

## MUNDT VS. MCGOVERN: THE 1960 SENATE ELECTION

by

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"Upon this one-hundredth anniversary of the election of Abraham Lincoln as the first Republican president, we, the Republican party of South Dakota, rededicate ourselves to the belief that public office is a sacred trust. This trust must be administered in behalf of all of the people of our great state without fear or favor of special-interest or pressure groups and with the conviction that 'Under God The People Rule'."

The 1960 Democratic Platform Preamble was equally embracing pledging that: "The Democratic Party serves the interests of all our people. Its membership is drawn from Dakota farms, business establishments, offices, and homes. East river and West river, whites and Indians, farms and cities are all represented." The Preamble continues asserting that: "This multi-interest approach has won the confidence of an increasing number of our citizens in recent years. . . . The result has been the restoration of a two-party government to South Dakota. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

Few could argue that the revival of the Democrats was principally due to the herculean efforts of a certain idealist history professor from Dakota Wesleyan University. "The 1952 Eisenhower sweep had left only two Democrats in the seventy-five-member State Assembly and none at all in the thirty-five-member Senate." As Robert Anson points out in his Biography of George McGovern, "The debacle was only the final step in a drawn-out decline and fall that had its immediate origins in the 1940 presidential election, when South Dakota rejected Roosevelt and New Deal 'socialism' by the largest margin of any state in the Union." <sup>2</sup> In fact, between 1889 and 1967, the GOP had won 90% of all elections.

"Small wonder that the job of executive secretary of the South Dakota Democratic party seemed so unattractive to so many." "It was like Lombardi taking over the Redskins," said McGovern. "Things had to go up.' If McGovern was right, the rewards for such a job-----as they were for Lombardi-----could be bounteous indeed." <sup>3</sup>

After McGovern's first stunning victory in 1956 over Harold O. Lovre a four-term incumbent, he went on to eliminate Joe Foss, another popular figure and former Governor when Foss challenged him in 1958 for the U.S. House seat.

In the battle with Lovre, McGovern was, as biographer Anson puts it: ". . . . Snidely dismissed" as an "upstart schoolteacher counting on the rural prejudice against education to do the rest." <sup>4</sup> While not advertising himself as "Doctor McGovern" while he beat the backroads looking for supporters, George found that bankers, lawyers, and tax collectors; not teachers, were in greatest disfavor.

"They all say that George McGovern rebuilt the Democratic party in South Dakota." comments a high party official. "'Horseshit. George rebuilt the party all right, but it wasn't the Democratic party, it was the McGovern party.'"<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps there was some truth to this statement, but McGovern put it differently: "If there was to be any possibility for me as a candidate, I had to have Republicans and Independents for me. So, really, I was building two organizations: the party's and my own."<sup>6</sup>

The decision to take on the powerful and popular Senator Mundt who had generally coasted to easy election victories since 1938 was encouraged by Eleanor McGovern who commented: "Anything was better than campaigning for re-election every two years, living with one foot in South Dakota and the other in Washington with a preoccupied husband and five growing children who had no idea where they belonged."<sup>7</sup> Then too, a privately-commissioned poll in early 1960 showed McGovern well ahead of Mundt 60% to 40%.<sup>8</sup>

This was to be no ordinary campaign. As Anson puts it: "It was for partisans of both sides an ideological crusade, an epochal confrontation of left and right, or as it was so often cast in the months that followed, good and evil." No one saw it more starkly in those terms than George McGovern. "Since his days as a graduate student," writes Anson, "When he turned out leaflets opposing the Mundt-Nixon Communist registration bill, he had been following Mundt's career with increasing loathing. Mundt, as he saw it, represented the worst kind of holdover from the McCarthy days."<sup>9</sup>

While expressing condescending sympathy for "the college professor who gave up his job to organize what's left of the Democrats," Mundt provoked McGovern to snap back: "Before Mr. Mundt lavishes any more praise on me, I think he should know that one of the reasons I left the classroom was to play a larger role in combating the sensationalism which he has offered in place of statesmanship. For fifteen years Mundt, like his associate Joe McCarthy, has utilized one political weapon. That is his clever technique of exploiting the people's justified fear of totalitarianism by sensational attacks upon the loyalty of his Democratic opponents. Those who know the meaning of Americanism have had enough of 'McCarthyism.' There is reason to hope that South Dakota voters are growing tired of its counterpart, 'Mundtism.'"<sup>10</sup>

As the campaign took shape McGovern pressed the attack in the manner of a Wilsonian moral crusader, while Senator Mundt played the role of a cool political professional.

