

The essence of the debate over Vietnam centered on the contrasting proposals of the two candidates for ending American involvement in the war. President Nixon steadfastly adhered to a policy of insisting on a guaranteed cease-fire and return of American prisoners before the United States would remove the remainder of its troops. Senator McGovern proposed the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. forces as an incentive to Hanoi to release the prisoners. In commenting on a televised McGovern speech concerning the war, the Detroit Free Press declared that the McGovern plan

> . . . could increase vastly the chances for peace among the Vietnamese by ending U.S. involvement. It could get our prisoners home and our missing accounted for. And it could salvage whatever remains of honor for the United States by making the choice, as Sen. McGovern said, "between saving face and saving lives." Or, as he asked at another point, "Shall we forget about saving face and begin saving the soul of our nation?"
> . . . Sen. McGovern believes, and we concur, that

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[44] Flint Journal, Aug. 28, 1972, p. 6.

> the Vietnam war is more than a question of money and misplaced priorities. It is a question of morality, one that indeed sears the soul of the American people.
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> Republican criticism notwithstanding, this is not a program of surrender. Even if we wanted, we do not have the ability to set the terms for an end of the war.

Addressing the question of the return of the prisoners of war, the Free Press noted:

> What guarantees does the senator have that his proposal would get our prisoners back? None that we know of, except that the French prisoners were released within 90 days of the Geneva Agreements, and the North Vietnamese have given every indication that they would release our prisoners as forces were withdrawn.[45]

This was a sound appraisal of the McGovern position on the war. It was honest and forthright in giving its opinion regarding the morality of the American involvement in Vietnam, and candid and interpretative in analyzing key elements of the McGovern stand, such as the question of the prisoners. The Detroit News reached conclusions about McGovern's plan for peace different from those of the Free Press. Challenging McGovern's claim that he had opposed the war for nine years, the News pointed out that McGovern had voted in favor of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution that had been the catalyst for increased U.S. involvement in the war and that the senator, on several occasions, had voted for passage of funds to support the war effort. The News may have been correct, but the issue was not who had opposed the war the longest but who was going to end it the quickest. The News also disputed McGovern's assertion that

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[45]Detroit Free Press, Oct. 12, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

the war was immoral and contrary to American ideals. The News contended that there was no difference between the tyranny of North Vietnam and that of Germany during World War II when McGovern served as a bomber pilot. And finally, the editorial denied that the United States could gain a satisfactory peace settlement by unilaterally withdrawing its troops in a demonstration of good faith. The News observed:

> We all recognize that the South Vietnamese government has not been a model of democracy; that our bombs have sometimes gone astray; that war is wearying and ugly. But most of us also recognize that an imperfect democratic government is better than one imposed by Communists by force; that the bombing of North Vietnam can help bring a negotiated settlement; that we cannot depend on 90 day magic to end wars that have resisted the best efforts of four presidents.[46]

This statement was, at best, a gross oversimplification of the issue. To suggest that "the South Vietnamese government has not been a model of democracy" was a model of understatement. The tyranny that the News so generously accredited to North Vietnam might well have been examined south of the 17th parallel, too. To note in passing that "our bombs have sometimes gone astray" seemed to betray a callous disregard for the victims of the bombing. And to assert that an "imperfect democratic government is better than one imposed by Communists by force" was tantamount to suggesting that an imperfect system of slavery was better than non-slavery imposed by the North by force--in the American Civil War. In all, this editorial substituted

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[46] Detroit News, Oct. 12, 1972, sec. B, p. 12.

emotion for reason, cliché for logic, and polemics for interpretation. The Flint Journal and, typically, the Lansing State Journal provided no analysis of Senator McGovern's position. The Grand Rapids Press, in a brief editorial, endorsed the notion that American prisoners would be returned after a U.S. troop withdrawal.

Similarly, the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News were the only papers to comment substantively on the momentous announcement by presidential adviser Henry Kissinger that "peace was at hand," which, as nearly as anything, presented the Nixon position on Vietnam in the closing days of the campaign. The News expressed hope that peace was near, that the troops and prisoners could return but not at the expense of a coalition government in Saigon that would include Communist elements.[47] The Free Press, on the other hand, took a different tact and in a unique approach, juxtaposed statements from Kissinger's press conference with quotations from a peace plan offered by the National Liberation Front in 1969 to illustrate a remarkable similarity of language and positions and support the Free Press belief that peace could have been achieved sooner.[48] The editorial, appearing just eleven days before the election, added a fresh and valuable dimension to a campaign that had been fought, in part, on the president's ability to achieve peace.

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[47] Ibid., Oct. 29, 1972, sec. E, p. 3.

[48] Detroit Free Press, Oct. 28, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

Closely related to the issue of Vietnam were the foreign policy positions each candidate would pursue as president. This was one of the major chosen battlegrounds of the campaign for McGovern because of Vietnam, and for Nixon because of his visits to China and Russia. Those visits were the topic of an editorial in the Grand Rapids Press that sought to place the Nixon record in perspective. "Today," the Press observed, "Mr. Nixon may rightly claim that he has brought China and the United State together--the same China and United States he helped so successfully to isolate from each other for a period of 20 years."[49] If the president intended to place such a great emphasis in his campaign on his détente with Communist nations, the Press editors rightfully thought that some emphasis ought to be placed on his record, too. Only the Detroit Free Press and the Detroit News ran editorials designed to provide some insight into the foreign policy ideas of Senator McGovern. The News, which frequently referred to McGovern as an isolationist, produced an editorial in which it supported the views of a British periodical, the Economist, that insisted that the policies of Senator McGovern toward Western Europe would lead to a John Foster Dulles-style policy of massive retaliation. McGovern's aim of reducing American troop levels in Europe from 300,000 to 130,000 would, believed the News, have left the United States and the European community unable to repel a Communist attack

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[49] Grand Rapids Press, Aug. 28, 1972, sec. A, p. 10.

except through the use of nuclear weapons. The News concluded:

> The major trouble with McGovern's defense views is that he's still in favor of making U.S. commitments to Western Europe and Israel--not to Southeast Asia, of course--but his country would lack the means to carry out his commitments if he became president.
>
> It is also ironic that the candidate who has made a political career out of criticizing the conduct of the Vietnam war--and especially the U.S. bombing of the North--in effect would rely on massive retaliatory nuclear bombing of the USSR to defend Western Europe.[50]

The trouble with the News editorial was that it took what was sheer speculation by a London magazine and presented it as accomplished fact to its readers. As such, it did a disservice to its readers and an injustice to Senator McGovern. The Detroit Free Press also attempted to outline the foreign policy of Senator McGovern for its readers. The editors called McGovern's philosophy "idealistic, but not naive," and declared that it made "far more sense than what [McGovern] called 'six-gun diplomacy' and 'reflexive interventionism' of that sort that got us into Vietnam and then expanded our role into the rest of Indochina." The Free Press noted that McGovern "would limit America's role of policeman to those areas of the world where our interests are vital, rather than tell each nation exactly how it should run its internal affairs."[51] There was a suggestion implicit here that the United States would tell those areas of the world where our interests were vital how to run

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[50]Detroit News, Aug. 12, 1972, sec. A, p. 4.

[51]Detroit Free Press, Oct. 9, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

their internal affairs. That may not have been what Senator McGovern said, or meant, or even what the Free Press meant, but this should have been explained to readers since it would have meant no less a policy of "reflexive interventionism" than being a policeman throughout the world. And moreover, this represented not a shrewd analysis of an important position on an important issue, but rather starry-eyed acquiescence. The Free Press had the right, of course, to agree with the philosophy of Senator McGovern but it also had the obligation to provide a clear understanding of what that philosophy was.

Inseparable from the discussion of foreign policy was the issue of defense spending, and indeed, this issue was the source of much controversy. The center of the storm that had generated around the question of the defense budget was McGovern's contention that more than $30 billion could be cut from the defense budget without jeopardizing national security. The administration countered this claim by asking the Congress to approve increases in defense expenditures. In August, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird released a Pentagon study to support his demands for more money, and the report was the subject of an editorial in the Grand Rapids Press. One implication made by Laird was that critics of the Pentagon were reacting out of partisanship, a charge to which the Press replied:

> There are a great many persons in this country, some of them even Republicans, who view with concern the way military spending has steadily risen--not merely because of inflation, as Laird seems to be

> suggesting, but because of mistakes, overruns, wasteful experiments, overindulgence of the vanity of generals and admirals and the continuing heavy expenses attendant on conducting a futile war in Southeast Asia. If these persons are partisan in their criticism of military spending, their partisanship is of an unpolitical variety. They are being partisan on behalf of the poor, ill-housed and underfed in this country who are the chief victims of excessive military costs.[52]

This editorial was on the right track, but its assertions lacked credibility because they lacked specificity. For example, what mistakes, overruns, and wasteful experiments was the Press referring to? And what did it mean by "overindulgence of the vanity of generals and admirals"? The failure to provide the specifics of these charges betrayed a serious flaw in the editorial. But the Press did furnish an eloquent opinion regarding Laird's study in the sense that it helped show its readers that alternative viewpoints existed and that it was not necessarily unpatriotic to hold them. The Detroit News also gave editorial attention to the issue of defense policy. In a concise, but detailed, editorial, the News presented its readers with the specific positions of the two candidates on defense measures. It contained no distortions of the McGovern record as it concluded that Nixon was the more credible candidate on the issue.[53] The editorial was perhaps slightly one-sided in emphasis and explanation of Nixon's policies, but it nevertheless gave readers a decent understanding of the choice

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[52] Grand Rapids Press, Aug. 14, 1972, sec. A, p. 10.

