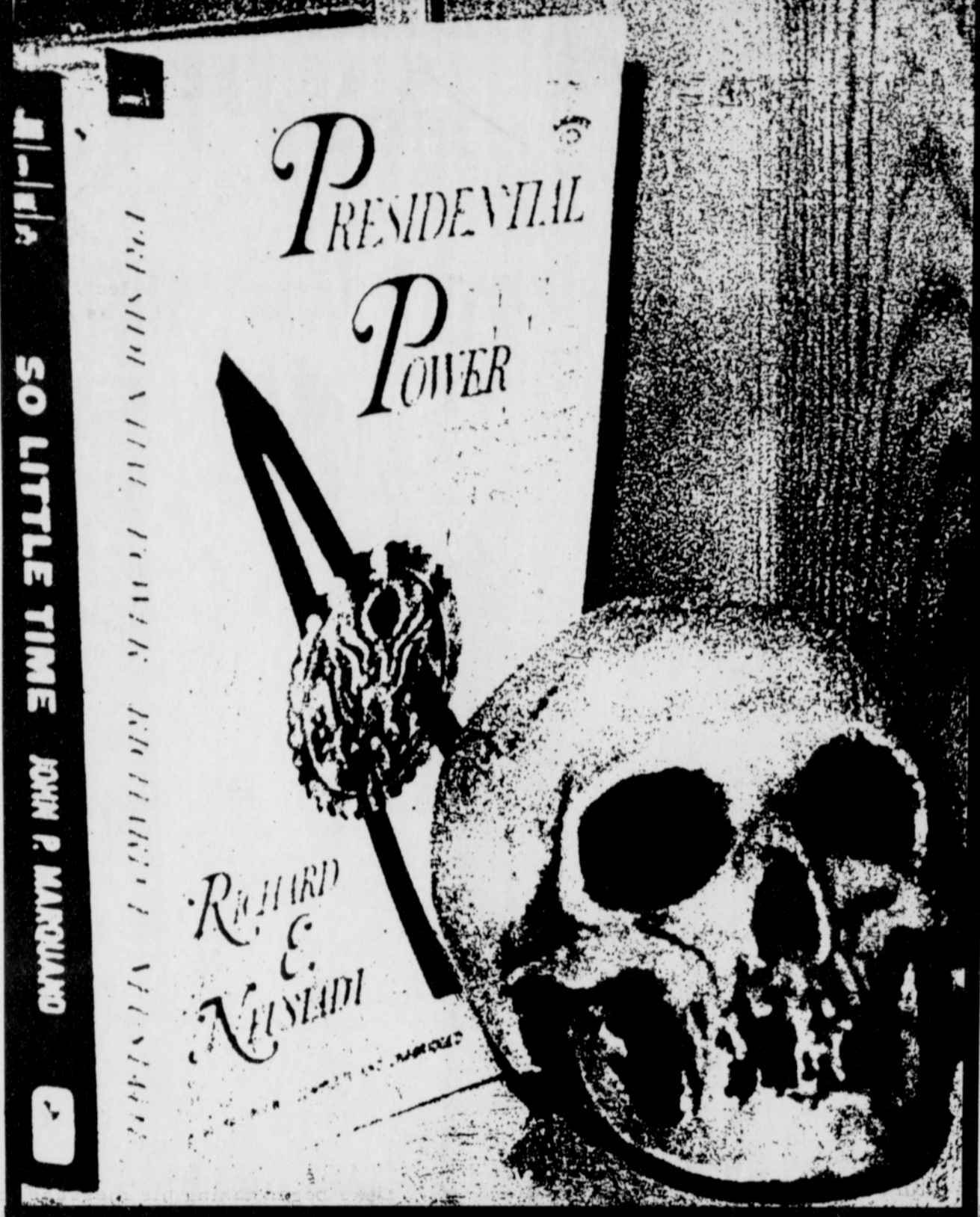


POWER TO THE PEOPLE

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL McCUSKER



BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"If the People lead,
the Leaders will follow"
— Seen on buttons
and bumperstickers

