

The Ant's Eye View : Delegate to the 1972 Democratic Convention

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Recently, it being the political season, I read Hunter Thompson's, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail -1972*. Thompson, a heavy drinker and admitted drug-abusing reporter and self styled "hostile [to Nixon] Peace Freak," covered the 1972 presidential campaign for *Rolling Stone*. One memorable vignette was his flashback of the day in the 1968 campaign that Nixon's managers asked Thompson to ride with Nixon in a limousine between stops for an hour to talk pro football on the promise that no political issue could be raised. Everyone else in the press core was "dying" for a few minutes of "face time" with the candidate, but all but Thompson were deemed "hopeless" by staff in view of Nixon's interest in the subject. Thompson wrote:

I'd figured Nixon didn't know any more about football than he did about ending the war in Vietnam. He had made a lot of allusions to things like "end runs" and "power sweeps" on the stump but it never occurred to me that he actually *knew* anything more about football than he knew about the Grateful Dead.

But I was wrong. Whatever else might be said about Nixon- and there is still serious doubt in my mind that he could pass for Human-he is a goddamn stone fanatic on every facet of pro football. At one point in our conversation, when I was feeling a bit pressed for leverage, I mentioned a down & out pass-in the waning moments of the 1967 Super Bowl mismatch between Green Bay and Oakland- to an obscure, second-string Oakland receiver named Bill Miller that had stuck in my mind because of its pin-point style & precision.

He hesitated for a moment, lost in thought, then he whacked me on the thigh & laughed: "That's right, by God! The Miami boy!"

I was stunned. He not only remembered the play, but he knew where Miller had played in college.

Thompson gave an inside perspective to the maneuvering of the McGovern managers to achieve a first ballot nomination in 1972-- which strategy involved sacrificing the opportunity for the Women's Caucus at the convention to effectively challenge the South Carolina delegation; it contained only nine women out of 32. The book recalled to mind my own service as a McGovern

delegate to the 1972 democratic convention in Miami. At the convention, I felt empowered as a single delegate only to sit on the convention floor oblivious to whatever maneuvers might be occurring above or around me.

Prelude

I returned to New York from being a civil rights lawyer at White & Case's expense for 31 days in Mississippi in July 1966 (and after also taking a family vacation in Ohio) just after I had worked on the *SEC v. Texas Gulf Sulphur* trial. I had had dream assignments for a young associate less than three years out of law school. In September 1966, I had new assignments like answering interrogatories for Montgomery Ward; and I was a restless young lawyer. A colleague suggested that I volunteer at Senator Bobby Kennedy's New York office—which I did. Earl Graves—later founder of *Black Enterprise Magazine*-- was my staff contact person.

Earl made me his political guy for Brooklyn. I compiled for him a thick tabbed book of reports, assembly district by assembly district, with multiple interviews of sources as to each assemblyman (no woman) and district leader and statistics of recent elections by assembly district. Some of the quotes from my sources were great, *e.g.*, such and such district leader “would take a red hot stove if he had a pair of gloves.” The secretaries of the senior litigation partners at White & Case typed it for me during their down time- of which they had plenty. (The senior partners did not do many briefs.)

Nevertheless, I was still restless and in spring 1968 I ended up being a Congressional candidate in Brooklyn in the democratic primary against a 26-year Congressional veteran, John Rooney. A “well-heeled” Fred Richmond was also challenging Rooney, and I was the spoiler with 13% of the vote-ensuring that Richmond did not win. Prior to running, I left White & Case in late 1967 since a fellow associate, Tom Butler, had a very difficult time trying to run for mayor of Rye

while working for one of the more demanding partners. I went to work for a small trademark firm whose partners promised me I would have the opportunity to run for Congress.

After the 1968 campaign, I left the trademark firm to accept a position as General Counsel of the Bedford Stuyvesant D&S Corporation under John Doar- the former head of the US Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. John hired me on the understanding that I would be leaving in about two years to run again. I resigned in April 1970 and made a good run for the seat, but Rooney got 49% to my 45%.

1972- I become a McGovern delegate

Despite a respectable campaign, I had no choice but to commit to not running again in order to get a job. In 1972, while an associate at Seward & Kissel, I did agree to head a McGovern slate to run in the same district in which I had run for congress. I had to "keep my nose clean" and work hard at S&K, so I did not campaign much. We had a young guy as our campaign manager-then 1st year law student Tom Kennedy whom I still see on a regular basis. He was really stretched out with finals on the eve of the primary.