[53] Detroit News, Aug. 27, 1972, sec. C, p. 3.

that confronted them in terms of programs related to national security. The Detroit Free Press, as usual, reached a different conclusion from that of the News. Focusing on what reduction of military expenditures could mean for domestic programs, the Free Press observed:

> Overall, Mr. Nixon has shown little inclination to stop the arms race.
>
> The $20 billion Vietnam "peace bonus" has evaporated, to be replaced by supplemental appropriations. The Trident submarine and the B1 bomber are going ahead, although we already have enough nuclear arms and delivery systems to destroy Russia several times, even after being destroyed ourselves. We have more than enough troops and conventional arms to fight brushfire wars we shouldn't be getting into in the first place, and wouldn't be if we didn't have overkill capacity.
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> We do not pretend to know whether the defense budget can be cut $20 billion or $40 billion without endangering U.S. security, but we are convinced it can be cut enough to make a difference at home. As Sen. McGovern's white paper said, "If the costs of our weapons, our troops and our wars are allowed to bankrupt our ability to provide a decent life for our people at home, then we have military power without national security."[54]

This was a candid, responsible statement of belief on an issue of enormous significance. It provided readers with an enlightening analysis and a cogent point of view.

One of the more emotional and explosive aspects of the defense issue involved the question of amnesty for draft evaders. The Detroit News addressed this problem in clear and unmistakable terms:

> Draft dodgers have violated a federal law and evaded their duty to the nation. Having done so, they cannot be accepted back into the normal stream of American life without acknowledging their mistake

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[54]Detroit Free Press, Sept. 25, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

> and paying a penalty. A general, full amnesty for draft dodgers is out of the question.

Then, as if to indicate that some measure of sympathy and understanding was justified, the News continued:

> However, the government should take into consideration the fact that those who fled into exile made their decision at a time of youthfulness, immaturity and stress. Many of them bitterly regret their action and would like to come home again . . .[55]

This was the most appalling example of patronizing sophistry that was exhibited by any of the papers studied in any of their editorials. It equated youthfulness with immaturity and ignored the fact that most of the draft evaders that fled the country had done so out of a sense of intense moral outrage, and the News should have reported this. Many citizens undoubtedly agreed with the News conclusion that amnesty for draft evaders should be conditional on their undertaking alternative civilian service; but the readers were not served, nor the issue explained, by the simplistic, condescending attitude displayed by the News in this editorial.

Of all the issues discussed during the campaign, the one that struck the closest to home for most voters was that of the economy. And it was an issue that offered newspapers endless opportunities for explanation. The McGovern economic program was so confusing, and confused, and the Nixon plan was so changeable that interpretation was essential. And nowhere was such interpretation more

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[55]Detroit News, July 30, 1972, sec. C, p. 3.

necessary than in the area of tax reform. Senator McGovern had promised tax relief for the poor and middle-class by closing tax loopholes that benefited corporations and the wealthy. President Nixon pledged to accomplish the same end by not raising taxes during his second term of office. The Detroit Free Press disputed this promise, editorially, in pointing out that the president had raised the federal deficit by more than $78 billion since coming to office, and that he would either have to drastically cut federal spending or face new, larger deficits to redeem his pledge. "In the absence of some supporting data," the Free Press said, "the 'no new taxes' pledge is not worth much. . . . The pledge is either less than candid or less than responsible."[56] This editorial demonstrated a genuine concern that the administration be open and honest with the American people. The Lansing State Journal, in an editorial borrowed from the Chicago Tribune, expressed a similar concern:

> If the President has a plan for tax reform, let him bring it into the open. Let the voter be the judge of its worth; after all, most voters also are taxpayers and they will have to foot the bill.[57]

It was a worthy admonition, but the editorial, in general, was void of substance and bland in style and not particularly edifying for State Journal readers. Analysis of

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[56]Detroit Free Press, Sept. 10, 1972, sec. B, p. 2.

[57]Lansing State Journal, Sept. 16, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

Senator McGovern's tax reform proposals was provided by the Flint Journal and the Detroit News. The Journal applauded McGovern's effort to furnish a detailed plan for public evaluation, but questioned some of his ideas regarding closing tax loopholes:

> . . . how far can the federal government go in removing long established capital investment incentives without seriously dampening the economy and seriously slowing the emerging economic growth? At what point will an attack on capital income . . . begin to show up in adding to the unemployment ranks?

These were legitimate questions for readers to consider and for the Democratic candidate to answer. But the real challenge to the McGovern plan was in its promise that lower- and middle-income families would face no new taxes. The Journal addressed that problem:

> Where McGovern may suffer, in the long run, is his claim that he can find within these tax reforms enough money to finance his still ambitious programs for welfare and other social reforms while, to use his own words, claiming, "No family will face a tax increase if they live on earned income rather than investment."[58]

The Journal, in this editorial, both helped readers to understand the complexities of a complicated issue and raised some provocative questions to guide readers in evaluating the McGovern program. Likewise, the Detroit News challenged the arithmetic of the McGovern proposals and offered an anlysis of specific aspects of the program to support its conclusion that not enough revenue could be saved or earned from closing tax loopholes to pay for the

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[58] Flint Journal, Aug. 31, 1972, p. 16.

expensive social reforms McGovern had proposed. The News, like the Flint Journal, worried about the effect of McGovern's tax reforms on employment:

> But the most disturbing aspect of McGovern's proposals is that the bottom falls out of the package in terms of its major goal and the "means" of achieving it. McGovern now says his key approach toward solving the economic ills of the poor is through job creation. He wants jobs--but he plans to cut $22 billion away from the sources of job creation. He will impose higher taxes on virtually every form of investment income and he will penalize the nation's risk-takers. Without investment, there will be no economic growth and no job creation. Yet, McGovern seems determined there will be little incentive to invest. Where does that leave the job-seeker?[59]

Out of a job, maybe, and the News properly pointed that out. It was a prudent editorial, based on facts and it expressed a responsible opinion.

Another key economic issue was the policy of wage and price controls. Imposed by President Nixon on August 15, 1971, and modified ninety days later, the controls had been designed to halt rampant inflation and, since their creation, had been the center of much controversy. The Flint Journal ran an editorial on the anniversary of the wage-price freeze assessing the impact of the controls after one year. It concluded, with some reservations, that the controls had been successful in reducing inflation and unemployment.[60] It was a comprehensive editorial, covering the many facets of the issue in clear, detailed terms. Readers who were unemployed may not have agreed with the

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[59]Detroit News, Aug. 31, 1972, sec. B, p. 8.

[60]Flint Journal, Aug. 15, 1972, p. 12.

conclusions of the editorial but they could not fault the Journal for not coming to grips with a complex and severe national problem. The Journal, along with the Grand Rapids Press, also sought to examine the position of Senator McGovern in regard to the wage and price controls. McGovern promised that he would eliminate the controls if elected and rely on presidential pressure on business and labor to curtail a rising cost of living. The Press contended that the economy had begun to right itself under the controls and then asserted, "Unfortunately, Sen. McGovern did not explain what he would do to nullify the convulsive effects that almost certainly would ensue if economic controls were to be terminated abruptly."[61] The Journal agreed. McGovern, said the Journal, "may find trouble in telling the voter that big business and big labor will meekly fall in line with 'voluntary' wage and price limitations while faced only with a possible rollback for 'flagrant violations' of guidelines."[62] These were valid considerations and the Journal and the Press exercised laudable editorial judgment in making their readers aware of them.

These opinions, and those about defense policy, and foreign policy, and Vietnam and a host of other issues, and the evaluations of the two candidates, and the analyses of

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[61] Grand Rapids Press, Aug. 18, 1972, sec. A, p. 10.

[62] Flint Journal, Sept. 18, 1972, p. 16.

the party platforms and of the parties, and the interpretations of events and circumstances of the campaign led these newspapers, inevitably, to a judgment and, ultimately, to an endorsement of the candidate they thought would be the best leader for the nation during the next four years.

