

George S. McGovern and the Farmer: South Dakota Politics, 1953-1962

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Although it often gets overshadowed by his latter career, George Stanley McGovern first prevailed in South Dakota politics as a champion of the ideals of the New Deal. In the early stages of his political life, he promoted government action that originated in the 1930s: stringing electrical wires into the rural hinterlands, reengineering the flood-prone Missouri River into a corridor of productive dams and lakes, marshalling the collective power of workers through federal labor statutes, and, most critically, relieving farmers of crippling surpluses and modulating farm prices. With the help of Republican farmers, who had switched their support to the Democratic New Deal during the Great Depression of the 1930s, McGovern captured a seat in the United States Senate during the pinnacle of the New Frontier/Great Society liberalism of the 1960s. There he helped Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson finish what they considered the uncompleted work of the New Deal.¹ As the "farm

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1. The farm vote made possible the election of other liberal candidates in Republican-dominated midwestern states, including William Proxmire and Gaylord Nelson in Wisconsin; Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, Orville Freeman, and Walter Mondale in Minnesota; and Harold Hughes, John Culver, and Richard Clark in Iowa. See "Proxmire for Senator: The Democratic Party's Best Vote-Getter," Folder 4, Box 6, Pre-1957 Papers, William Proxmire Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison; Gilbert C. Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 104; *Minneapolis Star*, 8 Mar. 1956; Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996), p. 290; James C. Larew, *A Party Reborn: The Democrats of Iowa, 1950-1974* (Iowa City: Iowa State Historical Society, 1980), pp. 56-57; John Mark Hansen,



George McGovern (center) with Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy

problem" lost prominence in American politics, however, and more farmers left the land, McGovern's political fortunes dwindled, culminating in the massive Reagan landslide of 1980 and the end of McGovern's personal career in elective office.

To understand McGovern's early political success is to understand agricultural politics. During the 1930s, drought, grasshoppers, dust storms, and rock-bottom agricultural prices ravaged South Dakota, leaving the state with a higher percentage of people on government relief than any other state in the nation. In the midst of this crisis came a rare event, the election of a Democrat, "cowboy governor" Tom Berry. While far from being a liberal, Berry understood the depth of the social crisis—he hired a photographer to document the rural devastation and marched to Washington, D.C., with pictures of starving farm families to show to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919-1981 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 136. See also Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

Both men led efforts to build a successful agricultural program and promote better conservation practices.² In subsequent years, McGovern did not hesitate to remind South Dakotans of the time when the state was "part of the dustbowl, when its farms and banks and stores were in bankruptcy, its rural homes devoid of light and electric power."³ When one farmer wrote McGovern that he preferred no government intervention over the restrictions of the farm program, McGovern responded that many farmers "remember vividly the days, several decades ago, when the law of the jungle prevailed in farm marketing [,] during which period hundreds of thousands of farmers lost their homes and possessions."⁴

South Dakota lived in the shadow of the Great Depression for several decades while Democrats dominated national farm politics, led by figures such as Henry Wallace and Charles Brannan, secretaries of agriculture whom McGovern admired. In 1948, when it seemed that the defeat of President Harry S Truman would mean the coming of "flexible" price supports and farm prices at 60 percent rather than 90 percent of parity (a measure of farm purchasing power compared to the nonfarm economy), farmers in the Midwest swung their vote to Truman and handed him a narrow victory. In 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower, hoping to break the Democrats' twenty-year lock on the presidency, promised to support agricultural prices at 90 percent of parity. Many farmers felt betrayed in 1953 when Eisenhower's secretary of agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, attempted to dismantle the farm program in order to give farmers the "freedom to farm." The same year, George McGovern stepped down as history professor at Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell in order to fill the post of executive secretary of the South Dakota Democratic party, supplying much of the ammunition that kept Benson in the "crossfire" for the next eight years.⁵

2. Eleanor Parker, "Sod-busters: Tom Berry—Depression 'Doctor' during Dark '30s—Had Plan for Water Conservation," *State College Dakotan* (Apr. 1958): 6.

3. U.S., Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 88th Cong., 2d sess., 1964, 110, pt. 9: 12330.

4. McGovern to David Gilkerson, 1 Mar. 1958, Folder February 25, 1958, H.R. 10966, Box 1958, Correspondence Re: Legislation, Speeches, Remarks, McGovern Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University Library, Princeton, N.J.

5. Allen J. Matusow, *Farm Policies and Politics in the Truman Years* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 191-200; Virgil W. Dean, "The Farm Policy Debate of 1949-1950: Plains State Reaction to the Brannan Plan," *Great Plains Quarterly* 13 (Winter 1993): 36; Thomas G. Ryan, "Farm Prices and the Farm Vote in 1948," *Agricultural History* 54 (July 1980): 389; Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture: The Eisenhower Years, 1953-1961* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate Printers & Publishers, 1975), pp. 6-7. For Benson's story, see Ezra

The most powerful agricultural organization in South Dakota in the postwar period, and McGovern's most important political ally, was the Farmers Union. The organization originated in Texas in 1902, started its first South Dakota chapter near McGovern's hometown of Mitchell in 1914, and by 1945 claimed half a million members nationwide, primarily in Great Plains states. The Farmers Union continued South Dakota's adherence to a strain of agrarian populism dating back to the grange activity of the Great Dakota Boom of the 1870s and 1880s, the Populist party of the 1890s, and the efforts of the Nonpartisan League in the early 1920s.⁶ These movements variously advocated government intervention to provide low-interest loans to farmers, free coinage of silver, and the nationalization of railroads, coal mines, and, as Populist governor Andrew E. Lee argued, "other vast industries that are now being manipulated by the capitalists directly against the interests of the masses."⁷ Over time, most Populists and other insurgents drifted back into the progressive wing of the Republican party, which dominated South Dakota politics. During the depths of the depression, however, many angry farmers again rallied around the Farm Holiday Association, which the president of the South Dakota Holiday called the "army and navy of the Farmers' Union."⁸ Thus revitalized, the Farmers Union advocated government action during the New Deal era, including the supply-control measures of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, government aid to farmer cooperatives, farm loans through the Farm Security Administration, and price controls during World War II. The Farmers Union consistently attacked corporate influence in agriculture and politics and rejected "free enterprise," as national Farmers Union president James Patton said, as a corporate euphemism for "freedom for exploitation."⁹

Taft Benson, *Crossfire: The Eight Years with Eisenhower* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1962), and Benson, *Freedom to Farm* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1960).

