

Dick Gregory's "One Vote" Note

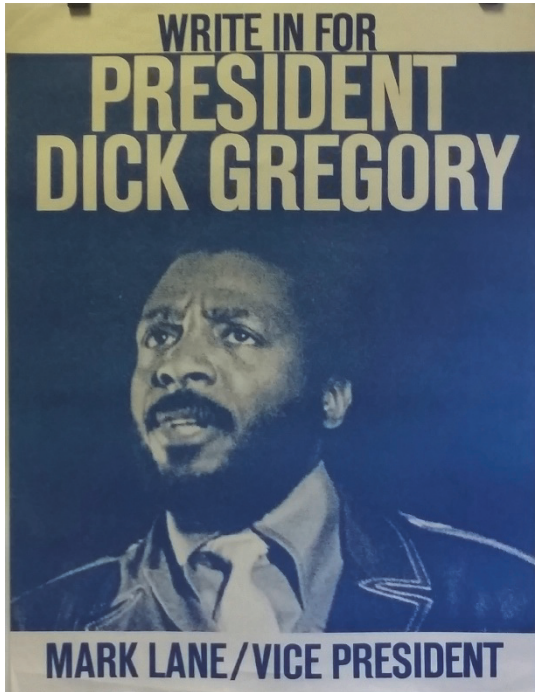
by Loren Gatch

THE YEAR 1968 brought waves of international protest across Europe and the Americas, motivated partly by the United States' escalating involvement in Vietnam but which also reflected a more general challenge by global youth to existing structures of authority. In the United States, opposition to the Vietnam War converged with the civil rights movement to produce a contentious and often violent politics of protest that was rendered more volatile by the assassinations, in April and June 1968, of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy. Lyndon B. Johnson's refusal to run for re-election left the Presidential contest of that year without an incumbent candidate, and the Democratic Party in particular was shaken by the anti-war campaign of Senator Eugene McCarthy, who was muscled aside that August by the party's establishment at the chaotic Democratic National Convention in favor of Hubert H. Humphrey.

As Humphrey went down to defeat against Richard Nixon in November 1968, another candidate used his own write-in campaign to promote a wider critique of American politics and society. While the comedian Dick Gregory had no chance of assuming the Presidency, the panache with which he staked out positions on poverty, pacifism and race relations won him enthusiastic audiences, particularly among college students. Gregory's campaign also briefly ran afoul of the government when it issued facsimiles of U.S. currency sporting Gregory's portrait in place of George Washington, which the Secret Service seized for looking too much like the real thing.

Richard Claxton Gregory (born 1932), has been a comedian, political activist, entrepreneur, and general gadfly in American public life since the early 1960s. As a comic, Gregory was one of the first black performers not only to play before white audiences, but to incorporate biting commentary about contemporary issues like civil rights and racism into his humor. Given his professional break in 1961 by Playboy's Hugh Hefner, Gregory quickly became a nationally-known entertainer as well as a prominent civil rights activist and anti-war campaigner.

Gregory brought a performer's flair to his political engagement, running, for example, in 1967 against Richard Daley for Mayor of Chicago (and receiving 22,000 write-in votes). Gregory reprised his Chicago campaign performance by entering the Presidential race in early 1968, first with Dr. Benjamin Spock as his running mate and then later, in September, paired with Mark Lane, a former New York State Assemblyman and critic of the Warren Report. In a Monty Pythonesque touch, Gregory and Lane formed the ticket of the tiny Freedom and Peace Party, which in turn had broken off from the Peace and Freedom Party, whose Presidential candidate that season was the Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver. The sectarian split reflected concerns about Cleaver's lack of appeal beyond Panther circles and even the possibility that his young age would invalidate his candidacy (Cleaver was not yet thirty-five at the time). Both wings of the party stood to the left of the regular Democratic Party on the issues of civil rights and the war in Vietnam, and expressed the distaste many activists felt for the Democrats' treatment of Eugene McCarthy during the Chicago convention.