The Detroit News was the surest about its decision--it endorsed President Nixon for re-election without reservation. The News based its choice both on a favorable reaction to the president's record in office and a negative response to the candidacy of Senator McGovern. The News applauded Nixon's Supreme Court appointments, praised him for restoring order to the streets and campuses, lauded his success in fighting inflation, and commended his Vietnam and foreign affairs policies. On the other hand, the News chastised McGovern for what it called his policy of surrender in Vietnam, ridiculed his tax and welfare reform plans, and criticized his efforts to paint the Nixon administration as the most corrupt in history.[63] If this editorial, and most others in the News throughout the campaign, seemed to scrutinize the Democratic candidate and his positions more closely than it analyzed the Republicans, the editors did not seem to notice. This editorial, while not actually distorting any McGovern positions and in fact offering some valuable insight into them, nevertheless was more an example of partisan cheer-leading than of

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[63]Detroit News, Oct. 8, 1972, sec. E, p. 3.

thorough, balanced, and responsible evaluation of the relative merits of the two candidates. As such, it represented not a fair appraisal of the choice that confronted all voters and a reasonable opinion reflecting that appraisal but rather deafening applause of one candidate based on blindness toward the other.

The Lansing State Journal, in an editorial apparently written by its own editors, also endorsed the president's re-election. It based its decision on a careful and balanced evaluation of Nixon's four years as president, citing both the president's accomplishments--foreign policy, stabilization of the economy, among others--and his shortcomings--failure to end the war, his Supreme Court appointments, and more. The editorial also examined McGovern's record, suggesting that the senator had raised important questions in the campaign such as the need for tax reform, but that his proposals were frequently "vague" or "simplistic."[64] It was, on the whole, a balanced editorial that analyzed pertinent facts and established a reasonable rationale for its conclusion that President Nixon deserved a second term.

In a lengthy, detailed, and well-written editorial, the Flint Journal joined in the editorial endorsement of President Nixon. It not only thoroughly examined the records of the two candidates, acknowledging both their

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[64]Lansing State Journal, Oct. 22, 1972, sec. C, p. 2.

achievements and weaknesses, but also provided illuminating perspectives about those records. For example, in support of its charge that McGovern lacked leadership qualities, the Flint Journal wrote:

> This is true not only of McGovern the presidential nominee, but of McGovern the senator. He never displayed those leadership qualities that made President Lyndon B. Johnson or Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey so effective in the Senate.

This may have been a consideration that had not occurred to many readers. Likewise, in judging McGovern's stands on crucial issues, the Flint Journal concluded:

> . . . since he became a serious candidate for president he has left doubts in the minds of many voters that he has reasoned out his stands on tax reform, defense cuts, the Vietnam pullout, foreign policy, welfare proposals and fighting crime. He never seemed to grasp how each is interwoven with the other, how some tax cuts could threaten employment, how a foreign policy in Southeast Asia could affect policy in Europe, how increased expenditures on welfare or the environment would threaten his pledges not to raise taxes of "the working man."

The editorial tried also to balance many of the president's accomplishments--the Flint Journal declaring that Nixon had "defused" the war but not ended it; that his journeys to Peking and Moscow represented genuine breakthroughs but that he had alienated U.S. allies in the process; that the wage-price controls had helped revitalize the economy but that they had been applied too late.[65] It was an enormously informative editorial, well-researched, with proper focus on issues and emphasis on leadership qualities. Readers may not have agreed with the opinion expressed by the

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[65]Flint Journal, Oct. 22, 1972, p. 14.

Flint Journal, but they had sound reason to respect it.

The Grand Rapids Press was less sure of the choice for president than the Detroit News, the Flint Journal, or the Lansing State Journal but, in the end, also endorsed Nixon. The Press expressed the belief that the Nixon record was, on the whole, one of solid achievement and courage, but that at the same time, the president had demonstrated a disturbing "indifference to individual liberties and a disregard for the moral stature that once was the basis for our leadership in the Western world." The Press further opined that George McGovern was a "decent man with an abiding faith in fundamental American and democratic principles" but it doubted his ability to govern the nation because of his devotion to social reforms at a time when the citizenry appeared to be weary of such movements. The editorial recounted key issues, giving the candidates' views on them, and concluded:

> For us, the balance goes to Mr. Nixon, even though we admire Sen. McGovern more. Mr. Nixon has the capacity to govern and the American people with the help of Congress, has the capacity, we believe, to resist the erosion of democratic principles we fear in a continued Nixon administration.[66]

It was a reasonable, responsible statement of position that ably served readers who, like the Grand Rapids Press, may have faced a similar dilemma in their decision regarding the presidential contest.

Of the five largest Michigan daily newspapers, only

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[66]Grand Rapids Press, Nov. 1, 1972, sec. A, p. 12.

the Detroit Free Press did not, or seemed not to, endorse the re-election of President Nixon. In the headline of its editorial, the Free Press declared "Nixon, For a Multitude of Reasons, Has Not Earned the Mandate He Seeks." The editorial, however, did not make it clear whether the Free Press editors believed that Nixon should not win a landslide victory, which seemed to be shaping up, or should not be returned to office at all. The thrust of the editorial dealt with the president's shortcomings, which the Free Press listed in detail, from the failure to end the war to his alleged "contempt . . . for individual rights." It credited the president fairly with certain successes, most notably in the area of foreign policy, but asserted he did not have a "record deserving of a thundering mandate . . . We cannot--and do not--join the joyful partisan cry for 'four more years.'" Yet, it was not clear if the Free Press meant this as an endorsement of Senator McGovern. The editorial noted that McGovern was "a decent and upright man," but severely criticized the senator for "indecisiveness" in the Eagleton affair, "poor judgment" in dispatching Pierre Salinger to confer with the North Vietnamese negotiators in Paris, and insensitivity in his proposed defense budget cuts and tax programs. And the Free Press admitted that it was troubled by certain fundamental questions about McGovern's ability to be president: "Could he govern? Are his ideals leavened with practicality? Would he be a good preacher but a poor President?" And

the editorial answered:

> We are almost persuaded that George McGovern really has the equipment to be President. If only he had more time, the country, coming to know him better, might feel more confident of his strengths. But the calendar is running out on George McGovern and this election.
>
> If that means a lopsided Nixon victory, it will not, we believe, be good for the country.[67]

This final statement was inexplicably vague. Did the Free Press editors believe a Nixon victory would not be good for the country or just a "lopsided" victory? Did the fact that they were "almost" persuaded of George McGovern's qualifications mean that they endorsed his election? The Free Press, in this editorial, raised some valid considerations for readers to weigh, but the curious ambiguity of the editorial in terms of a positive, forceful endorsement could only have left readers wondering about the leadership qualities of the newspaper.

On balance, the editorial coverage of the 1972 campaign was, as might have been expected, a mixture of sound and weak analysis and interpretation. But that in itself was a rather harsh judgment on these newspapers. For the occasional obsession with transitory political matters, the tendency to deal in general terms and avoid specifics, the inability of the Detroit News to balance and weigh the positions of both tickets, the astounding sparsity of comment by the Lansing State Journal all served to undermine reader confidence in the editorial page as a source of interpretation and opinion leadership.

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[67] Detroit Free Press, Oct. 26, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

CHAPTER III

THE OPINION COLUMNS

The opinion columnists who covered the 1972 presidential campaign produced a cornucopia of interpretation about and insight into practically every conceivable issue, event, and candidate from nearly every possible point of view to support or reject seemingly every imaginable conclusion. On almost any given day, a reader could turn to the opinion pages of the newspapers in this study to find an indisputable analysis of why George McGovern would win the election or why Richard Nixon could not lose it. Or the reader might find that the new Democratic party was in shambles or that it was the vanguard of the future; or that the Watergate affair was a serious scandal or that it was a mild prank; or that the economy was doing just fine, the environment rather poorly, and the war in Vietnam somewhere in between, and the converse of each. In short, there generally were columns to uphold the whims or the logic of virtually every voter on virtually every aspect of the campaign.

The result of this almost orchestrated ambivalence could, quite naturally, have been interminable confusion in the minds of readers seeking some measure of understanding

from supposedly knowledgeable and dependable sources. A more likely effect, however, was to instill a deeper and broader comprehension of the campaign than might otherwise have been achieved. For despite their apparently contradictory nature, the opinion columns, on the whole, did provide a large degree of analysis of key issues and events. From busing to bugging and Vietnam to amnesty the columnists offered hundreds of thousands of words supplying information and explanation that provided readers with needed perspective and valuable insight into the complexities of the campaign. If the columnists sometimes reached different conclusions it was more a matter of varying focus and emphasis and philosophical viewpoint than it was a distortion of facts. But certain columnists performed a service more significant and useful than the mere explanation of fragmented issues and events in a fragmented campaign. Some of the columnists joined those fragments together to form a sense of continuity. They lifted isolated segments from the narrow framework of the campaign to show how such segments related to the larger political process and to democratic government. As such, these columnists provided readers with a panoramic perspective of events, candidates, and issues; and seemed to help readers grasp their significance outside the parochial considerations of the campaign. Such columnists sought to dig beneath the superficial veneer of the political campaign to ascertain and report what a candidate's words, actions, and attitudes

would mean to the people if he became president. In a campaign saturated with shrill rhetoric and partisan bickering, this was a valuable and noble service, and one that the newspapers used to varying degrees, correlative to the degree of journalistic responsibility they exhibited.