"I don't know how he felt about me," says McGovern, "but I knew I hated his guts." As his biographer Anson writes: "It is one of McGovern's greatest strengths - and some would say, among his most glaring weaknesses - that on certain issues he does see politics in moral, almost apocalyptic terms. Later Vietnam would be that way for him."<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps it was this passionate, longstanding enmity for Mundt that trapped McGovern into printing up a campaign pamphlet called, "The Black Record of Kari Mundt", for statewide distribution. Although factually true as far as Mundt's voting record was concerned, it backfired on McGovern because in being so negative it was attacked by the almost solid Republican press as an attempt to smear Mundt. "The filthiest campaign in South Dakota History" according to a Sioux Falls Argus Leader editorial which called on McGovern "to apologize to the Senator."<sup>13</sup>

For their part, the Republicans had seized upon a reprint in Human Events called: "McGovern vs. Mundt: Key Senate Race." Supporters ordered these reprints paying, in one case, \$4.50 for two hundred copies. The order asked that 50 copies be sent to Gordon Olson at the Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce, 25 copies to Dr. Stavig at Augustana, and 25 copies to South Dakota State University - attention of its president, Dr. Briggs.<sup>14</sup>

More dramatic was the order for 20,000 copies from Lambert Miller of the National Association of Manufacturers in Washington. In thanking him for finding supporters willing to order that many copies, Mundt stated that they would be put to "very very good use." He also mentioned in this letter dated September 23rd that "the campaign is progressing nicely and I would say that we are running ahead by about four or five percent."<sup>15</sup>

The Human Events article itself explaining that South Dakota was a farm state where most farmers owned their own farms in whole or in part, claimed that the eastern part "is the richest farm district in the United States. . . How does it happen that such a district in such a state is represented in Congress by a man who has 100 percent approval from militant left wing groups?"<sup>16</sup>

"Is Representative McGovern," the author asks, "a new type of young American, raising the intellectual level of politics, with an academic education good enough for college teaching? Or is he, rather, a new type of left wing spokesman, whose academic robes are meant to hide his kinship with the old familiar types of CIO-PAC candidates?" To this set of rhetorical questions, the answer was clear. Professor McGovern, misled by Hubert Humphrey, his "political godfather," was an anachronism with his left wing extremism, welfare-state government centralization, unlimited spending proposals not to mention his "soft handling of Communists."<sup>17</sup>

Many of McGovern's pot shots were being skillfully deflected back at him. The editor of the Argus Leader, a longtime friend of Mundt's, was persuaded to write a letter to FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover requesting him to comment on which Congressmen had been most effective in fighting communism. Mundt knew that Hoover's endorsement would help tremendously here in South Dakota. So on October 4th the Argus Leader's front page had Hoover's reply naming two Democrats along with two Republicans in order to maintain an air of bipartisanship stating the following:

" . . . . In my own humble opinion, these fearless men, knowing of the scorn and abuse that would be heaped on them by the Communists, pseudoliberals, and other of like ilk, have constantly risen above personal consideration to strike out whenever possible against the treacherous enemy. The Communists, both here and abroad, have long felt the heel of Senator Karl Mundt. "18

Yet another blow hit the McGovern campaign when Mundt's editor friend from the Omaha World Herald asked Dave Beck, corrupt president of the Teamsters Union, who he was backing for the Senate race. Knowing how damaging his endorsement would be in Republican South Dakota, Beck dutifully replied that he was supporting McGovern. This repaid Mundt for his efforts to divert the labor investigations from the Teamsters to Walter Reuther's Autoworkers. This also repaid McGovern for his harsh attacks against Teamster corruption from the House floor.

