

Money Yes, Ethics No

By Tom Wicker

In this space on June 8, a favorable report appeared on a bill to finance Federal elections partially with Federal funds. A modest note from Senator Charles Mathias, Republican of Maryland, to whom authorship of the bill was attributed, states that Senator Adlai Stevenson, Democrat of Illinois, is in fact primarily responsible for developing the measure, of which Mr. Mathias is a co-sponsor.

But who ever wrote the bill, it or something like it is the first and most obvious need arising from the Watergate disclosures. Aside from the deeper causes of the Watergate activities in 1972, and regardless of who was or was not responsible, it seems quite clear that they were possible only because of the huge amounts secretly contributed by businessmen and others apparently fearful that a McGovern victory would have deprived them of needed and none-too-scrupulous friends in the Administration.

In fact, it now begins to appear that there is considerable cause for investigation of Republican fund-raising and spending aside from the bags full of greenbacks that went to Gordon Liddy and the other convicted conspirators. There was, of course, the dirty linen of the so-called "Mexican laundering" operation that Maurice Stans tried so hard to explain to the Ervin committee; and as far back as the year before the campaign, the dairy industry was pouring in hundreds of thousands of dollars while the Nixon Administration was reversing its ground and raising milk support prices.

All the Administration's involvements with I.T.T., including the famous \$400,000 of the Dita Beard memo, have yet to be sorted out, much less "laundered." Mr. Stans and former Attorney General Mitchell are under indictment, and a chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission has resigned, because of the irregularities surrounding \$200,000 in cash delivered in a brown suitcase to the Committee for the Re-Election of the President by Robert L. Vesco, the fugitive financier.

The inadequacies of existing laws are well illustrated by the fact that when C.R.E.P. was found guilty on three counts of mishandling this gift—which even C.R.E.P. ultimately found too smelly to keep—the committee could be fined only \$1,000 on each count. Forfeiting \$3,000 after receiving \$200,000 is a pretty good exchange in anybody's league.

Now the Cox inquiry is ordering a special investigation into whether or not methods of extortion were used by Republican fund-raisers in 1972, with corporations having legal problems with the Government as special targets. This investigation also will

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look into allegations that some big Republican contributors were forced to hand over their gifts in cash, rather than by check—a practice that clearly ought to be illegal, and which ought to have aroused the suspicions of the contributors and of honest members of the campaign committee who might have learned of it.

There seems to be no end to the suggestions of shady practices having to do with 1972 Republican campaign funds. What was John W. Dean 3d doing with \$14,000 in cash from these funds last fall, and by what stretch of ethical practice could he or anyone justify his "borrowing" \$4,000 to pay for his own honeymoon, whether or not he later repaid it?

How could a certified public accountant like Maurice Stans justify even to himself his having had a \$55,000 cash fund in lieu of an official salary from C.R.E.P., or his willingness to turn over more thousands of contributors' cash to Herbert Kalmbach for unstated purposes, and with only Mr. Kalmbach's verbal assurance that the White House had authorized the transaction?

These are not dealings of men much concerned with the kind of niceties for which the law and the Internal Revenue Service hold the rest of us accountable.

Until Mr. Dean's honeymoon financing came to light, it had been generally supposed that whatever else Watergate represented, it was not the ordinary kind of graft scandal so frequent in American politics. But maybe it was after all; it is easy to believe that with so much cash lying around and so little strict accounting in evidence, somebody's pockets besides Gordon Liddy's might have been lined.

The Senate investigators now are turning to the question of the possible misuse of campaign funds in more traditional ways than paying off, and hiring lawyers for, the Watergate burglars; no wonder, when it has come to light also that Fred LaRue, once a special assistant to John Mitchell, rented his apartment to a businessman for whom he interceded with the Department of Agriculture, and that Mr. LaRue and Mr. Mitchell, while the latter was Attorney General, accepted rides on the same businessman's private plane.

All too plainly, and whatever laws may or may not have been broken, the sense of ethics of too many highly placed men in the Nixon Administration was sadly lacking. That fact, combined with too much money too eagerly given by too many compliant people, made Watergate and the cover-up possible, and the need for drastic change in election financing evident.