

David S. Broder

Dodging Campaign Reform

PN 3/13/74
Ten months after he pledged to work toward "a new set of standards, new rules and procedures to insure that future elections will be as nearly free of abuses as they can be made," President Nixon last week finally submitted substantive recommendations on election finance reform.

Like almost every other response he has made to the Watergate catastrophe, this one was tardy, inadequate and largely irrelevant to the real work of cleaning up the mess.

Bryce Harlow, the President's political counselor, assured reporters that the staff and the President himself had been working hard for months on these recommendations.

Harlow is an honorable man, and when he says Mr. Nixon was determined to produce something useful, and not more "grandstanding" in a field of legislation that suffers from an excess of "showboating," he must be taken at his word.

But the measure of the meagerness of the presidential contribution was the fact that two Republican congressional leaders who preceded Harlow to the White House microphone had hardly a word to say on behalf of the Nixon recommendations.

As it happens, Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott (R-Pa.) and House Republican Conference Chairman John B. Anderson (R-Ill.) are principal co-sponsors of the major bipartisan campaign reform bills before the Senate and House.

What Mr. Nixon did, essentially, was to endorse some of the safe "reforms" almost everyone espouses, propose some new ones that have almost no chance of enactment, and lay the groundwork for vetoing any bill that provides for public financing of federal campaigns.

As noted previously in this space, the pending public finance proposals deserve and need much more searching scrutiny—for their effects on the whole political system—than Congress has yet given them.

But instead of providing that kind of analysis from his own perspective as a candidate for every federal office, Mr. Nixon chose to employ one of the shabbiest and least persuasive of all

arguments against the principle of tax-supported campaigns.

He asserted that public financing is, in effect, "taxation without representation," and quoted Thomas Jefferson as saying that "to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical."

But Jefferson's argument was directed against state-supported religion. Taxes are used all the time to propagate political opinions with which individual taxpayers disagree. The Congressional Record is published at public expense.

Instead of dragging this red herring into the debate, Mr. Nixon might have used this long-delayed presidential message and the radio broadcast he made on the subject to help inform public opinion on the important choices Congress faces in attempting to deal with the real abuses in campaign finance.

He not only missed the opportunity, he distorted the debate—as he has done so often by employing cheap rhetoric on Watergate issues instead of dealing with the serious substance of the question.

To cite but one of many possible examples, the private organizations that raise funds for federal candidates have been seeking to focus some intelligent public debate on a provision of the Senate Rules Committee bill which they feel would put them out of business.

These organizations—which range the political spectrum from the American Conservative Union to the liberal National Committee for an Effective Congress and include many of the leading "cause" groups in the country—raise contributions in small amounts from their mailing lists and send money, in aggregates, to candidates they support.

So what is Mr. Nixon's response to this problem? Instead of recognizing this as a restriction on the kind of voluntary, pluralistic politics he says he admires, he goes the Senate bill one better by proposing that every such contribution to a private political fund be identified as to its ultimate recipient.

The obvious targets of this incredible proposal are labor's political funds, particularly those administered by the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education. If Mr. Nixon had his way, the steel-workers in Baltimore who gave a buck to COPE this month would have to specify now whether he wanted it used next October to help Sen. Charles McC Mathias (R-Md.) or Rep. Paul Sarbanes (D-Md.). That is absurd, purposely unworkable.

Despite Harlow's assurances, it is hard not to think that the Nixon campaign reform proposals are simply a mischief-making device for obstructing legislation or justifying a veto.

They help those interested in legislation just about as much as his promises of cooperation help those trying to bring to a conclusion the interminable Watergate investigations.

They are a sham.