The Grand Rapids Press published the commentary of a number of syndicated columnists who, with perception and eloquence, informed readers about what kind of government and nation might result from the election. For example, William V. Shannon, of the New York Times News Service, discussed the notion of American idealism and how it related to the foreign policy of the United States.

> When America's morality is defined in the Nixon way, critics at home and abroad find difficulty in distinguishing it from plain old nationalism. It is egotistic, defiant, and acknowledges few limits to the force it is prepared to deploy. The "great goodness of America," in Nixon's phrase, seems to be asserted to block out criticism. Dissenters are scourged for offering "counsels of doubt and defeat."

Of McGovern's idealism, Shannon wrote:

> In his acceptance speech, George McGovern suggested that America is good in some ideal sense and it is to this true being to which it must once more "come home." Stated another way, America must rediscover its earlier ideals and stop their present perversion in misguided global "peace-keeping."

This was an important consideration, for the president, more than any other single individual, sets the moral tone for the nation. If the United States is to seek and promote a fundamental morality in the conduct of its foreign affairs, then the president will be the agent of the people through which it is accomplished. And, according to

Shannon, "the outcome of this election will turn, in part, on whether Americans regard Vietnam as a shameful interlude and agree with McGovern's redefinition of the nation's moral purpose or whether they heed Nixon's conventional, self-righteous patriotism."[1] Linking the question of American idealism to the war helped to underscore the choice voters faced and the implications of that choice. For that issue, more than any other, defined the difference between the two candidates, the moral posture of each candidate, and how that morality might be translated into future policies affecting U.S. relations with the rest of the world. This was a provocative column, appealing the reader's powers of reason to answer some basic questions about the role of the United States in the world and what the leadership and guiding philosophy underlying that role should be.

James Reston, also of the New York Times News Service, also addressed the issue of the moral leadership provided by the chief executive and concluded that the lofty language used by candidate Nixon was not matched by his actions as president. Analyzing a campaign speech by Nixon in Atlanta, Reston said: "He made an eloquent appeal for moral virtues, religious ethics, integrity and justice; but also for his Vietnam policy, his antibusing policy and his economic policies, as if all these policies supported all

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[1]William V. Shannon, "Revival of Idealism Could Decide Victor," Grand Rapids Press, July 31, 1972, sec. A, p. 12.

these heroic ideals." Reston noted further inconsistencies between what Nixon preached and what he practiced:

> This has always been the puzzle about Richard Nixon. He does the day's assignment well, but there are no connecting rods between one day and the other.
>
> If the day's assignment is to appeal to the religious and social traditions of the South, he talks of moral virtues and character.
>
> But if the question is the Watergate burglary, or the hidden sources of Republican campaign funds, or the controversies over the ITT, the Soviet grain deal, or the mysterious rise in the milk support price, somehow the guiding moral virtues are overlooked or overcome.

Reston conceded that Nixon's strategy would probably result in his re-election but questioned whether it would also permit him to govern effectively during a second term as president. "For," Reston wrote, "he may win by appealing to the fears of the comfortable majority against the militant blacks, the liberated women, and the student demonstrators, but come next year he will be left with the war, and the poor, and a frustrated and angry minority he has overwhelmed but not convinced."[2] Reston had raised some salient arguments. For the unity and harmony of the nation, so long divided and polarized should have been a paramount consideration for both the electorate and the next president. And if the record of one of the candidates discredited his words of unity and precluded any hope of achieving that goal, the voters certainly should have been aware of it. Reston's outstanding analysis insured that at least some of them would be.

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[2]James Reston, "Nixon Fails to Match His Words, Actions," ibid., Oct. 15, 1972, sec. B, p. 2.

Occasionally, for the sake of understanding, it was necessary to completely divorce certain issues from the bitter rhetoric of the campaign so as to consider them in a calm and rational manner. Such was the purpose of a column in the Press by Carl T. Rowan, whose commentaries are distributed by the Publishers-Hall Syndicate. The column dealt with welfare reform, which had become the subject of heated controversy as a result of Senator McGovern's ill-fated plan to grant every American $1,000. The controversy generally centered around the charge that welfare recipients were people able, but unwilling, to work for a living. Rowan sought to dispel this notion with an analysis of how welfare money was spent. Sixty per cent of the expenditures, he found from statistics disclosed by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, went to the poor, the aged, the blind, and the totally disabled for medical expenses. Another 35 per cent--the controversial portion--went to families with dependent children. Rowan criticized politicians who attempted to reap political benefits by charging that the government should reduce or eliminate such payments:

> The question that the most evil politicians don't want Americans to face is this: Who believes it is the best interest of this nation . . . to let 8 million kids who are needy, through no fault of their own, go on in hunger and sickness because we are too greedy to finance an adequate welfare program?
>
> The cynical politicians would rather have voters believe the kids were conceived by women who prefer to earn a living by breeding rather than working.

Citing HEW figures that indicated the average monthly

welfare stipend per person was $51.40, Rowan noted: ". . . at those prices, any woman who wants to make a living on her back can do better than having welfare babies." This blunt assertion placed the issue in perspective in lucid and unmistakable terms, and underscored Rowan's conclusion: ". . . this nation would be infinitely better off if we stopped demagoging over welfare recipients and gave those . . . abused Americans some knowhow and an opportunity to 'make it' in the traditional American way."[3] In this column, Carl Rowan not only discredited some insidious myths about welfare but also offered some much-needed insight into an often misunderstood issue.

Another example of superb interpretative reporting was a column by James Reston regarding Senator McGovern's handling of the Eagleton affair. In a scathing criticism of McGovern, Reston noted:

> The issue in this whole sad Eagleton business is not only Sen. Eagleton's health, but Sen. McGovern's judgment. He has had bad luck, but he has also misjudged the problem of picking a vice president, overrated the efficiency of his new young staff, trifled with the idealism of his main supporters, and mishandled the consequences of his own and Sen. Eagleton's blunders.[4]

This brief passage provided readers with valuable insight into McGovern's character that could reflect on his capacity to serve as president. Thus, the net effect of

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[3]Carl T. Rowan, "'Welfare Mess' Needs Facts, Not Politicking," ibid., Sept. 26, 1972, sec. A, p. 11.

[4]James Reston, "The Issue Is Sen. McGovern's Judgment," ibid., July 30, 1972, sec. B, p. 4.

Reston's remarks was to take an essentially political event out of the context of the campaign and suggest what potential implications that event might have had if McGovern had been elected president.

These four columns were typical of a multitude of opinion pieces written by syndicated columnists that appeared in the Press with the purpose of providing a new dimension of understanding of the campaign. Columns by Tom Wicker and Anthony Lewis, also distributed by the New York Times News Service, as well as additional pieces by Reston, Rowan, and Shannon, among others, furnished indispensable analyses of important aspects of the presidential campaign that helped readers to understand what the issues and events might mean in a McGovern administration or a second Nixon term.

Unfortunately the Grand Rapids Press did not consistently provide such high quality, informative columns. A column by Jack Anderson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist whose commentaries are distributed by the United Features Syndicate, illustrated this point. Anderson reported that a Las Vegas oddsmaker, Jimmy the Greek Snyder, rated Nixon a five-to-one victor over McGovern in the presidential race. Anderson further noted the various categories on which Snyder based his odds, including the support each candidate had among different voter factions, their positions on the issues, and the images they projected to the public. Anderson observed, for example, that Snyder rated

Nixon a seventy-two to fifty-three favorite on issues, but neglected to explain to readers what specific stands by the candidates would give Nixon that particular margin over McGovern.[5] This column gave readers no information that would have been useful in evaluating each candidate's qualifications to be president. It was, in essence, no more than a column of meaningless numbers.

Tom Braden, syndicated by the Los Angeles Times Syndicate, also contributed a column that offered little to reader understanding of the campaign. Braden observed that McGovern possessed a "secret weapon" in his battle against President Nixon, which was a "conscience-stirring image."

> On one side of the image is mumbletypeg and taw trading under the elms, of hard work after school in towns a generation removed from the farm, of social life revolving around the church, of dress-up clothes and white socks on Sunday and the freedom of going out with your girl on a week night if you were going to Christian Endeavor. . . . It is a pleasant image and it reminds millions of Americans of a simpler, purer past.[6]

As a political reporter of some experience and reputation, it seems strange that Braden did not realize that the image did not always fit the man, and therefore tell readers whether this image was just that--an image--or rather a true reflection of the man. And even if the image did represent the McGovern character, what did that mean in

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[5]Jack Anderson, "Jimmy's Odds Favor Nixon Over McGovern," ibid., July 25, 1972, sec. A, p. 17.