Not least among the great anniversaries to be celebrated in 1992 is that of the Democratic Party of the United States, which turns 200 as wracked and feeble as it has ever been during its long periods of exile. The Party celebrates its bicentennial in dejection despite the busload of contenders for the 1992 Presidential election. Perhaps like the Communist Party it should be abandoned, its diverse fragments reformed into a new party or a multitude of parties that might at least reflect the disparate new majorities that have moved into the American electorate.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its ruling Communist Party is dramatically remaking Europe and sending huge tremors throughout the human world. Old dreams of loosened bonds and political liberties are restructured; ancient bitternesses and hatreds flare into murder, revolt and civil war. Perhaps the demise of the Democratic Party would be of less consequence and trauma, but it could be hardly less bitter: it might be recalled that the Republican

Party replaced the moribund Whigs in the late 1850s, which was the spark that soon ignited the American Civil War.

The Democratic Party is traditionally the party of working people and minorities. Though its history is hardly glorious — in particular its advocacy of Southern apartheid a century ago — the Democratic Party usually, though reluctantly and always narrowly, encompasses a mixed variety of ideas, philosophies and cultural styles that would otherwise find expression in other parties, which unfortunately seldom have much chance against the two party system prevalent in American politics. Jammed uncomfortably into this single party (alongside an old core of strict constructionists) are liberals, leftists, trade unionists, minority groups, feminists and others who might be regarded as free thinkers.

While the Republican Party generally represents the aspirations and pretensions of wealthy Tories (Plutocrat would be a more apt name for the party) and would more likely include proto-Nazis than fuzzyheaded liberals, the Democrats switched their antebellum loyalties at the turn of the century to embrace the hordes of impoverished Mediterranean and eastern European immigrants who were imported to work in the rapidly expanding American indus-

trial machine. The old cadre of party bosses were never comfortable with the mix of political ideas these people brought with them, but they liked the numbers. The "Party of the Rebellion" found its political platform increasingly mixed with socialist and so-called liberal reforms; and in the 1930s, the Democrats under Franklin Delano Roosevelt engineered a major redefinition of government's role in American society. Often accused since then as the Party of the Left — the "Party of Traitors" — the Democrats usually attempt to fix the national political structure after rapacious Republicans tear it apart with corruption and mismanagement. The real bankruptcy of the Democratic Party in recent times is that it has done little to stem the wild surge to the right in American politics but has instead opportunistically accommodated it.

The chaotic diversity of the American political system not only pits such special interest groups as race, religion, ethnicity, gender, capital and labor, but inside each general category are limitless special cells, each of which appear in direct opposition to those of every other cell, a multiplicity of special interests the two party system is unable to adequately quell or represent.

With only two parties through which to realize their ambitions, mainstream politicians show little interest in responding to minority interests or, in fact, to registering into the parties the millions of blacks, Hispanics and caucasian poor who seldom participate in the political process because although the involvement would swell each of the party's ranks, it would also broaden the base of each party and threaten the status quo. Entrenched incumbents count on fewer people voting to maintain their power and on ever larger contributions from their wealthy and corporate sponsors.

The candidates of the two parties, though they publicly appeal to the masses for their votes serve the minority at the nation's upper end. It is not entirely the fault of office seekers that the system is tilted toward the top. Elites take root in every society and wield disproportionate power unless a counterbalance restrains them. In a democracy that force of resistance is constitutionally the power of ordinary people. Political parties are formed to reflect and channel the passions of ordinary people and publicly represent them fairly, efficiently and powerfully, in theory at least, with a minimum of corruption. The two party system fails this purpose. It is too exclusive and compressed, and it eliminates too many people and ideas from the actual process of governance and elections. The parties in reality serve politicians not voters.

Although there are many who fear that more than two political parties will open up the process too much and render it unstable and ultimately unmanageable, the nation is too large, too populous, too complex to be adequately represented by only two. The current system of only two viable political parties has resulted in shrinking democracy. Only more democracy, more political parties, will reverse the decline.

On average, less than fifty percent of eligible voters in this country vote. The nonvoters are usually economically disenfranchised who suffer most from inequities and corruption. Disgust and powerlessness, not apathy, alienates citizens from the polls and are major sources of a great public discontent, an example being the growing movement to limit terms of political office at all levels, a sign that even those who do vote are attempting to directly seize the political process. That momentum might be tapped more pertinently this election year by concentrating on registering to vote the many millions who



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