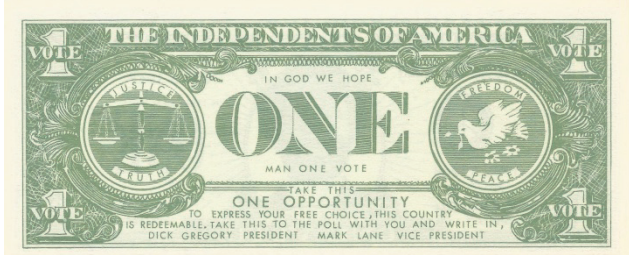


Gregory-Lane Campaign Poster

Dick Gregory put real energy into his campaign, and even managed to publish a paperback manifesto of his candidacy, *Write Me In!*, which if anything confirmed that Gregory certainly was not lacking in ideas about how to make America a better place (one proposal of unimpeachable merit was to place pay toilets in federal buildings and use the proceeds to finance foreign aid). Apart from an intelligent analysis of the differences between Southern and Northern racism (and Gregory's evident penchant for conspiracy theories), what emerges from the idiosyncratic details is a core conviction, common among idealistic reformers, that if only responsibility for solving America's problems could be taken away from the corrupt politicians and placed into the

hands of well-meaning experts, then all would be well.

The episode of Gregory's campaign that garnered his candidacy a national, albeit brief, surge of publicity was the controversy over its use of the "One Vote" note (pictured below). Patterned rather closely in its scrollwork and arrangement after a genuine U.S. dollar, Gregory's version replaces George Washington with a photographic portrait of Gregory, a peace sign on the left and the denomination "One Vote" on the right. Signed by Gregory and Lane, the note promises that it "cannot be bought sold or traded." On the reverse, the "one vote" denominational motif is multiplied on each corner and in the center, while the Great Seal is replaced by the scales of justice on the left and a peace dove on the right. The text exhorts its bearer to "take this one opportunity...to the poll with you and write in Dick Gregory President and Mark Lane Vice President." At least two varieties of the note exist: one with the words "vote for", the other with the words "write in", above Gregory's signature.



In a later memoir, Gregory recounted how he came upon the idea of putting his face on a dollar bill. On a trip to Mississippi, Gregory noticed how a car bearing Illinois plates with the slogan "Land of Lincoln" got a brick through its window by angry locals, yet "they couldn't get rid of the five dollar bill that has his name and face on it. That's when I realized the power of money." He further explained: "I wanted some campaign literature that if you threw it down, somebody would pick it up." One unsourced account describes how Gregory's bills were first

issued in Chicago by Operation Breadbasket; an early newspaper account of Gregory's bills (with picture) appeared on October First in the black publication, the *Chicago Defender*, under the headline "Freedom Dollar". The currency only gained national notoriety later that month, when newspapers across the country reported that the Secret Service had seized quantities of Gregory's campaign money and printing equipment in raids conducted in New York City, Nashville, and Cincinnati. At that point, over a million examples of the note had been produced, and were being distributed liberally at Gregory's campaign events.

J. Baxter Bryant, head of the Tennessee Human Relations Council and a Gregory campaign official in Nashville, where some 30,000 samples were confiscated, alleged that "racists" had instigated the government actions, and the campaign vowed to file suit in federal court in Nashville to block the election because of the suppression of Gregory's campaign literature. The publicity was a godsend to the Freedom and Peace Party ticket, and the Secret Service's officious public statements represented a straight man's counterpoint to the playfulness of Gregory's reactions. United States District Attorney Gilbert S. Merritt Jr. wrote to Bryant, explaining the reasons for the seizure of the notes: "Our investigation indicates that the bills have been passed as dollar bills in numerous instances in other parts of the country, both in money-changing machines and to merchants, and business and individuals have been defrauded in the process." In Norfolk, VA, where Gregory had handed out his money the previous week at an appearance, Lawrence M. Farmer, Special Agent in charge there, advised that "people having these bills should surrender them to the United States Secret Service", adding helpfully: "Persons won't be prosecuted as long as they surrender the bills."

