Campaigning for America
Edmund S. Muskie's 1968 Vice Presidential Campaign

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Nearly one-half century ago, Stanley Kelley, Jr. succinctly identified the basic purpose democratic theory assigns political campaigns. "Campaign discussion should help voters make rational voting decisions," he wrote in his classic work, *Political Campaigning*. (Kelley 1960, 8) For any number of reasons, campaigns generally fall short of that aspiration. (Maisel, West, Clifton 2007) Whereas political scientists may embrace the ideal Professor Kelley identified, political candidates view campaigns more opportunistically. They generally see campaign discussion as a means to help them achieve their ambitions, not as a vehicle to help voters make rational decisions. Accordingly, they usually tailor their behavior to enhance their electoral prospects, not to help voters act in an enlightened manner. Candidates often pander to voter preferences, oversimplify complicated issues, and promise more than they can deliver. All too many engage in demagogic appeals rather than reasoned discussion of important issues.

The 1968 vice-presidential campaign of Edmund S. Muskie followed a different model. Consistent with Professor Kelley's prescription, Muskie addressed issues in a reasoned way which drew the contrast between Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey

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and himself on the one hand and their rivals, Richard M. Nixon and Governor Spiro T. Agnew on the Republican ticket, and Governor George C. Wallace and General Curtis Lemay on the American Independent ticket. Yet Muskie's campaign rhetoric was unique in two respects and accordingly differed both from Professor Kelley's aspirational model and from the opportunistic course which most candidates follow. First, Muskie's speeches were not designed simply to foster reflective voting and to advance the Humphrey-Muskie ticket, although surely both objectives were important to him.

At a time when many challenged basic American values and questioned the efficacy of American government, Muskie's speeches were intended to reconnect citizens to the American political system and its underlying ideals. Muskie devoted much of his speeches to discussing basic American principles and to trying to convince his listeners of their enduring merit. Muskie's 1968 campaign speeches read like a traveling civics seminar, a national lecture series on American ideals, a course on America 101. Second, unlike the opportunistic model, Muskie told his audiences what he thought they should think. The messages he delivered were not always consistent with what they believed or wanted to hear. Muskie's rhetorical style emphasized persuasion rather than promising (Nicoll 2009). Candidate Muskie was more the teacher than the salesman.

Muskie made his debut as a national political figure in late August, 1968 when Humphrey chose him as his running mate. The year 1968 was simply a terrible one in American history. The horror of the year can only be sketched; not fully conveyed, here. America was bogged down in an unwinnable war in Vietnam to which it had committed more than 500,000 troops without a clear mission or an exit strategy. The Tet Offensive, which Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces launched on January 30, 1968, made clear that our government's optimistic forecasts bore no resemblance to reality. More than 30,000 Americans and many more Vietnamese had died by the end of 1968. In addition, the war had numerous collateral casualties. Lyndon Johnson's

Great Society had been abandoned as public funds went to the War in Vietnam and not to a War on Poverty. Americans no longer trusted their government. The War had alienated America's young and that disaffection soon found expression in a pervasive counter-culture which rejected prevailing values and offended older generations. Student protests closed down Howard University in March and Columbia University in April and demonstrations disrupted other campuses, too. Before the year was half over, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had both been assassinated. Urban unrest led to violence in some cities. The Democratic convention in Chicago turned into a bloodbath as violence erupted between the police and demonstrators, making it one of the ugliest events in modern political history.

It was a trying time to be a Democratic national candidate. The Democratic ticket bore the weight of Johnson's unpopularity, Vietnam, and the other burdens mentioned. The party was badly split with three groups of traditional Democratic voters reluctant to support Humphrey–Vietnam doves and Eugene McCarthy supporters on the left, Johnson loyalists, and Wallace supporters (a group which included Southern segregationists but, also, blue collar and ethnic Americans) on the right. Wallace had become the champion of many who reacted against an emerging more permissive and heterogeneous society which was quite different from the world they had known. Nixon, running as the "new Nixon," declined to debate his opponents and rarely met the press, relying instead on a well-crafted Madison Avenue advertisement-driven campaign. Whereas Wallace engaged in demagogic and racist appeals, Nixon and Agnew used code words like "law and order" to convey a similar message.

