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George McGovern, the 1972 Democratic presidential candidate who was defeated in 1980 for re-election as a senator from South Dakota, has a new job. On Monday, McGovern, who has spent the last year on the lecture circuit, began teaching a course on religion and politics in America at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

He attributed his 1980 defeat to a political "massacre" organized by the religious right and conservative groups who targeted certain liberals for defeat.

He and such fellow liberals as Birch Bayh of Indiana and Frank Church of Idaho were caught off guard in the "massacre," McGovern said.

But of the "new right," McGovern said, "I think they crested in 1980. I don't think they'll be as effective in 1982. The right wing doesn't have the juicy liberal targets to shoot at in 1982.

In his 25 years in publishing, Byron Dobell has been senior editor of Life, editor in chief of Bookworld, managing editor of New York, assistant director of planning for Time-Life Books and, in three separate tours, managing editor, executive editor and editor in chief of Esquire.

Now at the age of 54, Dobell is taking on a new challenge — editor of American Heritage, the bimonthly devoted to American history. On Feb. 1, he will replace Geoffrey C. Ward, who has been editor since 1977 and is leaving to write books.

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At his Esquire office, Dobell said: “American Heritage is a kind of an institution, and I hope to give it what institutions need from time to time — a great burst of energy. It’s a terrific magazine and I want to renew and revitalize it.”

He told of tentative plans to increase the magazine’s frequency, to accept ads for the first time in its history, to extend the recent push to newsstand sales and to put more emphasis on 20th-century history.

“The 20th century is beginning to wind down,” he said, “and people want to know how we got where we are.”

A follow-up: After four years of legal wrangling, Frania Ty Lee can now collect the $9.2 million she won in a case in which she maintained she was once secretly married to the billionaire H.L. Hunt.

A federal judge ordered Wednesday that the money be placed in a bank in Shreveport, La., and Mrs. Lee was expected to have it transferred to her account in Georgia.

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Appeals went as far as the United States Supreme Court, on Dec. 18, when the Hunt estate was ordered to pay off Mrs. Lee, who lives in Atlanta.

A technicality held up the payment until a final order was issued Monday.

Mrs. Lee, who said she had married the Texas oilman in 1925, will have to turn over 10 percent of the $9.2 million to the Baton Rouge law firm that represented her and another $49,000 to an Atlanta attorney who was called in for help.

He has been writing Hollywood scripts with no more than prospectively successful, and he has a television project in the works that he cannot talk about yet. So what is a fellow to do?

If he is Mort Sahl, he digs out a V-neck sweater, tucks a newspaper under his arm and steps on stage to do what he has been doing off and on for more than three decades - skewering the mighty with mordant wit.

This time, the stage is at Marty's in Manhattan, where the humorist is appearing through Feb. 6. The formula is the same one Sahl devised for San Francisco's hungry i in 1950; only the names in the news have changed.

President Reagan, he suggests, won only because of the public's disenchantment with Jimmy Carter.

"If Reagan had run unopposed," he said, "he would have been defeated."

Sahl, who is not above recycling Cold War material ("Every time the Russians would throw an American in jail, Nixon would retaliate by throwing an American in jail") gives equal time to liberals, a group, he suggests, who help assure repeated defeats by their rallying cry - "We're going to lose."