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Ellsberg and Apathy

by Tom Wicker

..... Mr. Ellsberg - since the wiretapping disclosures caused suspension of his trial last summer - has been traveling the country raising money for his defense fund, sometimes speaking three times in a day. This has given him a close and chilling view of the so-called "apathy of the voters," which he believes is more nearly cynicism and frustration.

Having seen one President violate a pledge not to start a war, and another President fail for four years to honor a pledge to end a war, the voters no longer expect the truth, Mr. Ellsberg believes. They hear George McGovern pledge to end the same war but they do not believe him, either; they read about the Watergate but have little faith in achieving honorable government.

Paradoxically, this works in Mr. Nixon's favor, not against him in the Ellsberg thesis, because it amounts to a loss of confidence in the ability of the people to change things - which is to say a loss of confidence in the processes of democracy. But "the President" represents authority, not democracy; and when the people have lost confidence in democracy, they are likely to turn to authority even if they don't trust that either. Authority at least relieves them of the responsibilities and frustrations of democracy.

Ultimately, of course, authority also relieves them of democracy's rights and privileges.