Muskie learned of his selection as Humphrey's running mate late in the afternoon of the convention's final day on August 29, 1968. He then reviewed, and rejected, the acceptance speech aides had drafted and, instead, dictated the speech he delivered a few hours later to the badly-divided convention which introduced him to the American people (Billings 2002). "To make a society such as ours work is not easy," Muskie said in an opening passage of his acceptance speech. "It means learning to live

with, understand, and respect our differences as human beings—of different colors, different races, different national backgrounds, different cultural levels, different tastes and intellectual capacities, different educational attainments, and different social backgrounds, personalities and dispositions--and to accept each other as equals. It means learning to trust each other, to work with each other, to think of each other as neighbors. It means diminishing our prerogatives by as much as is necessary to give others the same prerogatives . . ." (Muskie 1968a, 2-3). Muskie would return to these themes, often, during the campaign.

So Humphrey and Muskie began the campaign with the support of little more than 30% of the vote in a three way race, a badly fractured party, no money, little time and the ugly images of Chicago providing an unwelcome, but ever-present, background to their efforts. The unknown Muskie faced a host of challenges and precious little time to meet them. As the vice-presidential candidate, he needed to defend Humphrey, whose liberal and leadership credentials were suspect in some circles after four years in the shadows as Johnson's vice president. He also needed to appeal to McCarthy loyalists and young people who questioned the legitimacy of the political system. Moreover, Muskie had to convince voters that the "new" Nixon was a misnomer, that the 1968 version was really just another incarnation of the familiar "Tricky Dicky" of past years. He needed to persuade working class and ethnic Democrats to reject Wallace. To accomplish these missions effectively, he needed to introduce himself to the national electorate, which had little knowledge about him, in order to establish himself as a credible voice.

Barely a week after the convention closed, with little opportunity to plan or review briefing books, Muskie embarked on his maiden tour at a celebration of Polish-American Day in San Antonio, Texas. He began at the Alamo for a simple reason—Muskie, a Polish-American, was invited to come (Muskie 1968b, 2-3). From San Antonio, Muskie went to Las Vegas, then to Little Rock and Missouri and Indiana. Muskie's first campaign outside of Maine was underway.

On the first day of his campaign, Muskie suggested the country adopt a different approach to addressing its problems; the same approach which had characterized Muskie's political career—that it substitute rational discourse for emotional reaction. "We are perhaps the prime example of a society which was created on the assumption that if you allowed the individual citizen to develop his full capacities, that he can contribute to a rational discussion and understanding and solution to our problems"(Muskie 1968c, 4). Two days later, he added to his prepared remarks one of his favorite aphorisms: "It is better to discuss a question without settling it than it is to settle a question without discussing it"(Muskie 1968d, 4). Coming from Maine "where people don't get too emotional, and when they think, they think in terms of common sense" Muskie articulated his lifetime commitment that "it is possible in this country to settle problems by talking them over rationally, and objectively, and then finally agreeing on a solution, even though everyone isn't necessarily in full agreement with that solution" (Muskie 1968e, 3).

Forty years later, it is tempting to dismiss these phrases as platitudes or, in Muskie's words, as just "common sense." Yet that sense was not common in 1968, and certainly gave no sign of influencing much conduct. Muskie's prescription of rational deliberation and civil discourse was not the medicine of choice in 1968.

During the first weeks of the campaign, Muskie delivered a series of eloquent, often extemporaneous speeches on basic values as well as addressing the substantive issues of the campaign. He took questions from reporters and his audiences on a regular basis. He held at least one press conference, almost every day. He frequently discussed Vietnam, often in response to questions, and generally gave lengthy discussions which traced American policy back to the Geneva accords in 1954. His formulation, that he would be prepared to take increased risks (such as a complete bombing cessation to accelerate negotiations) ultimately became the formula Vice President Humphrey adopted in his Salt Lake City speech on September 30, 1968 in which he separated himself from Johnson's Vietnam policy.