6. Wesley McCune, *Who's Behind Our Farm Policy?* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1956), p. 45; Herbert T. Hoover, "Farmers Fight Back: A Survey of Rural Political Organizations, 1873-1983," *South Dakota History* 13 (Spring/Summer 1983): 138.

7. D. Jerome Tweton, "Considering Why Populism Succeeded in South Dakota and Failed in North Dakota," *South Dakota History* 22 (Winter 1992): 343.

8. William C. Pratt, "Rethinking the Farm Revolt of the 1930s," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Summer 1988): 132. See also Pratt, "South Dakota Populism and Its Historians," *South Dakota History* 22 (Winter 1992): 328, and John E. Miller, "Restrained, Respectable Radicals: The South Dakota Farm Holiday," *Agricultural History* 59 (July 1985): 432, 437.

9. Bruce E. Field, "No Monolith Here: U. S. Farm Organizations in the First Decade of the Cold War" (paper presented at the Center for Recent United States History, University of Iowa, 20 Apr. 1996), pp. 25-28.

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For the South Dakota Farmers Union to advance its agenda, however, it needed a sympathetic political party, and the Democrats in the state were in complete disarray. South Dakota had been settled in the wake of the Civil War, and, given Abraham Lincoln's Republicanism and the party's "free soil" ideology, most early South Dakotans were Republicans. Their flirtation with the Populists in the 1890s and the Democrats in the 1930s were exceptions. In fact, Republicans often coopted what worked for the opposition: Senator Peter Norbeck advocated low-interest loans and other measures to help farmers; Senator Francis Case was deeply involved in the planning of Missouri River development; Senator Karl Mundt favored federal aid to education; and both Case and Mundt supported the New Deal farm programs and rural electrification. The power of the Republican party was buttressed by its overwhelming popularity in the state's small towns and by the network of Republican newspaper editors that bolstered its popular appeal. When McGovern took over as head of the Democratic party in 1953, Republicans outnumbered Democrats in the state legislature 108 to 2, and no Democrat had served in

Dust bowl scene, Gregory County, 1936





Karl E. Mundt

Congress in nearly twenty years.¹⁰ As late as 1961, a Rapid City Democrat lamented that “neither Christ or Martin Luther, seeking election to the U.S. Senate, Congress or as Governor, on the Democratic ticket in this state could expect to be elected even if the opposition party had a slate of unknown candidates and SD Democrats were oozing unity and practicing political togetherness.”¹¹

Notwithstanding the absence of Christ or Luther, many South Dakotans had shown a willingness to vote for third-party candidates or Democrats in the past based on their pledge to solve the “farm problem,” which still affected large numbers of voters. In the 1930s, 56 percent of the population lived on the state’s eighty-three thousand farms. The strains of the depression, the evolution of new farming practices, and the dislocations associated with World War II disrupted and destabilized rural life. After European reconstruction and the truce on the Korean peninsula, demand for farm goods slack-

10. Gilbert C. Fite, “Peter Norbeck and the Defeat of the Non-Partisan League in South Dakota,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 33 (Sept. 1946): 219-20; George S. McGovern, *Grassroots: The Autobiography of George McGovern* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 52.

11. R. O. Meyer to McGovern, 20 Oct. 1961, Box Senate Files (Dec. 1980), 1960 Campaign, 1962 More, McGovern Papers.

ened and prices dropped. Moreover, as many saw it, the flexible price-support policies of Secretary of Agriculture Benson deepened the crisis. The South Dakota Farmers Union claimed credit for helping to stop an attempt to establish flexible supports in 1948 and denounced Eisenhower's repudiation of his "Golden Promise" of 90-percent parity as helping large food-processing companies. In March 1953, only a few months into Benson's eight-year tenure as agriculture secretary, the president of the Miner County Farmers Union wrote to President Eisenhower to request the new secretary's resignation. Along with the Farmers Union, Democrats advocated aggressive federal intervention to end the exodus from South Dakota farms. Indeed, by 1954, the number of farms in the state had dropped to 62,500.¹²

As executive secretary of the South Dakota Democratic party, McGovern made the most of the farming issue. He criticized Eisenhower's failure to honor the "Golden Promise" and blamed "eastern Republicans" and "eastern capital which directs the GOP" for undermining price supports. In a speech to the North Dakota Democratic State Convention in 1954, McGovern cited a poll indicating that given a chance, 52 percent of farmers would now vote for Adlai Stevenson over Eisenhower and noted the growing number of former Eisenhower supporters in South Dakota who had joined a "Never Again Club." McGovern also reported on the new slogan that was "sweeping the farm belt: 'Vote Democratic; the farm you save may be your own.'" He candidly admitted that any Democratic gains in South Dakota would come as a result of Benson's unpopularity.¹³

