

Smoothing of America

By ANTHONY LEWIS

When a minor official of the Truman Administration was found to have taken a deep freeze from a favor-seeker, or his wife a fur coat, the country rang with cries of scandal and corruption.

In the Nixon Administration, the Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Justice Department's Criminal Division—the man meant to be one of the country's main watchdogs against corruption and crime—was found to have taken a \$30,000 loan from a figure in a Texas bank scandal. His resignation caused hardly a ripple.

When an over-zealous F.B.I. agent awoke a newspaper reporter at night in the Kennedy Administration's investigation of steel price increases, the incident was treated in some quarters like a storm troopers' raid.

In this Administration a Harvard Law School professor who had looked into the records of three possible nominees to the Supreme Court was questioned three times by F.B.I. agents. How many Americans have even heard of that episode?

Arthur Krock wrote years ago of what he termed "the superior articulation of the left." The phrase expressed the feeling of conservatives at the time that their viewpoint was not getting adequate expression, at least in some parts of the press. Old-fashioned liberals feel a similar frustration now as they see Mr. Nixon sail smoothly on through scandals that would have sunk a Democratic Presidency.

Just imagine a Democratic Justice Department settling a great antitrust suit after the defendant corporation made an enormous contribution to the party convention. Imagine the department being evasive when asked questions, and a principal official giving contradictory explanations, and then the whole affair blowing quietly away . . . but it is unimaginable.

It is not just the case of the International Telephone and Telegraph Corp. It is the change in official milk price policy after political gifts. It is the slippery handling of the Soviet grain deal. It is the burglary and bugging of Democratic headquarters, the payment of those who did that dirty work with Republican campaign money that had been "laundered" through a Mexican bank.

Perhaps the average citizen can focus his outrage more easily on a deep freeze than on some great piece of corporate finagling. Perhaps Americans historically are just more suspicious of politicians than of businessmen and tend to put Democrats in

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the professional politician category.

But there is more than that in the present public indifference to corruption of authority and of democracy. There is something very strange and disturbing in this country: a deadened quality, an end to caring.

People talk about it all over, and leaders write letters. A United States Senator feels even on Capitol Hill an ebbing of energy and concern. A woman who has been abroad for some time writes of the emptiness she finds on her return, the resignation; even the time of student disturbances was better, she says.

In Newsweek, Stewart Alsop writes of the Watergate affair, the bugging and burglary of Democratic headquarters. It reached into the White House, he says; "It was just about the scariest and nastiest thing that has happened in Washington since Joe McCarthy was in his heyday." Yet nobody seems to care; with concern, Mr. Alsop asks why. But he does not look at the deepest reason for cynicism among Americans and despair.

For nearly eight years now, the United States has been massively engaged in a war in Southeast Asia. One President got us into that war without ever telling the public that he was doing so, indeed while giving repeated assurances that the American role was not changing. Another President has assured us again and again that he was ending American involvement, even while intensifying the destruction of Indochina.

No people can survive eight years of such deceit without a mark on their collective psyche. Among millions of Americans, the hope of changing official policy has been crushed. Millions have become desensitized to the fact of death by our instruments in Indochina.

Vietnam may not be the only cause of the contemporary indifference. But when leaders teach that war is peace, it is not surprising to find a large measure of public cynicism generally.

A young man writes of "the contagion of acceptance" and its danger to the United States. "What happens," he asks, "when a people attend only to the surface of their everyday lives and of their country, and ignore the unsettling truths? What happens when a people believe that war is peace? What happens when ordinary people, without evil or hate, come finally to support a policy which annihilates another people at no cost to themselves?"