

# Election Finance Reform: Idea Whose Time Came

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WASHINGTON, Aug. —One of the mysteries about the cyclical history of reform is: Why now? Why, for example, when a number of cogent ideas on reforming the American electoral system have been kicking around—and flopping regularly—for three-quarters of a century should anyone seriously believe they are about to have a great revival? The answer, of course, is Watergate. But only indirectly.

## News Analysis

Few, if any, of the campaign finance reforms that passed the Senate on Monday, for example, would have had a direct bearing or a deterring effect on the Watergate-style "horrors" that have come to light so far, assuming the Senate version of a strong new campaign spending bill had become law long ago.

Because what the Senate, at least, has now come to grips with is money—not tape recordings, telephone bugs, enemy lists, burglars' tools or political espionage, but money.

If money is the root of all Watergate evil, then there may indeed be some truth in claims asserted here that this week's Senate-passed campaign spending reforms were Watergate's children and will "insure that Watergate can never happen again."

### 'It is an Epitaph'

But what is probably nearer the truth about the reform ethos here so far is that it is designed less to cure Watergate abuses than to cleanse a cumulative sense of profound shame among politicians.

The money abuses of the 1972 election year, with its cash-filled briefcases, illegal corporate contributions and secret million-dollar donors, seems finally to have struck in the hearts of Congressmen the fear that they, among Government officials generally, are fairly or unfairly becoming objects of contempt.

"When we say that the American political system is the best money can buy," Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., Democrat of Delaware, observed bitterly on the Senate floor this week, "it is not a compliment, it is an epitaph."

Asked whether the outspoken 30-year-old freshman Senator had meant to say "epitaph" rather than "epitaph," a Biden aide said: "Oh, no, not at all. He meant the thing you write as the last words — you know, on a tombstone."

The rectitude of a sinner who has peered into the abyss can be a fearsome thing. And in one giant step the Senate on

Monday, after years of inaction on various abuses, took a vow of campaign probity — and, relatively speaking, of poverty — that could do more to restore public confidence in Government than sending 100 Watergate offenders to jail. If it is not too late.

For the first time in American political history, the Senate not only set an effective limit on a single contributor's ability to obtain a financial lien on a candidate, but also set the limit of such donations at \$6,000, in the low range of the customary special-interest contribution.

### Some Donors Penalized

Those scores of large contributors whose donations have been without strings, given in an effort to make the political system work or in an honest belief in "the better man," would simply have to pay a penalty in lost freedom of expression and this worries some constitutionalists. But not much.

The \$6,000-a donor ceiling must be seen against the ability of hundreds of wealthy one-issue ideologues and pressure groups to give a candidate who they think will deal with them \$10,000, \$20,000, even \$100,000. One man, W. Clement Stone of Chicago, gave President Nixon \$2-million in 1972, but disclaimed any desire for special favors.

The new limit — enforceable through \$25,000 fine and/or five years in prison for violators — means that candidates will have to forsake special interests and instead work to get rank-and-file dollars, a change akin to the one-man one-vote reforms of reapportionment in the last decade.

One-man, one-dollar is even an official policy now. Taxpayers now have the option, by

## Bill Asks Stiff Penalty For Grand Jury Leaks

WASHINGTON, Aug. 3 (AP)—Citing the Watergate case, Senator John G. Tower, Republican of Texas, introduced a bill today that would authorize criminal charges against anyone who disclosed information about grand jury proceedings.

Present Federal law allows only contempt-of-court punishment for unauthorized disclosure.

The bill would treat such disclosures as a felony, punishable by up to two years in prison and a \$5,000 fine.

It is "solely intended to stop the unauthorized leaks of grand jury deliberations that have had the effect at times of making the whole proceeding look as if it was a farce," the Senator said.

merely checking a box for "Democratic," "Republican" or "non-partisan" on their income tax returns, of having the United States Treasury pay \$1 — not with the taxpayer's personal money, either — to the indicated Presidential nominees in 1976. But there remain loopholes.

### Sidestep \$6,000 Limit

As the reform bill came to the Senate floor for debate, a determined millionaire or a lobbying group—organized labor's Committee on Political Education or the medical profession's American Medical Political Action Committee, to mention only two of the well-financed political action funds — could have sidestepped the \$6,000 limit on donations to one candidate.

The individual-contributor loophole was reduced, not closed, by prohibiting any person from making total campaign contributions to all candidates and causes in a given election year of more than \$25,000. But the special interest committees with state-by-state units — COPE and AMPAC, for example — could still give \$6,000 to candidates of their choice from each of 50 "separate" state committees, or \$300,000.

Only about 3 per cent of all Americans contribute to political candidates, and those who do usually give \$1 or \$5, \$10 or \$25, \$50 to \$100 at most. So the \$6,000 and \$25,000 donor limits undoubtedly will seem meaningless to most people.

But not so. Because to meet the newly lowered spending limits in the Senate bill—\$34.8-million for the Presidency; \$3.1-million for a Senate race in New York, and \$300,000 for the House of Representatives — candidates cut off from the many \$50,000 and \$100,000 contributors would have to appeal to small donors as never before, thus broadening the base of citizen political participation while freeing themselves from obligations to special interests.

More people would have to be asked to give, and a candidate's success in broadening his fund appeal would make him less parochial, less vulnerable to representatives of such special interests.

### Financial Disclosure Voted

In a mood that seemed one of slightly petulant purity, the Senators even agreed, as an amendment, to accept a long-dormant financial disclosure proposal. It would require them, and all Federal candidates, as well as Presidents, judges and top-salaried bureaucrats, to make public their personal assets, stocks, bonds, property,

and profit-making transactions of all kinds. Campaign fund limits and disclosures were not enough; they must turn their

The personal wealth disclosure, innocuous enough, had failed countless times. But as Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, said, in sensing his moment and insisting on it, "The voters deserve to know when a man [in Congress] votes, whether he is voting the public interest or his own pocketbook." Congressmen with oil stock, for example, who vote for legislation benefiting the oil industry, might have to think twice about appearances.

The Senate's reform package was thus plainly more than a Watergate reaction. But it was nonetheless an appropriate and appropriately timed remedy for the public's dissatisfaction with politicians.

Whether the House will agree to such a remedy when the same issues of campaign finance reform and honesty and integrity come up there in September remains an open question. The Senate bill may seem more unpalatable in the House than the problems with which it deals.