

In 1972, when George McGovern ran against a wartime Republican president, young future candidates like John Kerry campaigned with him. On the eve of this year's Democratic convention, he shares his perspective with **DOMINIC PATTEN**

The one that got away

History, conventional wisdom tells us, is written by the winners. But victory, like beauty, can be a matter of perception. Circumstances and time have a way of changing even the most unyielding of gospels.

Just ask the senior George Bush, who came off the 1991 Gulf War with approval ratings of over 90 per cent, only to lose the 1992 U.S. election to a silver-tongued governor from Arkansas.

Or ask George McGovern.

Few reputations in American political life have been restored like the name of the former Senator from South Dakota, which had seemed buried under Richard Nixon's landslide victory in the 1972 election.

Today, Mr. McGovern is praised by such diverse sources as gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, Bill Clinton and conservative columnist Robert Novak, a long-time foe who now calls him "a genuine hero" for his war record.

At 82, Mr. McGovern, the last Democrat who ran against an incumbent Republican president during a time of war, is in a privileged position — to see yet another talent he nurtured in that dramatic 1972 campaign racing to take possession of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

"I remember the first time I met John Kerry vividly," Mr. McGovern recalls as he prepares to travel to the Democratic convention in Boston this week. "He headed up a group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He worked for me in my campaign in 1972, worked hard. He was a smart guy and I was very impressed with him."

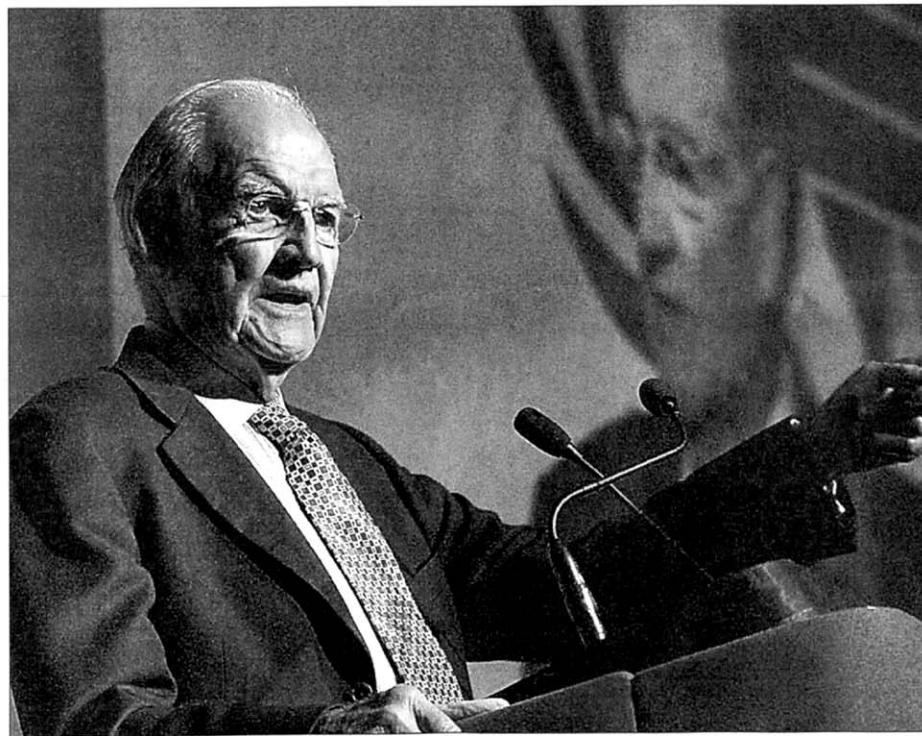
On the eve of the publication of Mr. McGovern's latest book, *The Essential America: Our Founders and the Liberal Tradition*, the Democrats' one-time standard-bearer believes history is on his side. "A lot of what I was talking about in 1972, unnecessary wars, the environment, corruption in high office, has become conventional wisdom," he says from his vacation home in Stevensville, Mt.

In the 1972 instalment of his series *The Making of the President*, Theodore White encapsulated Mr. McGovern as "the preacher, calling for repentance." Yet Mr. White also mentions that his idealistic campaign "introduced a new generation of young people to politics."

