

The Best And Richest

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, Oct. 9—Suppose President Johnson had made personal loans totaling \$550,000 to an associate in public life, then appointed him chairman of a Federal regulatory agency and written off the loans. When the facts became known, would leading Senators and other weighty voices have said that there was nothing wrong in the arrangement—that it was just a way to keep a man of modest means in the public service?

Or suppose it were discovered that the Transport Workers Union had secretly given half a million dollars to the head of a public agency dealing with transportation. Or that General Motors had. Or an oil company. Would such Republican "liberals" as Jacob Javits and Hugh Scott rush to their defense? Would that crusty conservative, Senator Jess Helms of North Carolina, be the only outspoken critic?

The immunity of Nelson Rockefeller from criticism or even serious scrutiny is an amazing phenomenon. He can do things that would cause an explosion if done by anyone else, and still keep Establishment opinion purring.

There must be an implicit assumption that a man as rich as Mr. Rockefeller, with so impressive a history of family philanthropy, will use his money in the public interest. We take him on trust.

That notion is staggeringly naive. It smacks of the misplaced faith in great men that got us into Vietnam, only in this case it is faith in the Best and the

ABROAD AT HOME

Richest. Nelson Rockefeller has many achievements to his credit. But to take him on trust is dangerous nonsense.

Consider those huge loans to William J. Ronan, chairman of the New York-New Jersey Port Authority. Even if we grit our teeth and assume that the money was meant as mere kindly largesse, it surely had an effect. Do human beings receive \$550,000 without feeling some special relationship to the source? Even generosity creates obligations.

And Mr. Ronan is in a much more powerful position than most Federal agency heads. The Port Authority makes its decisions largely in secret, with little by way of democratic control. It plays a crucial role in the planning and economics of the New York area—specifically including the financial interests of the Rockefellers.

The cover is just starting to come off the Rockefeller largesse and its real effects in the political world. It was only a gesture when he gave a Picasso to a Democrat who helped with necessary votes in the Legislature, but who else can make such gestures? The salaries and loans and investments for his staff are generous, but they also are likely to buy lifelong loyalty in a way others can't afford.

As Governor, Mr. Rockefeller was equally adept in using state money to serve his interests. His great concrete elephant, the Albany Mall, provided jobs for his friends the building workers. It just happened, too, that the Democratic leader of Albany, Dan O'Connell, and Mayor Erastus Corning wrote the insurance on those buildings. When the ill-planned World Trade Center encouraged by David Rockefeller proved a commercial flop, Nelson ordered state agencies in as tenants.

Why does almost no one pay any attention to these things, or ask hard questions? Where are the journalistic bloodhounds who tracked down every scent in the career of Richard Nixon? Where are the voices that thundered at a \$100,000 gift from Howard Hughes or use of campaign money to buy jewelry for Pat Nixon?

Nor is it the use of money alone that seems to escape probing curiosity. Consider the massacre at Attica.

When Edward Kennedy seemed headed toward the Democratic nomination in 1976, various newspapers and magazines began new investigations of his role in the death at Chappaquiddick, and properly so. But there were 39 deaths at Attica, and Mr. Rockefeller's responsibility is right there, waiting to be scrutinized.

He refused to go to the prison when a visit by the Governor might have averted tragedy. And then, when state police killed prisoners and hostages by shooting into the crowd, Mr. Rockefeller had nothing to say—except to try to obscure what had happened. He has not yet acknowledged, much less criticized, the horror.

Of course prison rioters do not evoke much public sympathy. Nor should officials have to sympathize with them. But cold-blooded murder is something else. When a politician by his silence condones official murder, the calculation or cowardice that led him to that position must say something about his values. Is no one interested?

There are many other questions. Does no one care about his far-out advocacy of military power, or his opposition to the nuclear test-ban treaty? Why has he never said a critical word about the war in Vietnam? How many fall-out shelters has he built for himself?

President Ford, asked at his press conference about the gifts, suggested that Mr. Rockefeller had to be considered in a different way from other men because he is so very rich. Are editors and politicians and other shapers of opinion going to accept that dangerous doctrine, and go on suspending their natural disbelief in the case of Nelson Rockefeller?