Yet Muskie's efforts during his first two and one half weeks on the campaign trail produced little discernible reward. Humphrey remained far behind; Muskie attracted good reviews but, as a vice-presidential candidate, little attention. Also, he was frequently interrupted by antiwar or pro Wallace hecklers.

The turning point in Muskie's campaign came on September 25, 1968 at the Washington County Courthouse in Washington, Pennsylvania. When he arrived at the Courthouse, Muskie had to walk through an army of hecklers chanting antiwar protests to reach the podium. The antiwar hecklers provoked answering outbursts from those with a different perspective. As Muskie began to speak, the heckling continued. "Say something!" one student yelled. "Well, that's not a bad idea. If you will give me the chance, I will try," Muskie replied. "You have a chance. We don't," shouted one voice. "Let's see you do something," challenged another.

Taking these as his cue, Muskie invited the hecklers to designate a spokesperson to whom Muskie would give ten minutes of uninterrupted attention in exchange for the same courtesy in return. When some in the audience jeered at the comments of Rick Brody, the student designee from Washington and Jefferson College, Muskie asked the crowd to give Brody its attention. After Brody proclaimed his patriotism but denounced all of the candidates and suggested students take to the streets rather than participate in the election, Muskie returned to the microphone. The crowd now gave Muskie its attention. Abandoning his prepared text, Muskie encouraged his audience to participate in the political system and argued that history demonstrated that it was susceptible to change. "I hope that we are on the threshold of an era in which the individual citizens will drop the apathy of the past and become concerned not on a one-shot basis, but a continuing basis . . . . And so you young people have got a great opportunity here to contribute to what must be done that the rest of us have not yet been able to do" (Muskie 1968f).

Muskie's words that day were not the most eloquent he spoke during the campaign but his action in listening created one of the campaign's most powerful

images. Whereas the national television networks had been ignoring Muskie, all three featured the encounter during the evening news. *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* gave the story front page attention. The reaction to Muskie's action was overwhelming. As Muskie staffer Eliot Cutler put it, "in a remarkable political year it was another sort of remarkable political event. And it endowed Muskie with an image that he never lost, and that was, this rational, reasonable, calm, calming public figure" (Cutler 2002, 4).

At one level, Muskie's action represented a shrewd political calculation. At the relatively small cost of five or ten minutes air time, the technique often quieted Muskie's hecklers while providing good media copy and enhancing Muskie's stature. Yet this approach also was vintage Muskie. Muskie's willingness to listen reflected his view of the proper relationship between leaders and citizens in a democracy. His action, he later said, was "based on the simplest kind of idea of communication . . . . This is the idea upon which our society is based—communicating between people" (Muskie 1968g, 3). Muskie's triumph in Washington, Pennsylvania did not make the problem of student hecklers go away. It did, however, enhance his ability to reach a wider audience during the remainder of the campaign in his distinctive effort to reconnect American citizens to basic American values. I want to turn to these now.

Muskie had mentioned trust in his Acceptance Speech and, as the campaign continued, that became a recurring theme in his speeches. He repeatedly said the basic issue in the election was whether "Americans of many different kinds can live together in complete trust, confidence, and harmony"(Muskie 1968h, 19). "This is a country and a system that will work only if we trust our people, only if our people trust their leaders," he said (Muskie 1968i, 7).

Muskie's emphasis on trust linked to a second central theme, the recognition of the pluralistic nature of our society and Muskie's conviction that this diversity enhanced America. He condemned "this business of building walls between different segments of our society in the mistaken belief that by so doing, we can build safety and

security for the privileged." Instead, Americans needed to resolve their doubts and "be willing to trust even people who might do them injury." Unless Americans embraced "the concept of a free and open society," America as we had known it would disappear (Muskie 1968h, 20-21).

> It seems to me in this election year that every American should take the time to reconsider the responsibilities of freedom. He should ask himself if he is living up to them, is he willing to reject the dogma of fear and racism. Is he willing to stamp out intolerance and hatred wherever and whenever they appear. Is he ready to diminish his own prerogatives by as much as is necessary to give other Americans the opportunities he has for a home, for a job, and for a decent education for his children. Does he really trust his neighbors, whoever they are? Is he willing to work for the goal of equal opportunity for every American. If every American could answer 'yes' to all these questions most of the difficulties we face here at home would seem much smaller (Muskie, 1968j, 4-5).