12. James L. Satterlee, *A Graphic Summary of South Dakota*, Census Data Center, Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin (Brookings: South Dakota State University, 1993), p. 28; Jon Lauck, "The Political Economy of South Dakota Agriculture, 1945-1995," *Papers of the Twenty-eighth Annual Dakota History Conference* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1996), pp. 339-55; Robert Nelson to Melvin Hovland, 25 Nov. 1955, Folder 1955 Re: Nelson, Robert, and Robert Nelson to John Baker, n.d., Folder 1956 Re: Nelson, Robert, both in Box 1954-1958, Selected Correspondence & Related Materials, McGovern Papers; Herron Runestad to Eisenhower, 23 Mar. 1953, Folder 18-A Benson-Con, Box 329 GF 18-A Benson Pro, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kans.; Testimony of South Dakota Farmers Union, State Political Party Platform Hearings, 1972, Folder Gen Farm Platform & DCD Reorganization, Box 0056, James Abourezk Papers, Richardson Archives, I. D. Weeks Library, University of South Dakota, Vermillion; Robert G. Lewis to Democratic Farmers for Kennedy-Johnson Leaders, 22 Oct. 1960, Folder 2, Box 5, Iowa Institute of Cooperation Papers, Iowa State University, Ames.

13. McGovern, Keynote Address, North Dakota Democratic State Convention, Folder Speech May 12, 1954, Box 1954, Speeches, Statements, McGovern Papers. McGovern's autobiography, *Grassroots*, contains the best description of his early stewardship of the party. Due to a fire in McGovern's garage, little documentation about these years remains.

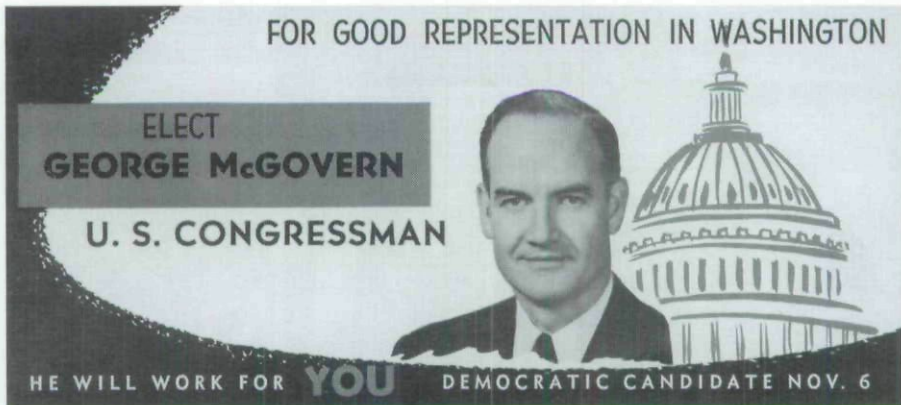
In the summer of 1954, the new executive secretary targeted Republican senator Karl Mundt, who was running for reelection against Ken Holum, a farmer, schoolteacher, and member of the Missouri Basin Survey Commission from the town of Groton in the state's northeast corner. Polls showed Holum with a majority of the farm vote but trailing behind in cities and towns. To increase support for Holum, McGovern attacked Mundt, the chair of the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings who had also been involved in the Alger Hiss case, for being part of "irresponsible investigations" involving "fanatical charges of treason."¹⁴ He also asked his political hero, Adlai Stevenson, to bring some of his "skillful wit" to the criticism.¹⁵ McGovern challenged Mundt's claim that groups from New York City and Indiana were trying to affect the election by distributing Communist propaganda in South Dakota, an effort that backfired on McGovern when Mundt supplied several examples. McGovern also urged Democrats to take advantage of the Tidelands-oil corruption issue, which, he argued, cost South Dakota millions of dollars that could have been used for education, and to emphasize the importance of New Deal initiatives such as Missouri River development and rural electrification. Holum went down to defeat but showed considerable strength in rural areas and came closer to beating Mundt than early polls had suggested.¹⁶

In 1956, McGovern stepped down as executive secretary to run for one of the state's two congressional seats. His opponent in the District One contest was five-term incumbent Harold Lovre, a lawyer from Watertown. Not surprisingly, the most important issue of the campaign was agriculture. The reelected senator Mundt, dean of the South Dakota congressional delegation, warned the administration in late 1955 that "anti-Benson sentiment in the farm belt is something which is just pretty serious. They not only do not like his farm pro-

14. McGovern, Keynote Address.

15. McGovern to William Blair, 18 Aug. 1954, Folder George McGovern, CSP Box 54, Adlai Stevenson Papers, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.

16. *Ibid.*; McGovern to Karl Mundt, 30 Aug. 1953, Folder 6, Box 114, Record Group (RG) 1, Karl E. Mundt Papers, Karl E. Mundt Archives, Madison, S.Dak.; Scott N. Heidepriem, *A Fair Chance for a Free People: Biography of Karl E. Mundt, United States Senator* (Madison, S.Dak.: Karl E. Mundt Historical & Educational Foundation, 1988), p. 192; South Dakota, *Legislative Manual* (1955), p. 380. The Tidelands issue concerned Mundt's vote to allow individual states to collect the profits derived from oil deposits found near their shores. *Pierre State News*, 26 Sept. 1960. See also R. Alton Lee, "New Dealers, Fair Dealers, Misdealers, and Hiss Dealers: Karl Mundt and the Internal Security Act of 1950," *South Dakota History* 10 (Fall 1980): 277-90.



