

Stepping Around the Milk Bucket

Post 6/10/74

THE LAVISH CAMPAIGN contributions by various milk lobbies do indeed create a high degree of embarrassment for some congressmen. It is quite true that these lobbies' contributions to Mr. Nixon's re-election campaign have raised, by their scale and timing, a suspicion that they were bribes to purchase a higher milk support price. But it is equally true that the same lobbies contributed, in varying amounts, to the re-election campaigns of many eminent congressmen. They include members of the House Judiciary Committee, that now must decide whether to recommend the impeachment of Mr. Nixon.

The question can be put bluntly: If these congressmen took campaign money from the Associated Milk Producers, Inc., how can they sit in judgment on charges that the President committed a crime by taking money from the same source? There are sound answers to that question. But, it increasingly appears, a good many congressmen would just as soon step gingerly around the whole subject, on grounds that it is all too complicated and difficult for the simple citizen to understand. Evading the milk issue would be a profound mistake. It may very well turn out that the simple common citizen understands the whole thing better than congressmen think. It may turn out that the simple common citizen wants to see presidential impeachment lead to a broad reform of American political practices.

Mr. Nixon raised long ago the point that he got only a fraction of the campaign contributions spread around, before the 1972 elections, by AMPI and the two other big dairy organizations, Mid-America Dairies, Inc., and Dairymen, Inc. In its white paper last January, the White House said: "A great number of the Congressional and Senatorial candidates to whom dairy funds were given were also leaders in the effort to legislate a mandatory increase in March of 1971." The proper response is that it is perfectly legal for a politician to accept contributions from a dairy organization, and it is also legal for him to represent dairymen's interests in Congress. But it is illegal for a politician to take a contribution with the understanding that any official act is contingent upon it. That is bribery.

Where the government sees evidence that a congressman may have taken a bribe, it has the duty to prosecute. It has done so repeatedly over the past decade. Where Congress has evidence that a President may have taken a bribe, it has the duty to pursue the matter through the constitutional process of impeachment. It hardly constitutes moral leadership for Mr. Nixon to hint that, whatever he may have done, others have done the same. If a person is arrested for burglary, the jury is not likely to acquit him on the argument that bur-

glary is, after all, a very common crime and, at least among burglars, a traditional and accepted way of raising funds. Why should congressmen not enforce the law as stringently in regard to bribery as to burglary? Between the two, it is bribery that inflicts by far the wider harm on the public interest.

Sen. Sam Ervin's Select Committee devoted a great deal of attention to the Watergate burglary and the subsequent attempts at the White House to conceal it. The committee also looked into illegal campaign practices. But the hearings trailed off with hardly a glance at campaign financing. The committee's staff has now written a highly detailed report of the milk case, amounting to a powerful indictment of the President. It remains to be seen what the committee will do with that report. As for the House Judiciary Committee, pursuing behind closed doors its laborious review of the evidence bearing on impeachment, it seemed to outsiders to have moved through the milk affair with remarkable speed.

The evidence of bribery in the milk case, as we have noted before, would be quite strong enough to justify conventional criminal prosecution if it involved anyone but Mr. Nixon and his close associates. On March 23, 1971, knowing that AMPI had pledged \$2 million to his re-election campaign, Mr. Nixon met with a group of dairy representatives. That afternoon, he overrode a previous decision by his Secretary of Agriculture to raise the support price. But there was no public announcement. Instead, the White House contacted a representative of AMPI and told him to reaffirm the pledge. After a series of frantic meetings AMPI and other lobbyists not only reaffirmed the pledge but came up with an immediate contribution of \$25,000. It was only after this new pledge and the contribution that the Agriculture Department announced the new support price. That is a sequence of events that urgently requires examination in any process of impeachment.

The issue of impeachment far transcends the personal fate of Mr. Nixon. It is the integrity of the American political system. It is our ability, as a democracy, to set the moral standards by which we will be led and by which we will grant the authority of office to our successive Presidents. If there should be any congressman who thinks that the purpose of impeachment is limited to attacking and removing Mr. Nixon, he missed the real meaning of the process now under way. Its proper purpose is to clarify the ethical code of our self-government and to demonstrate that the country is prepared to enforce that code. Congressmen do not contribute to that high purpose when they attempt to avoid the painful but central issue of corrupt and illegal campaign contributions.