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Watergate Is Everywhere As Bar Association Meets

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 3—Eight thousand lawyers and judges have come to town for the American Bar Association's annual meeting, but for all the careful lawyer-like planning and agendamaking of the A.B.A. staff, the convention has taken on a thrust of its own. As the A.B.A.'s president, Robert W. Meserve, acknowledged a bit ruefully this afternoon, "overhanging the whole convention is the subject of Watergate."

Lawyers clustering in hallways outside of meeting rooms talk Watergate. Press aides talk Watergate. Television sets show Watergate.

Yesterday, before the A.B.A.'s policy-makers could devise their own stance on the matter, another, related association that is also meeting here helped set the tone for the A.B.A., taking the initiative on the subject of lawyer discipline growing out of the Watergate case.

The group—the National Organization of Bar Counsel, an association of lawyers who handle grievance proceedings for state and local bar associations, most of which are A.B.A. affiliates—created a "special committee to coordinate Watergate lawyer discipline."

The organization's chairman, John Bonomi, of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York grievance committee, said that the special committee would begin at once to gather information from legislative committees and prosecutors about lawyers implicated in Watergate and send the information to discipline groups in the appropriate bar jurisdictions.

In another development, former Supreme Court Justice Arthur J. Goldberg notified the bar association that he would not speak here tomorrow on woman's rights, as he had promised, but on "The Watergate Tapes, a Constitutional Confrontation."

Some of the Watergate events had been scheduled by the association itself among them are talks tomorrow by Samuel Dash, the chief majority counsel of the Senate Watergate committee, and Fred D. Thompson, the committee's chief minority counsel.

Other Watergate events stem

from outside the association's leadership. Delegates from various states, for example, have submitted resolutions for consideration by the A.B.A. calling for the institution of disciplinary proceedings against officials ranging from President Nixon to John W. Dean 3d, the President's former counsel.

The second main focus at the convention — like Watergate, partly planned by the A.B.A. and partly thrust upon it—is the debate over how well the legal procession is doing its job.

To the extent that the thousands of delegates are being forced to think about the subject, the thrust comes from Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate, who is holding a counter-convention here on the legal profession.

The convention, to be held tomorrow and Monday, will feature panels of lawyers, law professors and journalists. Their topics will range from the lawyer as a lobbyist to politics in law enforcement to the cost of lawyers.

But some association officials and dignitaries are bringing the subject up themselves, without waiting for the counter-convention findings.

"We have a lot of faults on our side, we're going to correct them," Chesterfield Smith, who takes office Wednesday as the A.B.A.'s president, told a group of state bar association leaders on the convention's opening day yesterday. "But you too have faults," he added.

In his booming voice and Floridian accent, Mr. Smith told the state groups that they should give more help and ideas and "instructions" to the A.B.A. "You too," he said, "have an obligation to keep your house in order."

A former A.B.A. president pointed out some more problems at a luncheon today, concentrating on the state of the country's overburdened courts and the law.

"The cry of justice has not yet been adequately answered," said Charles S. Rhyne, currently president of the World Peace Through Law Center. "Justice has not been made as effective, as expeditious or as accessible as our people require and demand."

At a news conference this afternoon, Mr. Meserve said that he hoped that the association's policy-making body, the House of Delegates, would not condemn "specific" people "in the absence of judicial proceedings."

He also said that the association could not do much about Watergate except urge local bar associations to discipline any lawyer who is convicted. But he announced that Attorney General Elliot L. Richarkam had agreed to cooperate with a new A.B.A. committee recently set up to devise ways to "depoliticize" law enforcement.