

Politics at Sea

To the many unanswered questions about Nixon campaign financing left in the wake of the Watergate trial, some new ones have been added by the year-end statement filed with Congress by the Finance Committee to Re-elect the President.

These new questions arise out of a \$100,000 contribution to the President's drive made five days before the election by a political fund of the Seafarers International Union. The first puzzle is why the Nixon committee ignored its legal obligation to make this gift known within 48 hours, instead of waiting nearly three months.

That question takes on more than technical significance in the light of the strange shipwreck of a lawsuit against the S.I.U. and several of its principal officers, which the then Attorney General, John N. Mitchell, had initiated with considerable fanfare in mid-1970. The union chiefs were accused of conspiring to contribute \$750,000 to Democratic and Republican candidates—most of it to Mr. Nixon's unsuccessful 1968 rival, Hubert H. Humphrey—in violation of the law limiting unions to voluntary political donations, as distinct from money out of their union treasuries or other enforced assessments.

Last May, after the charges had languished for nearly two years without active prosecution, a Federal judge granted a defense plea for dismissal on the ground that the Government had neglected to press for a speedy trial. The Justice Department decided not to appeal. It repels as utterly unworthy any suspicion that its decision might have been linked with the active effort the Administration has been making in recent months to weld all the maritime unions into the President's new labor front—an effort reinforced by the hundreds of millions of dollars in Federal subsidies the White House has sponsored for merchant ship construction, maritime wage support and movement of Soviet grain in American vessels.

But, even if all doubts are erased about why the Administration decided to forget and forgive the old case, there seems plenty of basis for a closer look at the new \$100,000 contribution. On Nov. 2, the day the S.I.U. political fund made its gift to Mr. Nixon's campaign, it borrowed \$100,000 from the Chemical Bank in this city. The chairman of the bank's executive committee is a co-chairman of the Nixon finance committee. What cries out for answer in all this is why any loan was necessary if the union was relying on voluntary contributions by its members, as the law requires.

Another mystery in the latest Nixon contribution list surrounds a total of \$35,000 in checks from two Greek shipowners, given in the face of a legal ban on acceptance of campaign money from foreign citizens. One of the donors happened to be the lucky winner of a contract for refueling ships of the United States Sixth Fleet in Greece, which brings up yet another apparent legal conflict—the prohibition on contributions by Government contractors.

A heavy fog seems to be enveloping the political seas. We hope the General Accounting Office and Congress can apply a searchlight powerful enough to pierce it.