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Secrecy, Political Intelligence and a Free People

"In a word, the voters are turned off."

That is the sum and substance of a dispatch in this newspaper today from Haynes Johnson—the first of a series of reports by Washington Post correspondents who have been out taking a hard, close look at the state of mind of the American electorate. It isn't so much apathy, says Mr. Johnson, as a certain negativism, a "distrust and lack of faith in politicians and the government itself." As a result, the people have grown disenchanted, and even cynical in a general way, about everything and everybody in politics, without quite knowing who to blame.

If this is truly the frame of mind in which voters will be going to the polls in November, it is bad news for our democracy, for cynicism and a general sense of alienation are the deadly enemies of an actively self-governing people. Yet that is apparently the prospect, and while the root-cause of it is doubtless a compound of many things, we would venture to say that not the least of the reasons why "the voters are turned off" is not just that they don't trust what the government and the politicians are telling them; rather it is that people in positions of power are engaging in a massive cover-up of essential information about the conduct of public business—whether it has to do with the government's operations or the conduct of a Presidential campaign—which, if better known, might well turn a lot of voters on.

The evidence of this concealment is everywhere, in Congress and in the courts, as well as in the Executive Branch. But nowhere is it more compelling than in the sordid history of the Watergate/Republican campaign financing/political espionage business; nothing in recent political history has given voters more reason to believe that an all out effort is being made to keep from them information which is vital to making an informed and critical judgment on Nov. 7. Every effort has been made to hide the full range of facts in these matters from the public. John Mitchell reportedly conducted an investigation into some of these matters and then resigned from the chairmanship of the Nixon campaign committee and, except for

some crude and surly utterances the other night, has kept his silence since. The documentation of his investigation has never been made public. Maurice Stans, the financial chief of the President's re-election committee, never made good on his promise to tell what he knows. The President's White House counsel conducted an investigation which apparently satisfied the President, but his documentation was never made public, and John Ehrlichman, another top presidential advisor, has shown that this investigation was constricted and narrow.

The civil suit which the Democrats thought they could use to spread the facts on the public record has been sidetracked until after the election and now it is clear that the criminal action against the men accused of burglarizing and tapping Democratic National Headquarters will also be postponed until after the voters have made their choices. The Department of Justice, displaying an uncharacteristic civil libertarian concern for the men indicted in the Watergate affair, is prepared to say nothing and is confident that its investigation was exhaustive, although the Attorney General has demonstrated that his knowledge of the whole matter contains some startling gaps.

So, we now know that two branches of the government—the administration and the courts—are not going to give the people the information before November and it is self-evident that the Republicans aren't either. That leaves the Congress to perform this essential duty, and on Tuesday, the House Banking and Currency Committee will vote to determine whether it will conduct exhaustive hearings into the matter. Nothing underscores the importance of that committee's going ahead with the investigation more than the recent revelations about John Mitchell's connection with the whole affair.

Reliable sources have told this newspaper that while he was Attorney General of the United States, Mr. Mitchell controlled a secret fund—kept in Maurice Stans' safe—which was used to finance intelligence activities designed to gather information about the Democrats. Now, we submit that there are few, if any, areas of information which are more essential to an informed electorate than those bearing on how the President's closest confidant and advisor in the government conducted himself while holding high governmental office. The public, for example, has a right to know how Mr. Mitchell reconciled his public responsibility to exercise prudent restraint in the collection of secret governmental information about private citizens with his alleged activity in controlling the funds to finance political intelligence operations. The public also has a right to know whether Mr. Mitchell and others who held government responsibilities thought that such activity was an appropriate use of the time and trust that the people had a right to assume was devoted to the public's business. The voters also have a right to know how deeply involved White House aides and other Cabinet and former Cabinet officers were and to what extent this kind of activity is representative of the character and tone of the Nixon administration.

Now, it may be argued that the Banking and Currency Committee should not get into this affair because it may jeopardize the rights of the defendants in the criminal burglary prosecution. In our view, that should be no bar to the investigation because the Watergate matter can easily be set aside in the investigation. It is to the campaign financing / political espionage mess what the Dita Beard memo was to the ITT case. It tripped off the affair, but there are many more important questions to be explored. We know that the Democratic Party's headquarters were burglarized. What we have a right to know is how the Republican secret fund was financed—who gave the money and what

they were promised for it—and to what purposes some of that money was put. Against whom were the intelligence operations directed, in what manner and to what purpose? Whose civil liberties were infringed and by what people in responsible authority in the government of the United States?

The answers to all of these questions deal fundamentally with the political process in this country and with vital issues in the current campaign. They would tell much about the character of the men with whom the President surrounds himself and upon which he relies in governing the nation and upon whom he presumably would rely in governing for four more years. They would tell how much those men value or debase, as the case may be, free political and governmental institutions and the electoral process itself.

The judge in the Democrats' civil case said at one stage that information about the case had to be kept from public view because it was political. That's just the point, but the judge stood it on its head. A free people remain free only if they know what their government is doing—or what it is doing to them. They have a right to information that goes to the heart of the political process. A \$10 million secret campaign fund is political. A secret stash of about \$700,000 in hard cash in a campaign safe is political. An attorney general who controls the funds for political espionage is political. Political espionage is political.

And, the election of a President of the United States is political. It is the highest form of political involvement available to the people of this country and they should have all of the relevant facts in making their judgment. Thus, in our view, the House Banking and Currency Committee could perform no higher public service than to spread as much as they can about this whole business before the voters of the United States well before election day.