Muskie acknowledged that there were risks to the course he suggested "[b]ut what are the alternatives?" he rhetorically asked since "the old historical doctrine" of building walls to isolate people from those who were different "has never worked" (Muskie 1968k, 3-4).

The preceding paragraphs suggest a third basic principle which Muskie repeatedly invoked. Muskie believed in the American Dream and he often used his father's experience as an immigrant from eastern Poland in the late 19thcentury to illustrate its implications. Muskie's father had come to America in search of "equality and opportunity" which he had ultimately found. (Muskie 1968l, 22-24) He had been able to make a new life because in America "[s]trangers were accepted," maybe not immediately but ultimately (Muskie 1968m, 2). In order to make America "the land of opportunity that we came here to find" Americans of different backgrounds had to work towards building "not a divided America, but a united America." Such an America depended upon providing educational opportunities for all children. Moreover, security would not come from building walls around people. "The only way to build real safety and real security is to build it upon the foundation of freedom. No

society which was not free was ever safe for anyone who lived in it"(Muskie 1968l, 22-24; see also Muskie 1968n). The question in the campaign was "whether we are going to continue to have that kind of an America or a different kind of America in which Americans distrust and hate each other" (Muskie 1968m, 3).

Wallace's appeal was the antithesis of the vision of America which Muskie drew from his father's beliefs and experience:

> My father did not come here looking for fear; he came here to escape fear and to find freedom. He did not come here looking for hatred; he came here to escape it and to find freedom. He did not come here seeking to deny other people opportunity; he came here to find it for himself, thinking it was available to all people who lived in America. He came here believing that freedom here was freedom for everyone (Muskie 1968o, 6-7; see also Muskie 1968, 6).

Fourth, unlike Nixon, Agnew and Wallace, all of whom condemned those who challenged prevailing orthodoxies, Muskie celebrated dissent as an intrinsic part of American life. He saw it as part of a citizen's right and responsibility, as American as the flag and apple pie. "The idea of kicking against the Establishment, of trying to change things as they are because you don't like them, is not a new idea," Muskie told a high school audience in Indiana (Muskie 1968q, 4). The following day, he told an Ohio high school group that America was a country where "you are privileged to kick the government around" **(**Muskie 1968r, 4).

Yet Muskie also sought to put dissent in context and to channel it in a constructive direction. Dissent was an important part of the process, but not an end in itself, Muskie told a college audience. Once "we have had every opportunity to express our protests, we must at some point come behind a decision and a program for action to implement our common good" (Muskie 1968s, 6). With the privilege of dissent came "the duty and responsibility of using your heads, your hearts, your capacity for understanding, to do what is best for everyone concerned," he told one high school group (Muskie 1968r, 4-5).

Muskie's belief in the importance and validity of dissent related to a fifth theme of his campaign—the value of democratic governance and the need to strengthen it. Muskie believed, as he said at the outset of his campaign at the Alamo, that the "election of 1968 [would] test our ability to conserve and improve a democracy in the midst of domestic and foreign troubles" (Muskie 1968t, 3). Muskie's view of democratic governance was elaborate and some strands are implicit in what has already been said—the need for civil discourse, compromise and communication. Muskie also repeatedly called for citizens to re-engage with their government. Society could "no longer afford stop and start citizens" who engaged in "citizenship by crisis." Instead, America needed the ongoing commitment of "informed, educated, and concerned" citizens (Muskie 1968u, 7-8). Citizens needed to understand that democracy did not provide instant results. "There is no way in a democracy for any citizen to get his way instantly" (Muskie 1968v, 10).