[6]Tom Braden, "McGovern's Secret Weapon Is a Conscience-Stirring Image," ibid., Aug. 20, 1972, sec. B, p. 4.

terms of the kind of president McGovern would make? One of the important functions of interpretative reporting is to dig beneath images, not, as Braden did here, create them.

The team of Robert Novak and Rowland Evans, whose columns are distributed by the Publishers-Hall Syndicate, in one of several columns on each candidate's electoral prospects in certain states, provided another example of the uninformative column. Evans and Novak concluded that McGovern's chances of winning the electoral votes of Massachusetts, a traditionally Democratic state, were decreasing as a result of dissatisfaction among blue collar voters with some of McGovern's social reform plans and a lack of organization in the state.[7] The columnists did not specify which social reform proposals had turned the voters against the Democratic candidate or how the organizational difficulties related to McGovern's ability to organize a government. Furthermore, it was doubtful that voters outside Massachusetts, or perhaps even many of those in the state, cared how Evans and Novak rated McGovern's prospects in Massachusetts. Possibly the column served only to distract attention away from thoughtful discussion of issues and to detract from the provocative columns by Reston, Shannon, and other columnists appearing in the Press. This sampling of columns is illustrative of the quality of interpretation provided by the Grand Rapids Press for its readers. There

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[7]Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "McGovern Prospects Dip in Democrat-Leaning Massachusetts," ibid., Oct. 10, 1972, sec. A, p. 10.

were a number of outstanding, thought-provoking columns that satisfactorily served the varied interests of the readers. But the Press somewhat diminished the impact of these columnists by printing the comments of columnists who did not inform or analyze but rather dealt with frivolous subjects in a bland and uninspiring manner.

The Lansing State Journal ran opinion columns that its editors apparently thought would give readers an insight into the men who sought the presidency. One column was written by Jack Anderson and entitled "The Real Richard Nixon;" another was by Jack Germond, Washington bureau chief of the Gannett News Service, and headlined "The Real McGovern." In both instances, the State Journal headline writers were guilty of false advertising. Anderson described President Nixon as a "very private person," self-disciplined, "a devoted family man," and impassive.[8] But these details provided little perspective into Nixon's character that might have helped voters judge his qualifications to be president; and, in fact, given Nixon's long career in public office, this description probably offered little information that was not already widely known. Anderson noted that the subject that most animated the president was politics, but did not explain whether Nixon's love of politics was a motivational force in his decision-making responsibility as president. This would have been

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[8]Jack Anderson, "The Real Richard Nixon," Lansing State Journal, Aug. 23, 1972, sec. A, p. 11.

the type of information vital to readers who sought to make an intelligent and educated decision at the polls based on a solid evaluation of each candidate's background, but it was not the type of information Anderson provided. Jack Germond's appraisal of George McGovern was less informative than Anderson's assessment of Nixon's character. Germond reported McGovern's anger over a charge made by Vice-President Agnew that the senator interpreted as questioning his patriotism. Reacting to McGovern's heated rebuttal to Agnew's statement, Germond characterized McGovern as "a preacher at heart." The columnist then observed that McGovern would have to expose himself to the voters for what he was, since the electorate was too smart to be fooled by phoniness. He concluded that "the lesson, which George McGovern seems to be learning these days, is that you have to do your own thing."[9] What, exactly, McGovern's own thing was or how it related to his qualifications to be president remained clouded by this inane, thoughtless piece of commentary and opinion.

One column more than any other demonstrated the seemingly total disregard of the State Journal editors for the interests of their readers. The column was written by Roscoe Drummond, syndicated by the Los Angeles Times Syndicate, and dealt with the subject of Vietnam. Drummond decided that the war would become "the most influential

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[9]Jack Germond, "The Real McGovern," ibid., Sept. 25, 1972, sec. A, p. 12.

single issue in the campaign," and it was therefore "urgent to set out clearly and candidly the crucial differences" between the two candidates. Drummond asked:

> Is Nixon right in contending that it would be a "disaster" for the United States to join with Hanoi in imposing a Communist government on the people of South Vietnam?
>
> Is McGovern right in contending that it would be a "disaster" for the United States to continue defending South Vietnam or supporting it in any way?

The columnist proposed no answers to these questions but promised to "clear away the mist."

> The idea that Sen. McGovern is unpatriotic is untrue and unfair. There is no reason to doubt that he is completely honest, sincere and loyal.
>
> The idea that President Nixon is acting immorally and loves war is untrue and unfair. There is no reason to doubt that he is completely honest, sincere and seeking peace.

The "mist" having thus been cleared away, Drummond concluded:

> Honest and sincere men can differ in what they deem best for the nation.
>
> It completely begs the issue to say that both men want to end the war. Of course they do. The real issue is how best to end the war. On this they are poles apart and the voters will have to make their choice.[10]

This column provided virtually no information about the Vietnam issue or the candidates' positions on the issue. Relying on tiresome platitudes and meaningless judgments, Drummond did more to blur the issue than he did to clear away the mist. That the State Journal published this column seems to be evidence of the reckless and thoughtless

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[10]Roscoe Drummond, "Vietnam Views Differ," ibid., Sept. 6, 1972, sec. A, p. 15.

attitude with which the editors regarded their obligation to inform the people.

There were occasional opinion pieces in the State Journal that provided a measure of perspective into the campaign, but they appeared with less frequency and generally with less profound analysis than the opinion columns published in the Grand Rapids Press. One of these was a column by Bruce Biossat, syndicated by the Newspaper Enterprise Association, in which he attempted to define the criteria for evaluating each candidate's capacity for wise judgment in making presidential decisions. One criterion, Biossat indicated, when evaluating an incumbent was to match his record against his campaign promises. Another was to determine "not only whether he honored his promises but how he did it, whether he seemed to be acting wisely if he chose not to, how he met the unforeseen difficulties, whether he acted sensibly and responsibly when he undertook things he hadn't talked about." Biossat suggested that the criteria for evaluating the challenging candidate were less clear than for the incumbent, focusing on his performance in lesser offices and as a candidate. He then concluded:

> The Eagleton affair, plus the casual fuzziness of his welfare and tax proposals, have weighted McGovern with early handicaps.[11]

This was an illuminating column, emphasizing a quality that by any standard would have to be considered an

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[11] Bruce Biossat, "Good Judgment Crucial Asset," ibid., Aug. 22, 1972, sec. A, p. 8.

indispensable element for a president to possess. And Biossat set forth some sound and instructive criteria for determining to what extent a candidate possessed the essential quality of judgment.

Another column of superior insight dealt with the status of black Americans and the plight of urban dwellers. Written by Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. whose columns are distributed by the National Urban League, it was a truly sensitive and thoughtful piece. Jordan asserted:

> It is readily apparent that the great running wound that has so crippled our nation--morally, economically and spiritually--is racism. It is equally apparent that the No. 1 domestic priority must be the revitalization of our urban areas.

The columnist then noted:

> A political campaign is more than a competition for power and office; it is an opportunity to educate the public to the issues that so deeply affect their lives. This campaign, in particular, offers a major opportunity to take the public beyond the code words and phrases that appeal to emotions and instead, to initiate a great debate on the real public issue of our time.
>
> This has not yet been done. Many black people sense, instead, an open hostility to their cause, or, at best, a disinterest in our aspirations for a more equal, just society. The feeling is strong that white Americans are not being educated to the issues that affect our cities and black people, and that black Americans themselves have been neglected as a measure of political expediency.

Jordan's laments were well grounded in fact. For, as he observed:

> There are numerous aspects of the nation's educational system that need serious discussion on the national level, with clear proposals on how education problems affecting black children will be met by the next administration. Problems of school finance, upgrading ghetto schools, early childhood development and others come readily to mind.

> Instead, the only educational issue that has been aired has been the artificial and divisive issue of busing.[12]

Jordan had a point. And he argued his point in a forceful yet dispassionate manner that helped focus attention on a crucial national concern and explain that concern in terms that projected the issue out of campaign demagoguery and into a realm of calm and unemotional consideration. This column was an example of extraordinary interpretation and analysis, but it also represented the type of column that readers so rarely found on the opinion page of the State Journal.