Like Barry Goldwater, who lost the 1964 election in a crushing defeat, but started a conservative wave that eventually took over the Republican Party, Mr. McGovern left a continuing legacy in the careers of his 1972 campaign team.

"At the time, I can tell you," says the elder statesman, "I thought Kerry, [Bill] Clinton and Gary Hart, all three of them, were brilliant young guys who had a future."

For all his kind words for Mr. Kerry, the junior Senator from Massachusetts (one of only two states Democrats carried in 1972) wasn't Mr. McGovern's first choice for the nomination. And neither was the ardent Howard Dean, whom some commentators and the influential Democratic Leadership Council took to calling (critically) "another



George McGovern" in both ideology and electability.

"I endorsed General Wesley Clark," says Mr. McGovern, "because I saw him as having a strategy to get us out of the war in Iraq, and get our servicemen and women home safely."

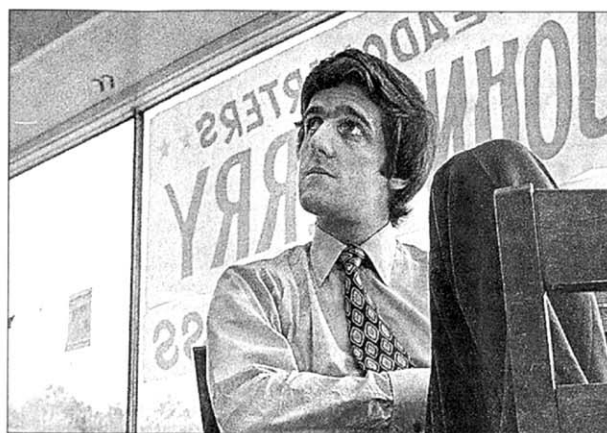
He says Iraq makes this "the most important election in years," as Vietnam did 32 years ago. "I thought 1972 was a watershed election because the voters had an opportunity for a clear choice," he says. "Sometimes American voters complain that there is no difference between Republican and Democrats. There is some truth in that, but not entirely. Certainly in 1972, we proved there was."

And it's true that despite their similarly humble backgrounds, one would be hard pressed to think of two men more disparate than Richard Nixon and George McGovern: One brooding, secretive and (as the Watergate tapes have shown) paranoid; the other, as Mr. McGovern was called early in 1972, almost a liberal "folk hero from the Plains."

For Mr. McGovern, Vietnam was the test. "Bush — I mean, Nixon," he explains with a slip of the tongue, "wanted to increase military spending. I wanted to reduce it. He wanted to advocate what he called 'Peace with Honour' in Vietnam, and I wanted to get the hell out as fast as possible."

Like John Kerry, Mr. McGovern was a war hero. Unlike Mr. Kerry, though, Mr. McGovern didn't talk about it very much. In the Second World War, he flew 35 dangerous combat missions, the maximum allowed, over Nazi Europe. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for bravery.

Despite the urging of some of his staff, Mr. McGovern never made his experiences a campaign theme.



They were later detailed in historian Stephen Ambrose's *The Wild Blue: The Men and Boys Who Flew the B-24s Over Germany 1944-45*.

A good party loyalist, Mr. McGovern is circumspect about Kerry's constant reference to his time in Vietnam. But for himself, he says, "I was part of a team in those B-24s." He pauses. "I couldn't take the credit myself."

Among the other graduates of the campaign class of 1972, Gary Hart was Mr. McGovern's campaign manager, and later Senator from Colorado. In 1988, Mr. Hart looked to have the Democratic nomination and possibly the White House within his sights until his indiscretion with leggy blonde Donna Rice.

Bill Clinton, of course, was a more successful protégé. Though it didn't seem so at the time, Mr. McGovern remembers an ill-fated swing through Texas, which as a coordinator in the Southern states fell under Mr. Clinton's responsibility in the campaign. Everything seemed to go wrong, but it did give

a "disappointed" Mr. McGovern a glimpse of the presidency to come 20 years later.

"Even then Clinton had a way of always seeing the positive in politics no matter what," he recalls. "And it was hard, let me tell you, to find much positive out of that trip."