Muskie also saw institutional reform as a way to connect citizens to society and each other. The federal system was not simply designed to fragment power to limit its abusive potential, said Muskie, but "as a way of broadening participation in public policy-making by citizens and by Government employees at all three levels" (Muskie 1968w, 10). The answer to the pervasive "unrest across our country" was not simply providing meaningful opportunity for all but also "to shape our institutions at all three levels of the federal system and in the private sector as to make it clear to those who are on the outside that the institutions are open to them, to make it clear to those who are on the outside that they have voice, too, which we are interested in listening to and to which we will respond" (Muskie 1968x, 5). Muskie thought reinvigorated state and especially local government offered the possibility of engaging citizens. Society needed "to constantly broaden the base of participation by our people . . . to constantly reorganize the institutions, governmental and non-governmental, which are available to do this all important work" (Muskie 1968y, 5).

Muskie did not devote himself only to these ideas, but they were recurring themes which appeared in his speeches on a daily basis and dominated his campaign discourse. To be sure, these themes had a potential payoff. Muskie hoped they would help persuade the blue collar and ethnic voters to resist Wallace and the Vietnam doves to view the Democratic ticket sympathetically. But Muskie's discussion was a far cry from the normal opportunistic discourse of presidential campaigns. And it also went beyond simply providing information to help voters vote rationally. Muskie was trying to persuade his listeners of the enduring value of the basic American principles, ideals to which most pay unthinking lip service but which Muskie truly understood and cherished. Those ideals were under assault in 1968 and Muskie used the campaign to defend them. Muskie treated his campaign speeches as opportunities to persuade Americans to reconnect to the democratic process and to embrace the pluralistic values which he associated with America.

This point, regarding Muskie's effort to persuade, leads to the second way in which Muskie's discourse departed from normal campaign fare. Muskie did not pander to audiences by simply telling them what they wanted to hear. On the contrary, he often tried to persuade listeners to change their minds about a topic or to take some action contrary to their inclinations. On the third day of his campaign, Muskie spoke to a reception for civic leaders at the home of St. Louis Mayor Alfonso J. Cervantes. Those in his audience had all achieved great success and, as Muskie put it, "I'm not sure that what I'm about to say is exactly what you'd like to hear someone in my position say." Muskie wanted to speak with them about his concern with the alienation of youth. Young people had "honest doubts" about the validity of the American system, he twice insisted. Adults needed to respond with "[t]rust and confidence" in youth to engage them in the system. "I plead with you," said Muskie, to use your resources "to deal with this problem of the young people as though they were all your children, that you are trying in some way to harness their great urges and desires and instincts and protests into the constructive channels which make a free society work" (Muskie 1968z).

Nearly a month later, on October 7, 1968 he spoke to a Citizens Luncheon in Syracuse, New York immediately after spending the morning being heckled by antiwar protesters at Syracuse University. Muskie told this relatively comfortable audience of adults that "the young are dissatisfied with institutions which appear to have closed their doors to them and to the disadvantaged." Muskie did not share their assessment of American society or think it was "fair." That was beside the point, he told his audience, for the young had a different and critical role in society.

"It isn't for the young to be always right or always fair. It is for the young to protest and to be the motivating force for change—to prod their elders, to prod our institutions and to move them on to greater heights. Because it is for the young who have the energy, the young whose minds and spirits are uncluttered by the inhibitions of the past, the young who haven't yet built that stake which prompts them to resist any change. So we must bring them in."

Muskie told his audience that "a lot of the inequities of our political institutions are your fault and mine, because all too often in the past you and I have been apathetic about participating in political activities in our communities." This "apathy and indifference" had hurt America's political institutions. Muskie was concerned the young would make the mistake his generation had made, that their lack of enthusiasm over the presidential candidates would lead them to abandon the political system (Muskie 1968u, 7-8).

Muskie did not coddle more youthful audiences or exempt them from this treatment. He went out of his way to tell college students of his support for a draft lottery, which would subject them to the risk of military service, rather than an all-volunteer military which focused the burden of service on the poor and those for whom college was not an option (Muskie 1968s, 6-10; Muskie 1968aa 4-11). Although Muskie praised as "a healthy sign" the intensity of the aspirations young people had for America, he told them that there was "of course, another side to the coin."

> If you want to be heard, you must be willing to listen. If you want to be respected, you must be willing to respect others. If you want to participate in the democratic process you must be willing to accept democratic decisions. If there is something you don't like, work to change it. But don't tear down an institution unless you are prepared to build a better one (Muskie 1968aa, 4).