The Detroit News, like the Lansing State Journal and the Grand Rapids Press, also displayed a combination of superb and mediocre opinion columns. In the first category was a column written by Philip Wagner, distributed by the Philip Wagner Syndicate, which sought to explain the issue of tax reform. Much argument and debate had obscured the salient points of the tax loophole question and Wagner provided a clear interpretation of the problem. The thrust of Wagner's analysis was that elimination of tax loopholes made pleasant campaign rhetoric but not necessarily good policy. He noted that the elimination of certain loopholes would be impractical because not enough additional revenue would result and that closing some other loopholes would be undesirable because the loopholes had a legitimate basis in

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[12]Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., "Open Letter to Candidates," ibid., Sept. 24, 1972, sec. C, p. 3.

the national interest. Wagner contended, for example, that eliminating the tax deduction allowed for interest paid on home mortgages would add billions of dollars to the federal treasury but might also result in a homeowners' revolt. Similarly, ending tax credits to the elderly, Wagner said, would yield more revenue but would not represent a humanitarian effort in the national interest. Wagner also analyzed the reasons behind other tax loopholes such as those for capital gains and municipal bonds and suggested that the advantages of closing such loopholes would be eroded by disastrous side effects. He then concluded:

> Everybody is against the other fellow's loophole but in favor of his own. That is what makes loophole plugging such a protean task and is one of the reasons why tax reform is more talked about than acted upon.[13]

This was a thoughtful opinion that considered a complex issue, dismissed the campaign oratory, and explained the issue in lucid, rational, comprehensible terms.

A column by Richard Wilson, syndicated by the (Des Moines) Register and Tribune Syndicate, surveyed the Nixon-McGovern contest from a broad, almost metaphysical point of view. Wilson indicated that McGovern's poor showing in the campaign was the result not only of mistakes and misfortunes but also a reflection of a clash of fundamental values between the two candidates. Quoting from a Jewish intellectual publication, Sh'ma, Wilson noted: "'McGovern's election . . . would certainly bring to power those

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[13] Philip Wagner, "Tax Loopholes Bad Unless They're Yours," Detroit News, Aug. 16, 1972, sec. B, p. 13.

whose morality and world view would be very different than those now held by the majority of Americans.'" In contrast, Wilson claimed that the values emphasized by President Nixon

> have been conventional and traditional. His family life is exemplary in this respect. The atmosphere he has created in his official behavior and social conduct in the White House and abroad has been "presidential" in the classic form.
>
> No implication should be drawn from such contrasts that would reflect on Sen. McGovern's character, motivations, family life or personal behavior. But this does not change the fact that from the beginning he undertook to reflect what is new and modern and endowed by a different and more enlightened conception of public morality and social and ethical values. To many that seems to be the revelation which the young and their mentors have brought to America and they welcome it.
>
> But to others it bears a suspect relationship to all they find offensive in the current atmosphere--the permissiveness, eccentricity of behavior and style, reversal of familiar and established policy affecting foreign and domestic affairs.[14]

This column introduced a fresh perspective and keen insight into the basic differences between the two candidates. It was a plausible explanation for Senator McGovern's low standing in public opinion polls, and a provocative analysis for readers trying to evaluate more than simply the superficial distinctions between Nixon and McGovern.

Another outstanding, informative column appearing in the Detroit News was the commentary of Carl T. Rowan, also published in the Grand Rapids Press, who explained in cogent and direct language the statistics behind the welfare controversy. But the News also ran a column by Rowan

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[14]Richard Wilson, "On Ballot, Tradition vs. Change," ibid., Oct. 16, 1972, sec. A, p. 17.

that did not match the high standard of interpretation exhibited earlier in his welfare piece. This column concerned the Watergate affair. Rowan presented a fair analysis of the pertinent data relating to the breakin of the Democratic headquarters and the confusing maze of financial dealings connected with the burglary.[15] But that was as far as his analysis went. He did not address the implications that such an act portended in an open and democratic society. He did not attempt to relate the alleged espionage to a general decline in civil liberties that such actions demonstrated. He did not associate the affair with the demand that the president, as the moral leader of the nation and the head of his party, publicly repudiate any knowledge of or connection with the burglary. In short, Rowan viewed the Watergate affair from the narrow perspective of the campaign without recognizing and responding to the larger implications of the incident.

One columnist more than any other epitomized the editorial attitude of the News toward the campaign generally and Senator McGovern in particular--William S. White, whose columns are syndicated by the United Feature Syndicate. Given prominent placement on the editorial page, White's columns stuck to two basic themes: why McGovern would lose the election and how the Democratic party had been kidnapped by radical elements. White, in fact, acted

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[15]Carl T. Rowan, "Scandal Lurks in the Watergate Caper," ibid., Aug. 7, 1972, sec. B, p. 7.

frequently as if George McGovern had stolen White's private, personal political party. When he was not engaged in emotional harangues about the fate of the Democratic party, White often dealt with the fate of McGovern's campaign. In the final days of the campaign, White wrote a column critical of McGovern's campaign style:

> George McGovern's long retreat from all the issues that are measurable by the use of ordinary reason, rather than merely "felt" in uptight emotionalism, has ended in a decision to stand and fight on a nonissue.
>
> With a remarkable simplicity, he now announces that the contest is really between the qualities of good and evil. George McGovern is good and guess who is evil?[16]

To support his accusations, White pointed to McGovern's charge comparing Nixon to Adolf Hitler and to his claim that the president had prolonged the war for political reasons. White was correct in denouncing these excesses in McGovern's rhetoric, but to imply, as he did, that the Democratic candidate was the sole villain in a campaign of inventive, was to do a disservice to his readers. For such an implication ignored the remark by presidential assistant H. R. Haldeman that critics of Nixon's war policies were "aiding and abetting the enemy."[17] And White furthermore neglected to mention the charge by Vice-President Spiro Agnew that McGovern was "parroting" enemy propaganda.[18] Name-calling and vilification were insidious

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[16]William S. White, "McGovern's Major Issue: Good vs. Evil," ibid., Nov. 2, 1972, sec. B, p. 16.

[17]See Bernard Gwertzman, "Nixon's Aide Says Peace-Plan Foes Help Enemy," New York Times, Feb. 8, 1972, p. 1.

[18]See James T. Wooten, "Agnew's Attacks Growing Tougher," ibid., Sept. 23, 1972, p. 14.

devices that rightly deserved to be scorned. But it was inconsistent, albeit typical, for White to suggest that the Democratic nominee was solely to blame. Moreover, White should have pointed out the divisive effect such rhetoric had on the nation and thereby questioned McGovern's (and by extension Haldeman's and Agnew's) ability to unify the nation while employing such vitriolic language. This column was, on balance, distinguished more by what was omitted than by what White wrote.

The Detroit News provided some intelligent commentary and some valuable perspective into the campaign on its opinion page. But the useful, informative opinions were often overshadowed by the severely partisan, passionate attacks on the Democratic campaign as exemplified by the White column. Thus, whereas interpretation of significant issues and events was available on the News opinion page, readers frequently had to wade through a deluge of partisanship to find it.

The Flint Journal presented a variety of columns designed to broaden the reader's perspective of the campaign, including capsulized accounts of the positions of the two candidates on major issues and brief biographical sketches of the men who held key roles in the campaigns of each nominee. In addition, there were columns that dealt with specific issues or events that gave readers some measure of understanding of what to expect of each candidate if he won the election. Among these was a column by Joseph

Harsch, syndicated by the Christian Science Monitor News Service, concerning the issue of welfare. Harsch noted that "it looks more and more as though Americans will vote in droves against George S. McGovern because they think by so doing that they will put an end to the 'welfare ethic' in the United States." But the re-election of Richard Nixon, Harsch contended, would insure passage of a welfare program guaranteeing a minimum annual income--the same type of plan, in principle, as proposed by McGovern. The columnist said both candidates agreed

> . . . that the present system is hopelessly out of date and needs drastic overhaul. They agree that the United States should have a uniform system. They agree that the new system should be designed to encourage work. And they agree that it should also include a minimum family support element.[19]

Thus, the popular theory that George McGovern would substantially increase the number of people on welfare and the amount of federal expenditures for it, while Richard Nixon would accomplish the reverse, was exposed as an unfounded myth by this column. For Harsch, using facts and persuasive arguments, illustrated that irrespective of the outcome of the election, the welfare reform plan that emerged from the next administration would be essentially the same regardless of which party was victorious. This was useful information for readers who, as suggested at the outset of Harsch's column, had been beguiled by campaign rhetoric and image-building into believing there was a fundamental

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[19]Joseph Harsch, "'Welfare Ethic' False as an Issue," Flint Journal, Sept. 30, 1972, p. 12.

difference between the candidates on welfare reform.

One issue, engendered by the Watergate affair, that sometimes dominated campaign debate was corruption in government. Erwin D. Canham, also of the Christian Science Monitor News Service, produced a thoughtful column for the Flint Journal on what the implications of the Watergate incident meant to American society. Making only brief mention of Watergate and admitting that public apathy over the event would probably not be overcome before the election, Canham was nevertheless optimistic that when all the facts were known the American people would demand a higher standard of their public officials than that demonstrated by Watergate. Canham expressed confidence that there would "ultimately be a revulsion against the age of espionage." To counteract such an atmosphere of mistrust, Canham suggested:

> We must regain confidence in one another. One way to help regain confidence is to stop spying on one another, stop casting suspicion on one another, start building up the sinews of mutual trust.[20]

This was, perhaps, a bland solution, but the column, as a whole, did present evidence that the Watergate affair was not an isolated occurrence but symptomatic of a much larger problem within the American government and society. And as such, the column was provocative as it exemplified that the age of espionage was a problem that affected more

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[20]Erwin D. Canham, "The Age of Espionage," ibid., Oct. 30, 1972, p. 16.

citizens than just those who used telephones at the Democratic headquarters.