I remember one rally at Borough Hall Brooklyn where McGovern spoke. I served as sort of a master of ceremonies and introduced McGovern, Jim Bouton, the author of *Ball Four*, and a very nice actress whose name I am not sure of, Barbara Harris(?). A rather tipsy African-American male in the back of the crowd considerably disrupted the proceedings by continuing to scream loudly, "Pete, tell them about all you have done for black people." I thanked him profusely. We somehow got through the rest of the rally and, at the end of the primary, McGovern captured all seven of the delegates from the 14th Congressional District.

At the convention, the New York delegation was quartered in a large beachfront hotel in Ft. Lauderdale. In the early hours we had some spare time. I remember seeing councilman Matthew Troy from Queens sitting in a bar with a bevy of supplicants. He was a powerful leader then, but

he later fell from grace and committed suicide after being charged with criminal misconduct.

Howard Samuels, the 1970 candidate for New York governor, changed outfits a literal four times a day. I was proud of my bell bottom jeans which I wore most of the time.

The New York delegation caucused in a large room and about two dozen of our leaders, including Bella Abzug, Pastor Richard Neuhouse, Liz Holzman, Paul O'Dwyer and Allard Lowenstein, always lined up for a chance at the microphone. I am sure there was a head of the New York delegation but the position was a futile one for a New York delegation of anti-war Democrats. I remember riding in a rented car as a guest of fellow N.Y. delegate Peter Berle (later of Berle, Butzel & Kass); he was trying to line up delegate votes to be the vice-presidential candidate, and he showed me a petition with about 50 names. While we were driving, we picked up Erica Jong (author of the classic feminist novel *Fear of Flying*) whom we gave a ride to another hotel. (See *New Yorker Talk of the Town*, April 14, 2008, where Jong relates that she is sure she will only be remembered for one phrase from the book. Dear reader, what was the phrase?) (Or maybe it was Germaine Greer whom we picked up. My memory fails.) I also ran into a Fort Greene neighbor, the radical black activist, Sonny Carson, who greeted me like a brother.

It was very boring on the convention floor but we were graced with celebrities including Gloria Steinem and Jimmy Breslin and political figures like Jesse Jackson. (I was behind Jimmy at the airport when we were leaving Florida and the woman at the ticket counter said after he left, "I thought Jimmy Breslin was a little boy.") On the convention floor, I also saw SCLC civil rights leader Hosea Williams again with whom I had worked in Mississippi. He introduced me to Father Robert Drinan of Massachusetts who was elected to Congress in 1970 when I was running. Before Senator Eagleton was picked by McGovern as his vice presidential candidate, many delegates were lobbying for their respective choices in notes passed around the delegation. Julian Bond was the popular choice until someone realized he was not yet 35. Jimmy Breslin passed a note urging

us all to stick with the choice of our leader McGovern. Our reaction to Eagleton was: who?

My fellow delegates from the 14th CD, including “Toughy” Sanchez from South Brooklyn, Cynthia Edwards from Fort Greene and Carol Hurford from Brooklyn Heights, were in the same row, and we were company for each other. Most of the days were spent on the floor-- over 12-16 hours at a time with box lunches and dinners. Colonel Sanders was an honored guest sitting up front on the podium, and we ate a lot of Colonel Sanders chicken. There were some classy moments like when Shirley Chisholm spoke, as the “un-bossed and un-bought” presidential candidate. She was a very genuine human being and a pleasure to talk to. She did a press conference so I would get more coverage. By doing so, she put herself in a difficult position since Congressman John Rooney headed a powerful subcommittee through which he controlled the budget for Justice, Commerce and the State Department. Then Congressman Ed Koch, for instance, would not endorse me in 1970 because, as he told me, I was “running against a sitting congressman.”

One day we were riding on the bus to the convention hall where we were to endlessly sit in our rows of folding chairs. Looking down from a bridge, we could see McGovern campaign manager, Gary Hart, on a yacht with another guy in their bathing suits talking to some very attractive women. Amazingly enough-considering the time- I remember the convention as a very serious event with almost no evidence of drinking and drugging. However, we got off early one night and most of the members of the New York delegation jumped naked into the hotel swimming pool. A day or two later, we returned to New York. I remember our mood as one of quiet resignation that Nixon was probably going to win. It was not until after our return that the news came out that Eagleton had had been treated for depression with electric shock treatments. He was replaced as vice presidential candidate with Sargent Schriver in an episode that could only have severely damaged McGovern’s campaign.