McGovern campaign brochure, 1956

gram, but now they do not like the man.”¹⁷ In January 1956, Republican candidate Lovre and two Iowa congressmen begged Benson for price supports for hogs. One of the Iowans pounded on the secretary’s desk, telling him, “If you don’t put supports under hogs, not one of us will return to Congress next year.”¹⁸ A formal poll taken in Wisconsin showed that the percentage of farmers who thought Benson was doing a poor job had grown from 13 percent in July 1953 to 55 percent in January 1956, the month McGovern launched his candidacy.¹⁹

Benson soon gave farmers yet another reason to think poorly of him. The December 1955 issue of *Harper’s Monthly* had carried an article entitled “The Country Slickers Take Us Again,” which criticized “our pampered tyrant, the American Farmer.” The writer charged that farmers typically sold their votes to the highest bidder and claimed that the “average” Iowa farmer had a minimum of two cars (usually a new Buick, Oldsmobile, or Cadillac). The following February, a letter to the editor calling the article “excellent” appeared in the magazine, signed by Ezra Taft Benson.²⁰ In the storm that followed, Senator Case said that if Benson had indeed written the letter, his “usefulness as Secretary of Agriculture” was over. Benson claimed that an assistant had signed the letter and apologized for pulling such a

17. Heidepriem, *Fair Chance for a Free People*, p. 135.

18. William D. Anderson, “The Mission, History, and Times of the National Farmers Organization” (master’s thesis, University of Chicago, 1965), p. 138.

19. *Wisconsin Agriculturalist* poll, released 1 Mar. 1956, Folder 1958, Box 327 GF 18-A, Eisenhower Library.

20. John Fischer, “The Country Slickers Take Us Again,” *Harper’s Monthly* 211 (Dec. 1955): 21-24; Ezra T. Benson, Letter to the Editor, *Harper’s Monthly* 212 (Feb. 1956): 4.

"boner." Case then called for suspension of the assistant for being "disloyal to agriculture and disloyal to the Secretary."²¹

Throughout his 1956 campaign, McGovern worked closely with the Farmers Union, using the group's twenty-three thousand members to raise money and organize voters. The editor of the *South Dakota Union Farmer*, whom he would take to Washington as his administrative assistant, looked over all his farm speeches.²² McGovern lashed out at Benson's policies and their consequences for rural America, basing his campaign, according to one newspaper, on "government with a heart" and fair treatment of the "little people—small business, labor, and the farmer."²³

The newly formed National Farmers Organization (NFO), which also demanded Benson's removal, helped McGovern's campaign, as well. The group had started with small meetings in Iowa salebarns in the fall of 1955 and, by the time of McGovern's 1956 campaign, claimed one hundred eighty thousand members throughout the Midwest. The NFO flooded Washington congressional offices with calls for Benson's "hide" and tried to work with the Farmers Union to advance their agenda for parity price supports. Ultimately, the organization would form chapters in fifty-six of South Dakota's sixty-seven counties.²⁴

McGovern finished strong in the rural precincts, winning the 1956 election by eleven thousand votes as part of a large Democratic sweep of the farm belt. He had relied on many Republican and independent-minded voters to get elected. As one South Dakota Republican commented, "My policy has been support the man—not

21. "Francis Case Reports from the U.S. Senate: The 'Benson' Letter to Farmers," 30 Jan. 1956, Folder 1958, Box 327 GF 18-A, Eisenhower Library.

22. McGovern to Robert Nelson, n.d., Nelson to McGovern, 5 July 1956, McGovern to Nelson, 9 July 1956, Roy Glover to Nelson, 19 Nov. 1956, all in Folder 1956 Re: Nelson, Robert, Box 1954-1958, Selected Correspondence & Related Materials, McGovern Papers; Hoover, "Farmers Fight Back," p. 139.

23. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 31 Jan. 1957, Folder Article 1957, Box Articles by & about McGovern, 1948-1967, McGovern Papers.

24. *Adams County (Iowa) Free Press*, 22 Sept. 1955; Iowa NFO board of directors to all Iowa NFO county officers, 24 Dec. 1957, Oren Lee Staley to James Patton, 11 Dec. 1956, Patton to Staley, 17 Dec. 1956, all in Folder 13, Box 7, Series 4, NFU Papers, University of Colorado-Boulder. See Box 329, GF 18-A Benson Pro, Eisenhower Library, for numerous NFO letters seeking Benson's removal. Information on South Dakota counties can be found in Folder 13/3, Box 13; videocassette TV-10 1-hour news, Folder 25, Box 15, and NFO press release, Folder 8, Box 12, all in NFO Papers, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames. See also Jon Lauck, "The National Farmers Organization and Farmer Bargaining Power," *Michigan Historical Review* 24 (Fall 1998): 88-127. In 1958, the NFO endorsed only two candidates for Congress outside of Iowa, one of whom was McGovern.

the party, because I am not a politician."²⁵ The revitalized Democratic party had hoped for larger gains, but the tide was not enough to carry other party leaders. Ken Holum failed to defeat incumbent Republican senator Francis Case; Ralph Herseth lost to incumbent Republican governor Joe Foss; and Tom Eastman succumbed to incumbent Republican congressman E. Y. Berry in the congressional district west of the Missouri River.²⁶

Throughout 1957, Benson's policies continued to rankle the state's farmers. The secretary's popularity sank so low that when he visited South Dakota later in the year he was showered with eggs at the National Corn-Husking Contest in Sioux Falls. The *Huron Daily Plainsman* chided Benson for calling the egging "un-American" and cited the American Revolution as evidence that "there is nothing more in the American tradition than the heaving of groceries."²⁷ One De Smet preacher thought it possible that a monument to the "embattled farmer" might be built in Sioux Falls in "emulation of that at Concord Bridge."²⁸ Knowing that he needed to shore up his chances for reelection in 1960, Senator Mundt used the opportunity to release press statements underscoring the distinctions between his farm policies and Benson's.²⁹ Other Republican politicians also took the "anti-Benson bait," as the *Sioux City Journal* called it, and openly called for the secretary's removal.³⁰

Unsurprisingly, McGovern's first congressional speech addressed the farm problem, and within a few months, he too called for Secretary Benson to resign, as did many chapters of the Farmers Union and National Farmers Organization in South Dakota. As a congressman, McGovern often pointed out that from 1947 to 1956, farm prices dropped 10 percent and the farmer's percentage of the food dollar shrank from fifty-one cents to forty cents. Meanwhile, the prices corporate processors received increased.³¹ He accused Benson

25. *Kennebec Advocate-Leader*, 11 July 1957.

