

N 47 5/19/73

One Scandal Always

By C. L. Sulzberger

PARIS—American politics, on the whole shown to be considerably less dirty over the years than those of France, Italy or Spain (to name but a few examples), have managed to acquire a particularly sordid reputation now. Perhaps our original Puritan heritage inspires a special orgy of shame over Watergate.

Ambrose Bierce, the brilliant cynic, had three definitions for "politics" in his "Devil's Dictionary." These were: "A means of livelihood affected by the more degraded portion of our criminal classes." And: "A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles." And: "The conduct of public affairs for private advantage."

It is to this third conception that this column addresses itself. The search for private advantage under the guise of public affairs is in no sense the real kernel of the current American scandal. Indeed, as an international governing device, it long antedates Watergate.

The sale of papal "dispensations" or of "indulgences" commuting temporal penalties for sin was a considerable source of church income in the latter Middle Ages and contributed appreciably to the Reformation. Yet religion was not even subsequently purified by its own contortions. The famous Talleyrand, with little qualification and less inclination, when aged 25, was named a vicar-general by his uncle.

Moreover, on the lay side, it was long common practice to buy high military rank for children. In most countries, however, political, military and religious administrations have done away with such immoral practices. Even the conduct of public affairs for private advantage has been rare in national Administrations even if sometimes widespread at lower levels.

Nevertheless, there is one big exception true for the national Government and under Presidents of either party. This big exception has been the sale—albeit sale by implication—of diplomatic posts abroad. I have written of this lamentable practice many times. Now, considering the reformatory zeal gathering in America, and because of a rumored spate of further such appointments, it seems appropriate to raise the matter once again.

While career diplomats who have been trained by a lifetime of study and experience should certainly be logically preferred for almost any embassy overseas, it is by no means an ironclad law or necessarily logical to exclude nonprofessionals from such positions.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The United States began with no trained diplomatic corps but relied in its early days upon such dazzling amateurs as Benjamin Franklin and John Jay. Long before any permanent Foreign Service was created, worthy men had been dispatched to distant lands to represent Washington. These even included, in subsidiary positions, such distinguished writers as Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

And the system produced some remarkable envoys. Indeed, in contemporary times, we have seen outstanding citizens like David Bruce, Averell Harriman and Ellsworth Bunker volunteering their services and proving themselves the peers of any professionals ever given responsibility by their own or other countries.

But in modern times the custom has become prevalent of awarding embassies to wealthy men whose only apparent merit was the size of their donations to the campaign chests of victorious Presidents. Even some of these have shown talent and industry—although it is to be questioned whether they manifested more of it than did those professional Foreign Service officers elbowed aside in their favor.

It is a curious phenomenon that the U.S.A. almost alone among modern nations practices this formula. Turkey and some Latin-American countries sometimes dispatch abroad on official missions political opponents they wish out of the way. Certain lands try to honor exceptionally distinguished writers and intellectuals by making them envoys.

But only Washington makes a regular habit of paying off political contributors accordingly, even when they have demonstrably little talent, as was the case with that famous Ambassador to Ceylon who thought NATO was a country but didn't know where it was.

Admittedly, Congressional stinginess—typified by the parsimonious view of diplomacy long shown by Representative John Rooney—makes it harder and harder for the State Department to acquire sufficient funds to support its overseas posts. And Congress is not overconcerned because foreigners don't vote.

Nevertheless, the fundamental issue should be faced. Now in the shadow of today's dreadful scandal, it is appropriate to reconsider the issue that has so long been posed. Is it justifiable to conduct the public affairs of the nation, diplomatically speaking, for the private advantage of a party?