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Let's Get All The Facts

By James Reston

The forgotten factor in the Watergate case is that it was only the most dramatic part of a much wider political conspiracy. Everybody seems to be concentrating now on punishing the people who planned, financed or approved the illegal espionage against the Democrats at the Watergate, but very little attention is being paid to the people who organized the disruption and sabotage of the Democrats in the Presidential campaign.

But this is one of those complicated problems where the people who actually broke the law may have done less damage than the people who merely evaded the law. Maybe the espionage by Liddy, Sloan, McCord and the other convicted conspirators — though it was a clear violation of the law — was not as disruptive of the American political process as the money corruption of Maurice Stans and the other Republican fund-raisers; or the calls in the night, the dirty tricks and sabotage against Senators Muskie, McGovern and Humphrey.

So if there is now to be a total disclosure of the corruption in the last Presidential campaign, it will not be good enough to deal with the problem of espionage at the Watergate. It will also have to go beyond the espionage, the burglary and bugging in Washington to the sabotage against the Democratic candidates, and the corruption in how money was raised, concealed and finally diverted to finance not only the espionage but the sabotage.

The fundamental menace to the integrity of the American political process is not these clumsy criminal wire-tappers at the Watergate but the cunning characters around the President, some of them in the White House, who were not breaking the law but, what is worse, breaking the rules of decent political competition — paying youngsters to infiltrate opposition headquarters, corrupting them to pretend they were loyal Muskie or McGovern "volunteers," and getting them to pass back information which could be used against the Democrats they were pretending to support.

As Spiro Agnew once said, democracy is a very fragile process. American Presidential campaigns are run by casual pick-up teams of volunteers, many of them young, working for nothing. Their loyalty is assumed, and therefore they are easy to infiltrate and corrupt.

This is the aspect of the last Presidential campaign that has been overlooked. The people who were involved in the Watergate espionage operations are in terrible trouble, but the people who were involved in the dirty tricks of political sabotage are in the clear, and the irony of it is that the legal sabotage is in many ways more serious than the illegal espionage at the Watergate.

You don't have to break the law like these Watergate burglars to influence Presidential elections. You can merely organize a Department of Dirty Tricks on the side. You can call up voters in New Hampshire and ask them to vote for Ed Muskie because he wants to give blacks a home in the state, or favors busing, or abortion. It is dirty but legal.

You can get your young guys to volunteer in opposition headquarters, and pass on the opposition candidate's schedule and the advance text of his speech, and arrange for people to heckle him, and tell off the television people in advance, so that the confrontation makes good pictures for the network news shows.

The possibilities of this kind of political corruption are endless. Letters were sent out in the Florida primary last year under Ed Muskie's name proposing policies which were highly unpopular to Florida voters. Anonymous printed "flyers" were distributed suggesting all kinds of immoral relationships by the Democratic candidates, and this has apparently been accepted by most people as the normal corruption of American politics. "Everybody does it!"

So now there is a brutal and conspicuous corruption in American politics: a moral apathy and spiritual bewilderment in the land, and the chances are that it won't be removed by indicting the culprits in the Watergate or cleaning out the White House staff.

Henry Kissinger said in New York the other day that after all the tragedies of the Watergate are over, after justice is done, "then we will have to ask ourselves whether we can afford an orgy of recrimination, or whether we should not keep in mind that the United States will be there longer than any particular crisis . . ."

It is a good point. He said that he had no doubt that President Nixon would "insist on the full disclosure of the facts. . . . Then," he added, "we have to ask ourselves whether we can afford an orgy of recrimination. . . . Without prejudging anyone's guilt," he concluded, "one should ask for compassion for these people. . . ."

Well, nobody wants an "orgy of recrimination" or would deny the need for compassion, but the Watergate characters are really not the main thing. The people who raised the money and concealed its source, and the people who organized the sabotage of the American political process are probably more to blame than the burglars at the Watergate. But somehow they are getting away with it,

which is the final irony of the whole tragedy. The Watergate and the courts are not the end of all this, but only the beginning.