One of the few columnists to openly endorse one of the candidates was Max Lerner, whose opinion columns are distributed by the Los Angeles Times Syndicate. Lerner told readers of the Flint Journal that his personal choice for the presidency was Senator McGovern, and listed numerous reasons to support his decision. Lerner noted that a McGovern victory would derail the Agnew express that was speeding toward the 1976 Republican presidential nomination and would signal a public indignation over the Watergate affair. Lerner also expressed a favorable reaction to the McGovern candidacy on domestic policies and to what he considered to be the senator's ability to engineer social change. The columnist suggested that "McGovern starts with greater social generosity and with a deeper streak of moral commitment to the life chances of ordinary people" than Nixon.[21] Readers may not have agreed with Lerner's conclusion or the reasons behind his decision, but he provided some valuable long-range considerations that readers could not ignore; considerations that helped readers to get a glimpse of what a McGovern presidency might be like rather than simply the McGovern candidacy.

Unexplainably, many of Lerner's other columns in the Journal dealing with subjects that offered an

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[21]Max Lerner, "Why Columnist Backs McGovern," ibid., Nov. 2, 1972, p. 14.

opportunity to provide a sense of continuity and expanded perspective failed to give readers a hypermetropic vision of the campaign. For example, in a column about the code words of the campaign, Lerner noted that the code vocabulary of the Republicans had more impact on the electorate than that of the Democratic party. Such phrases as the "work ethic" or "getting something for nothing," or words such as "quotas" and "busing" were all designed to appeal to the fears of the voters and cast suspicion on the objectives and programs of the opposition.[22] Yet Lerner did not go beyond the code words themselves to translate them into what policies they symbolized. Similarly, Lerner asserted that Nixon and McGovern were much alike in religious and ethical background, but failed to point out how this background might be reflected in policies if McGovern was president or if Nixon was returned to office.[23] These shortcomings were characteristic of the type of opinion coverage of the campaign the Journal provided through its syndicated columnists.

Further evidence of this could be found in a column by Paul Greenberg, syndicated by the Universal Press Syndicate, concerning the issue of foreign policy. Greenberg labeled Senator McGovern's "Come Home, America" theme a dangerous form of isolationism and compared the slogan to an attitude prevalent in 1936 when there was a similar

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[22]Ibid., Sept. 22, 1972, p. 10.

[23]Ibid., Aug. 20, 1972, p. 10.

"emphasis on meeting our own needs and staying out of foreign quarrels." Greenberg admitted that the phrase had considerable appeal, especially near the end of a wearying war. But, he argued, "a nation that turns its back on others should not be altogether surprised when a knife is stuck into it. Or does anybody still remember Pearl Harbor?" Moreover, Greenberg questioned how much domestic progress could result from a "come home" attitude:

> Can a nation grown indifferent to the world be expected to throw itself into problems at home? Isn't it a great temptation for Americans to isolate themselves from domestic problems, too, and stick to their own business and neighborhood and kind? . . . Isolationism doesn't necessarily stop at the water's edge. It is a general mood as well as a foreign policy.

And finally, Greenberg contended that the United States had obligations and responsibilities to uphold and that free peoples all over the globe depended on the United States.[24] Much of what Greenberg said was true and he raised some important questions--particularly his perceptive argument that isolationism abroad could spur a similar attitude regarding domestic policies because there was growing evidence that such a mood existed. But Greenberg also seemed to largely miss the point of McGovern's theme and the thrust of his foreign policy ideas. McGovern did not seek a retreat from past policies but rather a redirection and refocus of the American role in world affairs. "Come home, America" was not an appeal to abandon commitments to

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[24]Paul Greenberg, "'Come Home,' Is Easy But Foolish Plea," ibid., July 21, 1972, p. 6.

other nations but rather to realign those responsibilities in a framework more attuned to the goals and idealism of democratic principles than McGovern perceived the present policies to be. Had Greenberg attempted to project what specific kind of foreign policy might result from George McGovern's election, he would have better grasped the meaning of the senator's theme and subsequently provided more useful insight into it than this column offered.

Two of the most inventive and perceptive columns that appeared in the Detroit Free Press were not written by syndicated columnists, but by reporters associated with the Washington bureau of the Knight newspaper chain, of which the Free Press was one. On the day after McGovern was nominated for the presidency in Miami Beach, Saul Friedman wrote a column examining the notion of what kind of president McGovern would be. Friedman reported that McGovern compared himself to three past presidents--Andrew Jackson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Dwight Eisenhower. McGovern, according to Friedman, said that the presidencies of all three men came "during a time of national transition, when a people headed toward a new era needed, above all, inspiration and assurances from their leadership." Friedman noted:

> The postwar industrial, technological, suburban, city-state--with all its problems--has come of age. And so has its most deeply affected constituency--young people, affluent, highly educated, with new values; black people and other minority groups, filled with common purpose by civil rights movements; blue collar workers and the middle class, imprisoned by installment plan prosperity; women, politically

> conscious for the first time since the sufferage movement.

And to deal with such a complex and troubled constituency, Friedman indicated that

> McGovern, like Eisenhower, intends to loosen the reins of the presidency and decentralize the executive branch . . . But, like Roosevelt and Jackson, he now sees his role as inspirational and as an activist partisan of his constituency. He doesn't wish to heal but to cure.[25]

Though lacking in specifics, this column at least gave readers an insight into McGovern's philosophical view of the presidency. And it provided a framework, a point of reference for judging what McGovern said and did during the campaign. In the last sentence of the column, Friedman suggested a fundamental contrast between the approaches of McGovern and President Nixon to the needs and problems of the American people. Friedman gave readers a hint of what to expect from a McGovern presidency, and that, coming only one day into a long campaign, was a useful and commendable service.

Equally valuable was the column by Robert S. Boyd, chief of the Washington bureau of the Knight newspapers, in which he revealed that Senator McGovern, who had been labeled a "radical" by many, had not even been consistently liberal in his senate career. Boyd produced McGovern's voting record on major issues since he first entered the senate in 1963. That record indicated a fairly constant

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[25]Saul Friedman, "How McGovern Views Presidency," Detroit Free Press, July 13, 1972, sec. A, p. 6.

pattern of liberal voting but also some startling exceptions. For instance, although insisting that he was a long-standing dove on the war in Vietnam, McGovern voted in favor of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution that expanded the war in 1964; two years later he voted against a repeal of the resolution. In 1965, according to Boyd, McGovern opposed a $3 million appropriation to add civil rights investigators to the staff of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In 1966, the senator voted against stopping a senate filibuster on an important labor issue--the repeal of the "right to work" section of the Taft-Hartley Act.[26] One of the important functions of the columnist, or any interpretative reporter, is to analyze a candidate's record and reveal any inconsistencies between what the candidate says in the campaign and what he has done in office. And such was the role so responsibly and admirably fulfilled by Boyd in this column.

These two columns did not represent the only opinion pieces of superior quality in the Free Press, but they did reflect perhaps the lack of perspicacity in the columns that appeared in that paper. Examples of columns not demonstrating such keenness of perception were numerous. For instance, a column by Clayton Fritchey, of the Los Angeles Times Syndicate, concerning the controversial and often misunderstood issues of abortion, amnesty, and marijuana

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[26]Robert S. Boyd, "McGovern Liberal--But Not Always," ibid., July 24, 1972, sec. A, p. 7.

laws failed to address the salient points of the issues and provided little concrete understanding of how these problems would be treated after the election. Senator McGovern had been called, even by members of his own party, the candidate of "acid, amnesty, and abortion," yet Fritchey did not analyze the stated positions of the senator on these issues. Instead, he claimed, with rather inconclusive evidence, that "the wind is blowing in a liberal direction on each of these problems."[27] He hinted, obliquely, that tough approaches to abortion reform and the legalization of marijuana would result from a Nixon re-election, but neglected any discussion of specific proposals that might come from either President Nixon or a President McGovern. This was not a column that readily cleared away misconceptions and misgivings surrounding these emotional issues. Fritchey did not provide the kind of knowledge and understanding of these issues and the candidates' stances on the issues that readers needed to make an intelligent evaluation of the candidates.

Two columns appearing in the Free Press most clearly underscored the prostitution of the function of the opinion column evidenced in that paper. One was written by John S. Knight, the editorial chairman of the Knight newspaper chain, and the other was by Garry Wills, whose commentaries are distributed by the Universal Press

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[27]Clayton Fritchey, "Abortion, Grass, Amnesty Emotional Issues in Race," ibid., Sept. 18, 1972, sec. A, p. 7.

