CHAPTER TWELVE

Victory and Defeat, 1973–80

As the days passed since the November 7 landslide and 1973 was upon the country, Senator McGovern found solace in his home of South Dakota and the work for the constituents who had elected him to the Senate in 1968. Senator McGovern had to set his sights on re-election in 1974 in his home state that had rejected him to be their president. What no one could have predicted in January 1973 was a political tsunami that would make Senator McGovern’s loss seem like a ripple in a backwoods pond.

Redemption is never a word a politician would use after a huge political loss especially the size of Senator McGovern’s 1972 presidential loss. However, the activities of a seedy and dark Nixon White House began coming to the forefront, a warning Senator McGovern tried to sound off about during the 1972 campaign, but to no avail.

Senator McGovern would have an opportunity to challenge the Nixon administration’s policies for at least two more years as a senator unlike his friend and conservative icon Barry Goldwater, who had to give up his Senate seat after his historic 1964 loss to President Lyndon Johnson. Senator Goldwater showed his leadership by being active in his conservative pursuit of policymaking. Now Senator McGovern was at a crossroads where so many presidential second place finishers had stood in the past. Would Senator McGovern redeem himself by leading a new generation of Democratic Party activists and the belief in his brand of “New Politics” or would he quietly exit the stage of political history?

The answer to this question was redemption. Senator McGovern was invited to deliver a lecture at Oxford University on January 21, 1973, the day after President Nixon’s second inauguration, titled “American
Politics: A Personal View.” The Senator from South Dakota came out not as a man who had won only one state in the 1972 election along with the District of Columbia, but as one of the leaders inside the Democratic Party determined to set the record straight on the Nixon White House:

I had hoped to be occupied elsewhere today. But the American electorate has made it possible for me to spend this time with you. Like Richard I, Richard Nixon has been celebrated for his foreign journeys, while his own land has been troubled and unattended. Like Richard II, who wasted England’s wealth in a failing war in Ireland, Richard Nixon has squandered America’s good name in a foolish venture in Indochina. And like Richard III, if we can believe the Tudor historians, Richard Nixon has usurped powers that are not his in law or tradition. You have been spared a King Richard IV. We seem to have him—for four more years.¹

Only the voters of Massachusetts—the nation’s birthplace—and of Washington D.C.—the nation’s capitol—would have had it otherwise. We have established a new political dictum: “As Massachusetts goes, so goes the District of Columbia.” Just why the American electorate gave the present administration such as an overwhelming mandate in November remains something of a mystery to me. I do not expect to find a fully satisfactory answer. My supporters and I worked so incredibly hard and campaigned so vigorously and openly, that our overwhelming defeat has left us with a temporary sense of sadness and disappointment that we must learn to direct into a constructive, continuing effort to restore our hopes for America. . . I believed that any reasonable Democrat could defeat President Nixon. It now seems doubtful to me that anyone could have defeated him in 1972 unless there had been a third party effort by Governor Wallace to divert a major portion of the right wing vote from Mr. Nixon.²

Senator McGovern went further in his speech talking about the need of a shared power once more between the president and congress, not the “stronger” presidency nurtured by liberals. In fact Senator McGovern is harsh on his fellow liberals for backing down from the ideals that began under Jefferson, Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt:

In modern times, when American liberals have recognized that truth, they have tended to see it in terms of the Presidency. Only a