In his memoir *My Life*, Mr. Clinton called the Mr. McGovern campaign "the political experience of a lifetime."

In 1972, Mr. Kerry was on an unsuccessful run for a Massachusetts congressional seat of his own, out on the hustle with Mr. McGovern, drawing crowds and raising funds.

"It was helpful having people like Kerry out there," reflects Mr. McGovern. "You have people like that who are passionate, who know why they are supporting a cause or a candidate, and voters can tell a phony. Kerry believed that the war in Vietnam was wrong for America. He was no phony."

He emphasizes team effort again when talking about his own bid for the presidency. "It was a political



Clockwise from left: Now the United Nations Global Ambassador on Hunger, George McGovern addresses UN staff in Dublin last month; shaggy future president Bill Clinton greets Mr. McGovern at the airport in Little Rock, Ark., in 1972; and current candidate John Kerry after his congressional-primary victory the same year.

miracle that I won the nomination," Mr. McGovern says.

His army of volunteers and door-knockers had taken advantage of the newly reformed primary system to storm the Democratic establishment, overwhelming backroom bosses and other candidates like former Vice-President Hubert Humphrey.

Unfortunately, the skills and organization that win you the nomination, are not always the ones that get you the White House.

"The mistakes," the candidate acknowledges, "came afterwards," after "the Nixon steamroller [went] in to action," portraying him as weak on National Security.

Yet the party's riotous convention in Miami was fiasco, in which the Archie Bunker character from TV's *All in the Family* and China's Mao Zedong were both nominated for vice-president, delaying Mr. McGovern's acceptance speech until 2:30 a.m., when 80 per cent of the TV audience had gone to bed. The campaign's disorganization and sometimes contradictory policy statements certainly didn't help.

The selection of Sen. Thomas Eagleton for vice-president — only for it to be revealed that he had undergone shock treatment — was also a blow. When Mr. McGovern dumped Mr. Eagleton, after saying he wouldn't, it closed the deal for most voters in Mr. Nixon's favour, even with the Watergate scandal brewing.

Still, like a lover pining on Valentine's Day for the one that got away, every election year Mr. McGovern looks back on the way he could have won it in 1972.

"If George Wallace hadn't have been shot a month before the convention and had run as a third-party independent," he says, "We could have defeated Nixon."

"Wallace would have certainly taken 20 million votes, including the whole South, from Nixon. I'm sure the Nixon people, the day Wallace was shot, heaved a sigh of relief and said, 'The election is over, we got it in the bag.' And they did. We never recovered from that."

After leaving the Senate in the Reagan landslide of 1980, Mr. Mc-

Govern continued to fight for many of the same causes — promoting peace, ending poverty and ensuring justice — that he always had.

He publicly lamented his party's adjustment to placing winning elections above principles, moving from proudly calling themselves "liberals" and "progressives" to today's "New Democrats."

Despite the criticism, Mr. Clinton in 1998 appointed Mr. McGovern ambassador to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome. In 2001, coming almost full circle from his role as JFK's director of the Food for Peace Program in the sixties, Mr. McGovern was chosen to be the first United Nations global ambassador on hunger.

You can take the politician out of the polling station, but you can't take the polling station out of this politician. Across the decades, Mr. McGovern sees the evidence of his own success in the next generation.

"I didn't even know if any of them were thinking about the presidency, but it didn't really surprise me that much. They all had the skills."

In the last months of his presidency, Bill Clinton conferred the Presidential Medal of Freedom on the man who gave him his first taste of the national stage. Mr. Clinton poignantly referred to his former mentor as "one of the greatest humanitarians of our time. He still imparts to us the power and the courage of his convictions."

Those convictions are apparent as George W. Bush and John Kerry get ready to square off.

"I think John Kerry is a capable, articulate, talented person," Mr. McGovern tells anyone who worries about the unobtrusive Senator's chances against the notoriously combative President.

Off the political stage, but still very much in the game, the man from South Dakota, who was and to many will always be the soul of the Democratic Party, says with certainty, although he has said it before: "We're going to win this one."

Dominic Patten is a Toronto-based writer at work on a book called *Brand America*.