Syndicate, and both dealt with the ultimate choice that confronted all Americans on November 7. Knight, in a lengthy column, informed readers that he would not vote for the office of president on November 7 to register his protest against unscrupulous and immoral actions propagated by the White House and campaign staffs of President Nixon. Knight reviewed the records of both candidates, citing their achievements and strengths as well as their shortcomings and weaknesses. He then concluded:

> Speaking as one individual, I cannot vote for George McGovern, and mostly because I think his election would place shackles on our competitive system.
>
> But neither, for that matter, will I vote for President Nixon because I am outraged by this administration's abdication of moral principles.
>
> You may call this a cop-out, if you choose, but I prefer to regard my non-vote as one citizen's protest against the incredible flouting of simple honesty and a proper code of public morals by the White House and its staff.[28]

Garry Wills reached a similar decision, although for reasons different from those of Knight. Wills saw much in the record of Richard Nixon of a negative nature and little in the McGovern candidacy of a positive nature and thereby concluded that

> . . . if you want to escape the dread necessity of voting for either the war criminal or the preacher clown, just lift up the write-in slot, draw a line through the presidential space, and write Shriver in the second spot. Then go home to the refrigerator and reward yourself for a patriotic duty done.[29]

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[28]John S. Knight, "A Non-Vote for President To Register Moral Outrage," ibid., Oct. 29, 1972, sec. B, p. 2.

[29]Garry Wills, "Solving Election Dilemma," ibid., Nov. 1, 1972, sec. A, p. 7.

More likely a patriotic duty that was avoided or ignored. For the "solutions" suggested by Knight and Wills were not among the responsible alternatives available to voters who may have been dissatisfied with the two major candidates. On November 7, either Richard Nixon or George McGovern was going to be elected president, and as distasteful as that choice may have been to some voters, the public interest and political realism demanded that voters accept that choice and make a decision. A democratic government cannot function under the reasoning of John Knight and Garry Wills. Only if all citizens accept their responsibility to participate in the political process by exercising their right and fulfilling their obligation to vote can democracy work. Rather than encouraging the people to abstain from voting or frivolously wasting their vote, the columnists would have better served their readers and better redeemed the obligation of the press to the people by imploring people to go to the polls. But the irresponsible advice given by Knight and Wills in these columns could only heighten suspicion of the press and erode public confidence in the editorial and opinion pages as sources of information and leadership.

On the whole, the newspapers examined in this study did provide a discernible measure of interpretation of the issues and events of the 1972 presidential campaign in their opinion page coverage. Given the enormous volume of opinion pieces produced in each paper, it would have

been difficult not to. In many instances the papers also provided a more significant dimension of analysis than simply interpretation of what a single issue or event signified. In these cases, columnists sought, and often succeeded, to enable readers to get a long-range perspective of what issues and events and candidates' words meant beyond the insular context of the campaign. But this sampling of columns also indicated that not all columnists shared the ability or the sense of responsibility to produce this kind of perspicacious insight, or in numerous instances, any insight or significant interpretation of what the campaign rhetoric and promises would mean after the campaign.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In a democratic society, the press is an indispensable agent of the people. For the knowledge and understanding that is necessary for the people to act as wise and just governors over themselves must be provided through the energy, competence, and sense of responsibility of the press. Whenever the press abuses or abdicates that responsibility--consciously or inadvertently--the democratic process and the freedom it guarantees the people are severely jeopardized.

One important standard for determining the degree to which a newspaper accepts and fulfills its responsibility to the people is through the analysis and opinion leadership provided on its editorial and opinion pages. A survey of the editorial and opinion page coverage of the 1972 presidential campaign by the five largest daily newspapers in Michigan--representing more than 50 per cent of the daily circulation in the state--indicates that, in large measure, these papers abandoned their responsibility to inform and educate the people. For no single newspaper in this study provided thorough, consistent, and profound analysis of the issues, events, and candidates of the 1972 campaign on its editorial and opinion pages. There were

examples from each of the papers of outstanding, impressive editorials that interpreted complex aspects of the campaign in succinct, intelligible terms. None of the papers, however, did this with the regularity and expertise that would have been expected of a newspaper with an enlightened and earnest sense of purpose regarding its obligation to its readers.

In coverage of purely political matters of the campaign, the newspapers in this study often seemed preoccupied with frivolous or ephemeral considerations at the expense of substantive concerns. For example, editors frequently appeared more interested in who John Connally, a former Democratic governor of Texas, or Richard Daley, mayor of Chicago, and young people and blue collar workers would support for president than they were in what the two party platforms and candidates said about important issues. Although some thoughtful editorials were printed analyzing platform planks, there were just as many--or more--essentially meaningless editorials speculating on the ethnic vote or praising presidential qualifications no more momentous than Senator McGovern's alleged "computer-like coolness." The newspapers, in general, failed to address or interpret concrete political elements of crucial concern to readers.

Editorial coverage of various campaign events produced, in many instances, some provocative editorials that helped in voter understanding of the campaign. Among these

were editorials that suggested that candidates discuss issues rather than personalities, or that discredited false images of the candidates, or that demanded a full public accounting of the details of the Watergate affair. In contrast, other editorials became excessively political in content and emphasis and missed the principal and significant considerations of the controversies that erupted over the president's refusal to engage in nationally televised debates and the Eagleton candidacy.

Similarly, in evaluating the qualifications of each candidate for office, these newspapers invariably were more concerned with the political assets a candidate brought to his party than with the leadership qualities he might bring to the nation. Such observations contributed little, if anything, to voter education and understanding of issues of major consequence.

In discussing the prominent issues of the campaign there were a number of thoughtful and illuminating editorials that gave readers both an insight into the problems themselves and into the candidates' positions vis à vis the issues. Certain editorials on the war in Vietnam, defense spending, and the economy offered brilliant examples of sound interpretation of important problems. Yet other editorials, on these same subjects and others such as amnesty and foreign policy, distorted or ignored significant facts, pontificated in sanctimonious self-righteousness, or approached the issues with such bland indifference as to

render the editorial impotent. Or, as occasionally happened, the newspaper avoided any editorial comment on serious issues at all. As often as editorials enhanced reader comprehension of campaign issues, so sometimes did they preclude such understanding.

The editorials published in these newspapers coupled with the columns printed on the opinion pages produced one notable interpretative achievement: they offered readers a sense of continuity regarding the campaign. Editorials or columns dealing with the Eagleton affair, for example, occasionally noted how that episode reflected on Senator McGovern's judgment. Or an opinion about the vitriolic rhetoric used by McGovern or Vice-President Agnew sometimes suggested that the divisive effects of such campaign tactics might inhibit a post-election appeal for unity. In short, such commentary on the editorial and opinion pages sought to explain the relationship between fragmented and seemingly unrelated parts of the campaign. The editorials and columns tried, with a measure of success, to establish an insight into the campaign by analyzing the various aspects of the campaign--the speeches, the events, the issues, the candidates--in terms of how they related to each candidate's capacity to lead the nation. It was an important addition to the editorial coverage of the election, and while not universally successful, such analysis illustrated a genuine and laudable attempt to provide a perspective of and understanding about

a complicated campaign.

This type of analysis--providing a continuity to events--also marked the most effective and responsible method for fulfilling the interpretative function of the opinion page. The sampling of opinion columns from the newspapers in this study exemplifies the fact that many columnists in many of these papers provided a unique vision of campaign events that permitted readers to comprehend not simply what such issues, incidents, and pledges might mean during the campaign but also after the campaign was over and one of the candidates had to convert promises into programs. But, like the editorial coverage, the opinion page commentary did not always match a high standard of quality. Frequently, columnists expounded petty grievances, were obsessed with numerical comparisons of the electoral prospects of the candidates, or were beguiled by a candidate's image, and eclipsed the cogent analysis of those columnists whose works provided a significant measure of insight. Such columns provided no perspective of the campaign in any broad sense and provided little meaningful or useful interpretation of events within the narrow context of the campaign. These columns further served to underscore the fact that the editors of these newspapers did not consistently and forthrightly commit themselves to supplying enlightening and enduring analyses of the campaign in their opinion pages.

The inevitable and unavoidable conclusion from this

sampling of editorials and political opinion columns is that none of the newspapers in this study demonstrated a responsible sense of purpose or exhibited a unique and identifiable individuality in its editorial and opinion page coverage of the 1972 presidential campaign. None of these papers displayed a depth of dedication to the task of informing the people through the interpretation and analysis of its editorials and opinion columns that would have signified that the editors of the newspaper recognized their obligation to the people. No one of the papers provided the dynamic, singular, sound editorial leadership that would have signalled that the paper had a soul. Too much of what appeared on the editorial and opinion pages of these newspapers risked generating the response: "So what!" And that is the ultimate damnation for the soul of a newspaper.

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