26. South Dakota, *Legislative Manual* (1957), pp. 499-502.

27. *Huron Daily Plainsman*, 14 Oct. 1957.

28. Rev. Luther O'Brien to Eisenhower, 19 Oct. 1957, Folder 18-A Benson Con, Box 329 GF 18-A Benson Pro.

29. Heidepriem, *Fair Chance for a Free People*, p. 225.

30. *Sioux City Journal*, 14 Nov. 1957.

31. R. V. Fitzgerald, Jr., to Eisenhower, 4 Jan. 1957, Folder 18-A Benson Con, Box 329 GF 18-A Benson Pro; "Cost of Living Investigation Is Proposed," Folder Press Report, 17 Jan. 1956, Box 1956 Speeches, Statements, etc., Re: Legislation and Other Matters, McGovern Papers. George McGovern's alpha file indicates that McGovern sent a telegram to Eisenhower on 20 April 1957 and asked for Benson's removal, but the actual telegram could not be found.

of "counseling with the giants of industry to figure out ways and means of helping them get their raw products at the lowest possible price."³² At the same time, the congressman noted the costs of farm machinery, seed, fertilizers, and chemicals were steadily growing. The divergence of farm costs and prices became known in the post-war years as the "old familiar cost-price squeeze," a phrase McGovern jotted on the bottom of one of his speeches so he could remember to toss it in.³³

In his first term, Congressman McGovern called for a seven-man committee to investigate the margin between farmer and consumer in order to "learn if someone is profiteering at the expense of all the

32. Folder 1960 Re: Karl Mundt, Box 1959-1961, Selected Correspondence and Related Materials, McGovern Papers.

33. McGovern, speech to Sioux Valley Cooperative Milk Producers Association, Folder Speech, 3-2-1959, Box Mar-Apr. 1959 Speeches, Statements, etc., Re: Legislation & Other Matters, McGovern Papers.

George McGovern with farm constituent



people."³⁴ The first bill he submitted in the new Congress in 1957 provided for a thorough investigation of the issue.³⁵ The study was not initiated until it received the necessary funding in the avalanche of legislation marking Lyndon B. Johnson's early years as president, but McGovern continued to criticize the concentrated power of corporate middlemen. Commenting on a study released by the New Deal antimonopoly economist Gardner Means, McGovern concluded that big corporations "are able, by sheer market power, to operate successfully a price-fixing scheme." In his second term, McGovern and Senator Joseph C. O'Mahoney of Wyoming, another New Deal-era critic of monopoly power, would sponsor a bill to prevent corporations from raising prices without government approval in markets where the eight largest firms sold over 50 percent of the products.³⁶

In the farm-bill debates of 1957, McGovern proposed an amendment to circumvent the secretary of agriculture's pricing discretion and fix the price of corn at 90 percent of parity, the price level Eisenhower had promised in the 1952 campaign. The amendment failed by only four votes and generated a great deal of positive press for the first-term congressman in South Dakota. In 1958, McGovern forwarded a comprehensive bill to deal with all of agriculture. It was nearly a replica of the "Brannan Plan" of 1949, an effort by Truman's secretary of agriculture, Charles Brannan, to dismantle the price-support system and substitute "production payments" to farmers, a proposal that generated support among consumers because it did not artificially prop up food prices. The bill did not pass, but McGovern considered both it and Brannan, who then worked for the Farmers Union, staples of the postwar "liberal cause." Some predicted that the plan would make it into the 1960 Democratic platform, even though restrictions on farmers would be necessary for such a plan to work.³⁷

34. "Cost of Living Investigation Is Proposed."

35. *Congressional Record*, 85th Cong., 1st sess., 1957, 103, pt. 1: 90.

36. *Congressional Record*, 86th Cong., 1st sess., 1959, 105, appendix: 1427. For the earlier role of "Western agrarians" like O'Mahoney and the ideas of Means, see Ellis W. Hawley, *The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 290-96.

37. McGovern, "The Brannan Plan" (speech), 5 Mar. 1958, and McGovern to Charles Brannan, 27 Mar. 1958, Folder February 25, 1958, Box 1958 Correspondence Re: Legislation, Speeches, Remarks, McGovern Papers; Reo M. Christenson, *The Brannan Plan: Farm Politics and Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 169; *Brookings Register* clipping, 1960, Folder Senate Races in South Dakota, Box 8247, James Abdnor Papers, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre. One report indicated that hog production would need to be cut 30 percent, wheat 55 percent, and eggs 30 to 40 percent in order to raise prices to the desired level.

Although one Brookings farmer argued that he would rather "take [his] chances with jungle economics" than with the government,³⁸ McGovern's first-term efforts earned him a reputation as one of the foremost congressional advocates of the farmer.