The Republicans were quick to capitalize on this legerdemain with a series of paid political ads across the state poignantly pronouncing: "Hoover endorses Mundt: Beck endorses McGovern. "19

McGovern was quick to repudiate the Teamster endorsement contending: "I have always regarded Beck and Hoffa and the type of leadership they represent as a menace both to wholesome labor movements and to the American public. "20

Yet Mundt was able to turn things around in a speech in Yankton where he got headlines defending labor's right to organize while criticizing McGovern's vote against the Landrum-Griffin act which he argued would have given more democracy to the rank and file as opposed to the corrupt union bosses. 21

One of those union bosses was singled out in a special reprint of the Americans for Democratic Action Voting Record by an organization called "We the People" out of Chicago. "Walter Reuther's Socialistic 'Americans of (sic) Democratic Action'" counted McGovern as a 100 percent yes man. E.Y. Berry, the other Congressman and Senators Case and Mundt all rated zero. Clearly, it was McGovern, not the other three who were out of step with South Dakota thinking. 22

Ideologically, Mundt did not want to be typed as either a liberal or a conservative. Whereas at the beginning of his political career, he did call himself a liberal; in 1960 he said: "I consider myself a Republican. Period. "23

If Mundt gained by his adroit handling of the labor-Americans for Democratic Action issue, he certainly lost ground when he used the endorsement of a number of Republican Rural Electric directors in paid political ads. The presidents of East River Electric, South Dakota Rural Electric Association, and Rushmore Electric issued a dramatic news release under the heading "The Official R. E. A. Speaks. . . ." In criticizing Mundt,

they asserted: "It is the policy of our rural electric associations to keep out of partisan politics. Senator Mundt knows this and has repeatedly commended us for this policy and urged its continuance." As far as voting records are concerned, the article points out, Senator Mundt has supported the National Rural Electric Association's position only 1/3 of the time while McGovern voted 100 percent.<sup>24</sup>

In the first of a series of debates, McGovern pointedly challenged Mundt to explain his poor voting record on REA issues so vital to the rural people of the state. Mundt was ready with a detailed answer claiming that he voted for everything vital to South Dakota, but that the other votes were on public power issues that he did not think were at all in the interest of this state.<sup>25</sup>

Though he would not have gone as far as the Young GOPs did in their August convention to denounce REA as socialistic, it appears that Mundt had closer ties with private power companies than he did with REA personnel.<sup>26</sup>

In a "Memo from Bob", we read the following:

"Joe Bush of Northern states (sic) talked to me about how they could help in this coming campaign. What they are going to do is to talk to all the utilities in S. Dak. and find within their employees the Republicans who are for Mundt. They will then take those employees and indoctrinate them in why Mundt should be reelected.

They are going to get a nuclues (sic) lined up. Then when we say the word the nuclues (sic) will contact the other employees ur(g)ing (sic) support of Republicans based on philosophy of govt. They feel that is the best approach rather than a direct political approach. Please give this memo back to me for my file of campaign tactics and then when we determind the time for them to move we are to let Joe Bush know and he will take off from there.

They want to be real careful of politics and want to be sure the talk is all on philosophy so it doesn't have the utilities supporting Mundt in politics."<sup>26</sup>

The memo was returned with the encircled comment: "Good idea!

KEM"

Although the Republican Platform commended REA on its twenty-fifth anniversary noting with pride that the REA program in South Dakota was initiated by legislation passed by a Republican legislature under a Republican Administration, still their junior branch, the YGOP, refused to do likewise. Instead, they leveled sharp criticism at the High-Liner, the State REA publication. McGovern hastened to call it "a shameful attack on one of the greatest programs ever written for agriculture."

While editor Harlan Severson could not be reached for comment, candidate for the House, Fitzgerald claimed that he was . . . . "stunned to learn of the denunciation as socialistic" calling it an attempt to politically smear the thousands of board members and users of these farmer-small town owned services.<sup>28</sup>

If the traditionally republican farmers were inclined to vote democratic in 1960 it was probably not over REA issues as much as over general farm prices. "Eight years of Republican domination of the Department of Agriculture by the team of Eisenhower, Benson and Nixon, charged the Democrats, has brought to the farm a decline from 100% of parity in 1952 to 79% in 1960."<sup>29</sup>

Campaigning at Turton, McGovern attacked the Soil Bank for helping to cause the decline of rural communities adding that "so far as I can see, the only beneficiaries of the Soil Bank are the weeds, the grasshoppers and the speculators."<sup>30</sup>

McGovern repeated this charge in their first debate carried by KELO Land Television and Radio adding that the "collapse of the farm economy was the number one issue" because it affected everybody in the state.