While the government was notorious for its low tolerance of almost any depiction of United States currency, the assertion that Dick Gregory's campaign note had defrauded anybody was risible, and Gregory made the most of it. First of all, he noted, it was his picture on the note, and not George Washington's; "anyone knows that a machine made by a white man can tell the difference between a George Washington and a Dick Gregory Dollar"; moreover, he contended, the scales of justice on its reverse actually referenced Libra, Gregory's astrological sign. In a play on the accusation that the campaign handbill worked in change machines, Gregory countered "it had been seized because it is definitely dangerous to the major political machines." Far from the notes cheating anybody, Gregory said "I expect each one of them to be negotiated as a vote on Election Day."

If Gregory's note had fooled automatic change machines, this would not have spoken well for the reliability of those devices. In at least one instance, Elaine Euritt, a laundromat operator in Des Moines, did claim to have found two bills successfully used in the change machines at her establishment. Elsewhere in Des Moines, some 900 of the bills were distributed during a mock election at Hoover High School. The police chief of Memphis, Henry Lux, himself reported using one in a local store (one wonders if the clerk, knowing well who Lux was, would have dared refuse it). The question of the note's threat to the money supply reached a bizarre crescendo when Walter Cronkite, the anchor for the CBS Evening News, held up a sample during one of his national broadcasts. With an enlarged copy of the note as a backdrop, Cronkite reported that his sample had been tested in the change machine of CBS's employee canteen—where it didn't work.



Memphis Police Chief Henry Lux performs a visual analysis of the offending note.

Many years later, Gregory maintained that the Secret Service actually returned the confiscated notes to the campaign, illustrating the truth that “until you put a picture of a black person’s face on American money, nothing that has my picture on it is a facsimile of American money.” Whether or not this was indeed the case, the controversy over Dick Gregory’s “One Vote” note gave a final fillip to his campaign. The Freedom and Peace ticket managed 47,138 write-in votes on Election Day (well over half of which came from New York state alone), over 10,000 votes more than Cleaver’s candidacy. In Pennsylvania, at least, Gregory appeared on the ballot with Dr. Spock, not Mark Lane. In any event, these numbers were of course drops in the bucket compared to the turnout for the major parties, and the 1968 campaign marked only the beginning of Gregory’s long and sometimes controversial career as a celebrity activist and public figure.

References

- Chicago Defender*, October 1, 1968, p. 1; October 24, 1968, p. 1.
Cedar Rapids [Iowa] Gazette, October 26, 1968, p. 11.
Danville [Virginia] Register, October 24, 1968, p. 21.
Des Moines Register, November 2, 1968, p. 2.
 Gregory, Dick, with James R. McGraw, *Write me in!* (Bantam Books 1968).
 Gregory, Dick, with Sheila P. Moses, *Callus on My Soul: A Memoir* (Kensington 2003), pp. 124-125.
Jet, November 7, 1968, p. 42.
Kane [Pennsylvania] Republican, October 24, 1968, p. 7.
Kingsport [Tennessee] Times, October 24, 1968, p. 8A.
 Lane, Mark, *Citizen Lane: Defending our Rights in the Courts, the Capitol, and the Streets* (Chicago Review Press 2012), p. 183.
Los Angeles Times, October 25, 1968, p. 10.
Lubbock [Texas] Avalanche-Journal, October 24, 1968, p. 56.
New York Times, October 24, 1968, p. 42.
Norfolk [Virginia] Journal and Guide, October 24, 1968, p. B1.
 Tafoya, Eddie, *Icons of African American Comedy* (Greenwood Press 2011), p. 64.
 United States, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Series Y 79-83.
Washington Post, October 24, 1968, p. A2
Wilmington [Ohio] News-Journal, October 25, 1968, p. 2