Other issues important to farmers further bolstered McGovern's reputation during his first term in Congress. To help states cope with rural depopulation stemming from changes in agricultural production, McGovern worked with Democratic Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois on early versions of the area redevelopment legislation that would ultimately become law under President Kennedy, making loans available to economically depressed areas. When Kennedy was in the Senate in the 1950s, McGovern worked with him on a plan to move the program for distributing excess food from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. This move would reduce the costs attributed to the farm program and more efficiently disburse food in urban areas. McGovern was also involved in trying to slow imports that depressed the prices of South Dakota's meat and dairy agricultural products.³⁹

In spite of McGovern's first-term efforts, some colleagues in Washington, D.C., thought his election had been such a fluke given South Dakota's strong Republican tradition that they stopped in to bid him goodbye at the end of the Eighty-fifth Congress. McGovern's opponent in his bid for a second term was the gregarious, cigar-chomping Governor Joe Foss, an ex-marine who had won the Medal of Honor for shooting down twenty-six Japanese airplanes during World War II. Foss's campaign was a slow starter, however, because he had pledged not to seek elective office in 1958. He changed his mind when fifty prominent Republicans sought him out, arguing that they had supported the governor in the past and needed someone solid to beat McGovern. Foss, however, was no match for the history professor on the stump; one debate in Brookings became known as the "Brookings massacre." Foss's signature issue was economic develop-

38. David Gilkerson to McGovern, 1 Mar. 1958, Folder February 25, 1958, H.R. 10966, Box 1958, Correspondence Re: Legislation, Speeches, Remarks, McGovern Papers.

39. McGovern to William H. Douglas, 30 Apr. 1957, Folder H.R. 6842, Box 1957, Correspondence, Re: Legislation, Speeches, Remarks, McGovern Papers; Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), pp. 100-101; *Congressional Record*, 86th Cong., 1st sess., 1959, 105, pt. 5: 6324; *National Milk Pictorial* clipping, vol. 7, Folder 1967, Box Articles by & about George McGovern, 1948-1967, and McGovern to Fred Holscher, 27 Feb. 1959, Folder Re: Agriculture: Benson 1959, Box 1959 Correspondence Re: Legislation: Agriculture Aa-Rz, McGovern Papers.

ment: as governor, he had launched the Industrial Development and Expansion Agency (IDEA) to recruit new businesses, using the state's right-to-work law and the low number of man-days lost due to strikes as selling points. McGovern seemed to neutralize the issue with his work on the area redevelopment bills in Congress and scored points attacking Foss's failure to reform the property-tax system and faulting his management of the Board of Regents and Department of Game, Fish and Parks.⁴⁰

Once again, however, the critical election issue was agriculture, which Republicans would be hammered on as long as Benson was in office. Foss visited Washington, D.C., trying unsuccessfully to convince Eisenhower to change his farm policies.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Senator Mundt instructed Vice-President Richard Nixon not to "let anybody deceive you into thinking that Ezra Benson is any bargain in the farm

40. Robert Sam Anson, *McGovern: A Biography* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972), p. 87; Joe Foss with Donna Wild Foss, *A Proud American: The Autobiography of Joe Foss* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 217, 226-231; *Industrial Development* 4 (Jan. 1963): 43; "Information Furnished by Richard Schifter, Based on Confidential Discussions with Dr. William Farber, USD," Folder 1958 Labor Issue, Box 1958 Campaign & Other Items, McGovern Papers.

41. Foss and Foss, *Proud American*, pp. 226-27.

George McGovern and Joe Foss



belt. A blind man in a basement at midnight should be able to tap his cane and find that Benson's great unpopularity in the farm precincts cost us a bunch of Congressional seats."⁴² For his part, McGovern made the connection clear to his audiences, arguing that Foss "would just be one more vote for Benson and the big corporation-style farm advocates."⁴³ Foss also lost ground by criticizing the Democrats' politicization of the "farm problem" as a campaign tactic and by waffling on the question of Benson, stating at the state corn-picking contest that he was neither for nor against the secretary. Mundt reported to one constituent that even the most prosperous farmers were disgusted enough with Benson to vote against Foss. Three months before the election, McGovern led Foss among farmers 68 percent to 32 percent.⁴⁴

McGovern went on to win the 1958 election and used his second term to continue to build his base of support among farmers, particularly those engaged in raising poultry. During the 1950s, corporations became increasingly involved in chicken and egg production and would contract with farmers for their products if the farmer followed the corporate practices prescribed for raising chickens. In 1954, corporations controlled just 3 percent of the broiler industry; ten years later, the figure was 98 percent.⁴⁵ These changes in production meant large-scale changes in the economics of poultry and eggs, for the large corporate producers could afford to sell their products at lower prices or at a loss, undercutting the small family farmers and forcing them out of business. The issue was an important one in South Dakota, where many farm households depended on the "egg money." A farm wife near Mitchell told McGovern: "For years now [here] in S.D. you know that the grocery money 'as it is called' comes from the eggs and chickens the farmers wife raises. To say that many a child and family have been raised on egg money is true."⁴⁶ Another woman from Meckling noted that her egg money paid for groceries.

42. Heidepriem, *Fair Chance for a Free People*, p. 225.

43. "Foss and the Farmer," Folder 1958 Farm Issue, Box 1958 File Campaign & Other Items, McGovern Papers.

44. *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 25 Oct. 1958; Karl Mundt to Hugh Agor, 19 Nov. 1958, Folder 1, Box 38, RG 1, Mundt Papers; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 27 Aug. 1958; *Chicago Sun-Times*, 26 Apr. 1958.

45. South Dakota, *Legislative Manual* (1959), p. 187; Jon Lauck, "American Agriculture and the Problem of Monopoly," *Agricultural History* 70 (Spring 1996): 209.

46. Mrs. Ray Krause to McGovern, 19 June 1959, Folder 1959 Re: Agriculture: Egg & Poultry, Box 1959 Correspondence Re: Legislation: Agriculture Aa-Rz, McGovern Papers.