Mundt, while admitting that things were not ideal, countered by arguing that peace was the main issue; as one farmer put it: "He would rather have his son home driving a tractor than back in Korea on a tank." While Mundt stressed the importance of a dynamic agriculture seeking expanding markets and new industrial use for farm commodities in a free market; McGovern countered saying that this was unrealistic as shown by the fact that farmers themselves had repeatedly voted to approve of acreage controls.

Perhaps McGovern's most effective thrust in the first debate concerned Mundt's vote for the Tidelands Oil Bill. True, the Vice Presidential candidate, Lyndon Johnson, also voted for it but that was his job being from Texas. What excuse could a South Dakotan find for giving away federal wealth like this - 38 million of which was to go for education?

Mundt calmly dismissed this charge as really not too relevant since it happened some six or seven years back; and because the state of South Dakota now had the mineral rights to all of the flooded land behind the Missouri River dams.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps Uncle Gust had a point when he observed: "The various candidates says so little and expresses it so elegantly that I stay confused. Frankly I ain't expecting too much from either side."<sup>32</sup>

In reviewing the filmed debate, one is impressed by the skill of both participants. It was a pleasure to watch the founder of the National Forensics League in his prime at age 60 skillfully defend his record against

the 38 year old challenger who had won a five-state best debater award in college. While the general consensus was that McGovern had the edge, he himself thought: "I just slaughtered him."<sup>33</sup>

If so, this was to be the last time; for in Huron the hall was filled with what McGovern called, "the most hate-filled audience I have ever seen in my life." "They cheered everything Mundt said and booed and hissed everything I said;" McGovern complained. After one more attempt to debate in Sioux Falls, the fear of real violence breaking out caused the cancellation of the rest of the debates.<sup>34</sup>

After the Democratic National Convention in July, a new Ingredient was stirred into South Dakota's political stew. Instead of neighbor Humphrey, who McGovern and most Democratic leaders favored, John F. Kennedy was to be standard-bearer for the party.

Although some questions had been raised in the Lutheran press about Kennedy's ability to be loyal to both his religion and his country,<sup>35</sup> others in South Dakota thought his being Catholic would help counteract the "soft on Communism" issue.<sup>36</sup>

As it turned out, the Republicans ignored religion, but pounced on Kennedy, quoting fellow Democrats who had criticized him at one time or another. From October 31st to election eve on November 7th, a series of eight political cartoons was published in the Madison Daily Leader showing a very young impetuous Kennedy with a bag full of money scattering about while in the foreground a distinguished Democrat like Sam Rayburn is saying: "It's easy for someone to say, 'I can lead a great cause,' but untested we cannot put faith and confidence.....in hands like that."<sup>37</sup>

On the day before the election, the cartoon has James F. Byrnes saying: "The Presidency is no place for an immature or impetuous man."<sup>38</sup> Another larger ad announced in bold type: "NOTHING TO FEAR BUT KENNEDY FOLLY" followed by parenthesis "According to his own supporters", listing quotes from Truman, Johnson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, James Reston and Hubert Humphrey.<sup>39</sup>

The day after the election it became clear why so much effort was put into the presidential campaign in South Dakota when we read on Wednesday, November 9th that "Nixon rolled up a better than 58% majority..... nearing Eisenhower's margin of 1956," while "Mundt did not pass McGovern until the early hours of the morning....."<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps the Republicans figured correctly that Mundt and the rest of the ticket could be saved by Nixon's coattails if they were long enough. In a congratulatory letter to Ted Kennedy, McGovern put it this way: "It is probably true that the religious prejudice of this area caused (sic) us the Governorship and the defeat of (sic) (by) Senator Mundt, but that in no sense of the word can be blamed on any decision made by Senator Kennedy or anyone else."<sup>41</sup> In the same letter, McGovern mentions that

he thinks he would make a good Secretary of Agriculture. Kennedy was fully aware of McGovern's problem commenting to his brother Bob after his South Dakota campaign appearance: "I think we just cost that nice guy a Senate seat."<sup>42</sup>

Although McGovern lost by only 15,000 votes or one percentage point, he later admitted that it was his worst campaign. "I hated him so much I lost my sense of balance," admitted McGovern to his biographer, "I was too negative. I made some careless charges. When the media in the state turned against me," he continued, ". . . .I got kind of rattled. I got on the defensive. I started explaining and answering things I should have ignored. It was hard to get a hook in Mundt."<sup>43</sup> But he did force Mundt to campaign like never before in every corner of the state traveling some 10,000 miles.