Muskie's insistence on persuading audiences applied in other contexts. He made his most impassioned defenses of pluralism, trust and diversity to the ethnic Americans and blue collar workers who were most troubled by racial integration. He invariably let such groups know that the America he loved was based on those values. He challenged these groups to set aside their misgivings and to trust other Americans, despite their racial and ethnic differences. He called on a meeting of bankers in Chicago to commit organizational and financial resources to solving "the problem of creating a climate in which multitudes of different kinds of human beings can live together in harmony" (Muskie 1968bb, 15-16).

Muskie set a standard for political discourse in 1968 which has rarely, if ever, been met in modern presidential campaigns. At a time when many seemed to question the democratic system, Muskie emerged as its most articulate champion. At a time when divisions of unusual intensity colored much public conduct, Muskie emphasized the bonds between Americans of different races, generations and regions and celebrated the virtue of trust rather than suspicion. At a time when many called for more restrictions on human autonomy, Muskie argued that societal advance was premised on cutting individuals some slack so they could develop as human beings and accordingly enhance their society. He engaged the public and discussed a range of issues in a thoughtful, balanced and honest fashion. "Government is a living, continuing relationship between leaders and people, "he told one audience, (Muskie 1968cc, 9) and Muskie conducted his campaign consistent with that belief.

It is always difficult to measure the extent to which a vice-presidential campaign affects the outcome but circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that Muskie's unique

campaign resonated with the public. Muskie's effort received extensive favorable media reaction. One chronicle of the 1968 campaign observed that Muskie "rapidly emerged as the journalists' favorite, almost their pet" (Chester, Hodgson, Page 1969, 718). Humphrey himself wrote that Muskie "quickly became a hero to columnists and other press" (Humphrey 1976, 392). Moreover, the Humphrey campaign saw Muskie as a significant campaign asset. Humphrey emphasized Muskie in speeches, ran newspaper and television commercials featuring Muskie, and gave him a central role in Humphrey's final nationwide television broadcast (Goldstein 1982, 119, 122). Theodore White labeled Muskie as "an almost immeasurable asset to the campaign" especially when contrasted with Agnew (White 1969, 419). Muskie's campaign helped overcome the large obstacles Humphrey faced and reduce what began as a seemingly formidable Nixon margin into one of the closest presidential races of the twentieth century.

On Election Day, November 5, 1968, Muskie returned to Waterville, Maine to vote and await the returns. Muskie was exhausted, not only from the arduous campaign but from the extraordinary last-minute travel demands placed upon him. He had returned to Maine on November 3 after a campaign hopscotch across the country only to be summoned back to California for the final television special with Humphrey. So he flew to California, did the show, and returned to Maine. Late on Election Night, as the returns were coming in, he spoke to the crowd at the National Guard Armory in Waterville, then did network interviews, then introduced his friend, Dick Dubord, who provided musical entertainment. As Muskie was preparing to leave, a college student called out: "What about Chicago?" referring to the conflict on the streets outside the Democratic Convention. The mention of "Chicago," a metaphor for the breakdown of the system, may have induced Muskie to linger. More likely, he was attracted because the crowd was filled with students, no doubt many from Colby College. Whatever the reason, Muskie spoke again for several minutes:

> This business of being a citizen in a country like ours is a continuing responsibility. It involves more than one issue or one instance. It involves getting involved up to the top of your heart, your mind, getting

> involved not with your voice alone, but with whatever skill you have of communicating with other people—listening as well as talking, thinking as well as shouting, applying your talents to working out the problems as well as complaining about the answers that other people provide.

Having seen other generations become engaged on some particular issue before "fad[ing] into the distance into the crowd of apathy and indifference" Muskie had no illusions but he thought the students of 1968 could "make this a great country." Muskie's generation had done "the best with what we had [but] it wasn't good enough, and now your challenge is to do the best with what you have got and let's hope your results are better than ours" (Muskie 1968dd, 8-10).

The election campaign of 1968 was over, the polling places were closed, the votes were being counted, but Edmund S. Muskie was still campaigning for America.

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