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Watergate And the GOP In Maryland

A month ago, the Maryland Republican Party was one to envy. Its membership was illustrious: a vice president, a cabinet officer, two senators, half the congressional delegation and three county executives. It had money in the bank, a potentially bright future and—unlike the Democratic Party—a record unsmirched by recent scandal.

Watergate has changed much of that. While no member of the Maryland GOP has been tied directly to the Watergate affair, the fallout of Watergate has tainted the party of Agnew, Morton, Mathias and Beall. One congressman is dead, an apparent suicide following reports that he had received an undisclosed \$25,000 from the President's campaign organization. Another key party member—a blue chip Baltimore banker—has been indicted for his part in a scheme to use \$50,000 in Nixon campaign funds to boost the gate at a testimonial gala for Vice President Agnew. More indictments are threatened and before the Anne Arundel County grand jury, the Gen-

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eral Accounting Office and the press are finished with their investigations it is likely that some of what used to be called "the best people" are going to have to account for the way they handled their half of the two-party system.

All this, to say the least, is ironic. It is the Democratic Party, after all, which is the Mother Scandal in Maryland having provided in the last 10 years alone a Speaker of the House, a congressman and a senator who have been found guilty of criminal acts. Moreover, it is the Democratic Party, with its soul in the tawdry big-city politics of Baltimore, which has allegedly financed more than one campaign from a war chest with a false bottom.

Until recently this is the way the Republicans would have had the voters see it—a blend of fact and maybe some fancy which is usually followed with the whispered suggestion that it was only a matter of time until the Grand

Old Party got the goods on Marvin Mandel himself and toppled him, his regime and the whole allegedly rotten mess in Annapolis with one exquisite scandal.

But there has been no scandal in Annapolis, not even an embarrassment. Not a single hand has been found in

the till, not a single penny has been declared missing and not one dollar of the millions solicited by Mandel has triggered a grand jury investigation.

Instead, Marvin Mandel, the big-city politico, the creature of the organization, the former House Speaker with a fat bankroll of \$100 bills and a compromise for every occasion, has been touring the state yelling, "Watergate, Watergate." He has vetoed a wiretap bill, supported a disclosure bill, stared down a U.S. Attorney General over the alleged illegal use of the organized crime strike force and generally acted like a Reform Democrat out to topple the organization with Diogenes' lamp and William Booth's tambourine.

What, in Heaven's name, is going on?

Well, Watergate is going on. No longer do the Democrats have a monopoly on shady politics. No longer can the Republicans point a morally indignant finger at Annapolis and suggest that a politics of a less than wholesome variety is being practiced there. State GOP chairman Alexander Lankler even got rebuffed by Mandel when he suggested a bi-partisan gubernatorial commission to study campaign financing. Mandel said he didn't need any advice from Lankler on that score, thank you, smiling at the notion that a man who admitted his part in the scheme to exaggerate the proceeds from the Agnew gala should have the *chutzpa* to make such a suggestion.

More serious, perhaps, is the effect Watergate has had on the Republican Party itself. Maryland conservatives—some indignant, some not—have seized on the issue in the hopes of purging the party's moderate leadership. The conservative party chairman of Baltimore County, for instance, says he wants no part of anyone associated with the Maryland Committee for the Re-Election of the President. Like lepers, he says, they should be isolated and kept under observation.

The Maryland GOP, woefully outnumbered by Democrats, can hardly afford an intra-party fight, a fact Republican National Chairman George Bush mentioned when he addressed the State Central Committee the other night. Yet Bush was hardly out of the Lord Baltimore Hotel before the cry went up for Lankler's head and the party promptly split down the middle. The agenda for the night had called for a discussion of the 1974 campaign.

That campaign and the ongoing work of the party will require volunteers—individuals to raise funds, hold teas and, yes, sign their names to campaign reports. If, as some party leaders predict, the legacy of Watergate is to make the noble volunteer a political shut-in, then, ironically, the men in surgical gloves will have sabotaged more than one campaign.