She complained that the eggs she sold for twenty cents cost fifty-nine cents in the store and wondered what happened to all the money in between. Senator Mundt also noted that the biggest criticism he heard from his constituents concerned the price of eggs. He implored President Eisenhower to begin a program of government egg buying to boost prices. When farmers complained that large egg dealers had forced prices down, Congressman McGovern agreed. Writing to a Garretson farmer, he cited large corporations as the problem and argued that vertical integration, in which a company controlled every aspect of production and distribution, posed one of the most dire threats independent farmers had ever faced. The congressman then called for hearings to find a solution to the crisis and endorsed a bill to boost prices by regulating the marketing of eggs and chickens.⁴⁷

After McGovern won his second term to Congress, he began to think of running for the Senate against Karl Mundt in 1960, in part because McGovern "hated his guts" and his brand of hard-line anti-communism.⁴⁸ In a race one columnist called the year's "most important" senatorial contest, McGovern stayed true to form, however, and focused on the farm issue.⁴⁹ At a fifty dollar-a-plate fundraiser held in Washington, D.C., to kick off the campaign—an event attended by presidential prospects like Senators John Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, and Lyndon Johnson—McGovern declared, "If [presidential candidate] Nixon is elected, with men like Mundt who support him . . . the family farm is doomed as an institution and corporate agriculture will sweep the country."⁵⁰ He then attacked Mundt's "surrender" to Benson, linking the two by citing the secretary's compliments of the senator and the fact that one of Mundt's former aides had gone to work for Benson. McGovern also attacked Mundt for failing to offer enough support for rural electrification and for voting against a study of retail food prices in 1953.⁵¹ As in previous campaigns, McGovern

47. Mrs. Lyle Kaiser to McGovern, 10 July 1959, Robert Schurman to McGovern, 20 May 1959, McGovern to Schurman, 23 May 1959, "Poultry Hearing Set" (press release), 21 Apr. 1959, McGovern to Mr. and Mrs. George H. Heibult, 24 Sept. 1959, all *ibid.*; Heidepriem, *A Fair Chance for a Free People*, p. 192; Jon Lauck, "The Corporate Farming Debate in the Post-World War II Midwest," *Great Plains Quarterly* 18 (Spring 1998): 143-44.

48. Quoted in Anson, *McGovern*, p. 93.

49. *New York Post*, 30 Dec. 1959.

50. Quoted in *Washington Post*, 10 June 1960.

51. "King Karl Should Be Retired," Folder 1960 Re: Mundt, Box 1959-1961, Selected Correspondence & Related Materials, McGovern Papers. See also *Mitchell Daily Republic*, 20 Jan. 1960.

received a great deal of credit for his leadership in the area of agriculture, even from Republican party officials. In response, Mundt cited the long list of favors he had done for agriculture since his election to the Senate in 1948. He reminded voters that he had asked Benson to resign as early as 1953. Coupled with his strong record on agriculture and his solid political organization within the state, it seemed to be enough to prevent a blowout in the heavily agricultural precincts.⁵²



McGovern discussing Food for Peace report

Mundt narrowly won the contest, leaving McGovern jobless. The newly elected President Kennedy blamed his own weak agricultural record and his Catholicism for costing McGovern votes. Kennedy had worked with McGovern in Congress on labor-reform issues and the surplus-food programs, and he considered McGovern to be among the postwar liberal "best and brightest." McGovern's friends in the Farmers Union, Robert Kennedy, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., all advocated McGovern's appointment as secretary of agriculture, but he was passed over in favor of Governor Orville Freeman of Minnesota,

52. "Senator Karl E. Mundt's Work in Behalf of Agriculture and the Farmer," and unidentified newspaper clipping, both in Scrapbook no. 99, Mundt Archives; *Salem Special*, 28 Jan. 1960.

who had also lost in 1960. Instead, McGovern was chosen to head Food for Peace, a surplus disposal program initiated under Public Law 480. Yet another response to depressed farm prices, the law garnered enormous support in South Dakota, in part because it had originated with the work of Senators Mundt and Case.⁵³ The merits of the program were such an easy sell that one newspaper editor likened it to being "for motherhood and against sin."⁵⁴

"Live-wire ex-Congressman George McGovern of South Dakota," wrote Washington columnist Drew Pearson, "has put three times as much life into the Food for Peace program in six months as in eight years under Eisenhower."⁵⁵ Within South Dakota, George Cunningham, the president of the Young Democrats who would later work as an assistant to McGovern (and run for the Senate himself), also touted McGovern's work on the program. As a result, some people accused McGovern of using the post to prepare his next run for the Senate.⁵⁶ With the 1962 elections approaching, polls indicated that South Dakotans believed McGovern was doing a good job at Food for Peace, understood farm issues, and had "high personal integrity." Even so, they worried about his connection to "labor bosses" and his partisanship. The incumbent senator Francis Case was seen as a decent, hard-working man, but one whose "best years are behind him."⁵⁷ Moreover, Case was from the sparsely populated area west of the Missouri River, while McGovern ran strong among farmers in the more populous east-river section. Finally, with the Catholic issue fading as Kennedy's popularity grew, it seemed that McGovern could win in 1962.⁵⁸

The South Dakota Democratic party that McGovern had helped to build was in disarray, however. The 1960 elections had been a clean sweep for the Republicans, not only ending McGovern's service but also defeating, after one two-year term, Democratic governor Ralph Herseth. Infighting also developed over the amount of

53. South Dakota, *Legislative Manual* (1961), p. 214; Jon Lauck, "Francis Case, Karl Mundt, Food for Peace, and the Organizational Synthesis," *Papers of the Twenty-sixth Annual Dakota History Conference* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 1994), pp. 395-406.

54. *Lake Preston Times*, n.d., Folder Articles 1961, Box May-June 1959, Speeches, Statements, Remarks, McGovern Papers.