One State Senator from Madison writing to President Kennedy afterwards spoke for many when he commented that ". . .we Democrats in South Dakota took a real whipping on November 8th. We feel deeply hurt in the defeat of one of the greatest men we have ever sent to Washington, our Congressman George McGovern, as well as our great Governor Ralph Herseth." He went on to express deep regrets that Kennedy intended to continue allowing Hoover to head the FBI after what he had done to the Democrats in South Dakota.<sup>44</sup>

The election returns showed Mundt doing best in Pennington, (Rapid City) Minnehaha, (Sioux Falls) and Brookings Counties piling up more than 7,000 vote margin, while McGovern did better in Beadle, (Huron) Brown, (Aberdeen) and Davison (Mitchell) Counties but winning them by a margin of only 1,865 votes. However, it is interesting to note that McGovern carried his home county, Davison, by 1,540 votes while Mundt carried Lake County (Mundt's home county) by only 748 votes.<sup>45</sup>

While this election would be the first and last serious challenge to Mundt's political supremacy, McGovern would return in two years to win by a whisker over Joe Bottom thereby becoming the junior Senator from South Dakota and colleague of his erstwhile enemy.

If the state's voters determined that Mundt was to return to Washington, the nation's voters made it possible for the McGovern's also to stay in the nation's capitol. Kennedy convinced him to move into the executive branch to administer P.L. 480, the Food for Peace program.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>South Dakota Manual, 1961, pp. 232-251.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Anson, A Biography of McGovern, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>7</sup>Eleanor McGovern, Uphill, p. 102.

<sup>8</sup>George McGovern, Grassroots, The Autobiography of George McGovern, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup>Anson, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>13</sup>Sioux Falls Argus Leader, October 14, 1960, p. 3, "Mundt Attacks Campaign Leaflets."

<sup>14</sup>Mundt Archives, RGVII, DB1137, ff22: Letter from Claude Paseo to Mundt.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., Letter from Karl Mundt to Lambert Miller

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., Human Events reprint "McGovern vs. Mundt: Key Senate Race."

<sup>18</sup>Argus Leader, October 4, "Mundt Cited for Communist Control Work."

<sup>19</sup>Grassroots, p. 81.

<sup>20</sup>Madison Daily Leader, August 18. Also, Grassroots, p. 81.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., November 3, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup>Mundt Archives, RG VII, DB1137, Pol. Gen. 1960, FF.

<sup>23</sup>Madison Daily Leader, July 8, p. 1.

- <sup>24</sup>Ibid., November 4, p. 8.
- <sup>25</sup>Mundt Archives, Film of First Debate.
- <sup>26</sup>Madison Daily Leader, August 23, p. 1.
- <sup>27</sup>Mundt Archives, RG VII, DB1137, Pol. Gen., 1960, ff 12  
"Pol Tips."
- <sup>28</sup>Madison Daily Leader, August 23, p. 1.
- <sup>29</sup>South Dakota Manual, p. 247.
- <sup>30</sup>Madison Daily Leader, September 19, p. 1.
- <sup>31</sup>Archives, op. cit., Film of First Debate.
- <sup>32</sup>Madison Daily Leader, October 25, p. 3.
- <sup>33</sup>Anson, op. cit., p. 96.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 96-97.
- <sup>35</sup>John F. Kennedy Archives, Box 964, "Carlson to JFK",  
December 31, 1959.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid., Box 959, "Maher to JFK", April 27, 1960.
- <sup>37</sup>Madison Daily Leader, November 1, p. 5.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid., November 7, p. 9.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid., November 2, p. 5.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., November 2, p. 1.
- <sup>41</sup>Kennedy Archives, Box 669, McGovern to Sorenson, November  
16, 1960.
- <sup>42</sup>Grassroots, p. 83.
- <sup>43</sup>Anson, op. cit., p. 93.
- <sup>44</sup>Kennedy Archives, Box 669, Fredrickson to JFK, November 14,  
1960.
- <sup>45</sup>South Dakota Manual, 1961.