55. Press release from Director of Food for Peace, Office of the President, Folder Articles 1961, Box May-June 1959, Speeches, Statements, Remarks, McGovern Papers.

56. *Huron Daily Plainsman*, 6 Oct. 1961.

57. "Survey of Political Attitudes—South Dakota, July 1962," Box 1962 Campaign, McGovern Papers.

58. McGovern, *Grassroots*, pp. 89-90.

money spent on McGovern's 1960 race, particularly a large labor donation made to McGovern that the state party thought it deserved. McGovern's view that Herseth was not properly following up on potential issues added to the problem, as did disputes between Herseth and State Chairman Jim Magness as well as between Magness and George Cunningham. The party organization in Sioux Falls actually stopped sending money throughout the state. As the 1962 race approached, nobody was sure who would run against Senator Case. In April, Herseth's lieutenant governor John Lindley, who had earlier said he wanted to run for governor, announced that he would run for the Senate. A few weeks later, McGovern announced that he would run after telling Lindley earlier that month that he definitely would not run. Lindley then withdrew at the behest of the White House, according to the Republican *Rapid City Journal*. Over the next several years, the McGovern-Lindley rivalry would deepen, with Lindley keeping track of McGovern for the Johnson administration and volunteering to run against him when McGovern's opposition to Johnson's Vietnam policies grew more persistent.⁵⁹

In May 1962 a poll showed Case leading McGovern 59 to 41 percent, but closer to election time Republicans also suffered their own disarray. The summer before the election, Senator Case died of a heart attack at Bethesda Naval Hospital, and, as a result, Republicans would not be organized around a powerful incumbent as in the past. In July, party leaders met to decide who would challenge McGovern, taking twenty ballots to select Lieutenant Governor Joe Bottum as the nominee. Republican governor Archie Gubbrud then appointed Bottum to fill the remainder of Case's Senate term.⁶⁰

During the campaign, McGovern emphasized the importance of having a senator who could work closely with President Kennedy, and he proved his worth when he worked with the administration to stop the proposed move of a Veterans Administration program from

59. Lindley to McGovern, 17 July, 26 Oct. 1961, Magness to McGovern, 2, 9 Feb. 1961, McGovern to Magness, 1 Jan. 1961, Cunningham to McGovern, 31 Oct. 1961, McGovern to Lindley, 30 Oct. 1961, Don Rasmussen to McGovern, 24 Oct. 1961, McGovern to Ward Clark, 9 Aug. 1961, Mose Lindau to McGovern, 30 Jan. 1962, Eddie Hosen to McGovern, 17 Oct. 1961, Herseth to McGovern, 17 Sept. 1961, all in Box Senate Files (Dec. '80), 1960 Campaign, 1962 More, McGovern Papers; *Huron Daily Plainsman*, 22 Apr. 1962. Lindley also wanted the appointment to the United States Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, but McGovern preferred someone else. Lindley to Joseph Califano, 12 Mar. 1968, White House Central Files, Name File, Box 270, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Tex.

60. Alan L. Clem, "The 1962 Election in South Dakota," *Public Affairs*, Governmental Research Bureau, Bulletin no. 12 (Vermillion: University of South Dakota, 1963), p. 2.

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Sioux Falls to Saint Paul, Minnesota.⁶¹ McGovern also benefited from the new enthusiasm for Kennedy in South Dakota following the president's handling of the Cuban missile crisis and the popularity of his Medicare program, which the Senate defeated 52 to 48 in July. Karl Mundt, who opposed the government-funded health-insurance program for the elderly, told constituents that the program could be



George McGovern and John Kennedy

stopped in the future only if Republicans won key Senate races in 1962 and overcame Kennedy's threat to "purge" the "nay" votes such as Joe Bottum's, his first vote as a replacement for Senator Case. After submitting his formal resignation as director of Food for Peace to President Kennedy, McGovern told reporters that when he returned

61. *Aberdeen American News*, 6 May 1962.



McGovern with South Dakota hog farmer

to South Dakota he would make Medicare a prominent issue. Polls indicated its popularity, making McGovern one of the earliest beneficiaries of the politics of Medicare. He also relied heavily on agricultural issues and his accomplishments as Food for Peace director, avoiding the negative campaigning he had used against Mundt in 1960. The first counting of ballots gave McGovern the election by two hundred votes. A statewide recount coordinated by Sioux Falls lawyer Holton Davenport and his firm showed McGovern winning by 597 votes, less than one-third of one vote in each of the state's eighteen hundred precincts.⁶²

McGovern came to the Senate in 1963 as a champion of farmers and would embrace President Johnson's crusade to finish the work of the New Deal and build a Great Society. McGovern had built his pre-Senate career criticizing the excesses of corporate capitalism and

62. Mundt to Isaac P. Tieszen, 25 July 1962, Folder 2, Box 1139, RG 7, Mundt Archives; *Washington Post*, 19 July 1962; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 12 Aug. 1962; McGovern, *Grassroots*, p. 91.

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advocating government action to curb its injustices and inequalities. Such a case resonated with South Dakota farmers struggling to save their farms far from the urban centers of American finance and industry. He actively embraced the longstanding progressive commitment to protect the "little man" that had reached its fullest flowering during the New Deal. In subsequent years, his defense of wheat growers and cattle producers against powerful corporations and his ardent support for New Deal programs would fade from public memory as he became identified with student protesters who mocked the workers and farmers who hoped to enjoy some material success after the sacrifices of World War II and the Great Depression. These factors, combined with a shift in the country's mood toward the conservatism of the Reagan years, often relegate McGovern's early defense of South Dakota farmers to a distant memory.

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