

Another 'Watergate' Election?

CLEVELAND—Watergate spillover threatens to sink Sen. Howard Metzenbaum in Tuesday's Democratic senatorial primary election here, an upset which would show that public contempt for politics-as-usual is not confined to Republicans.

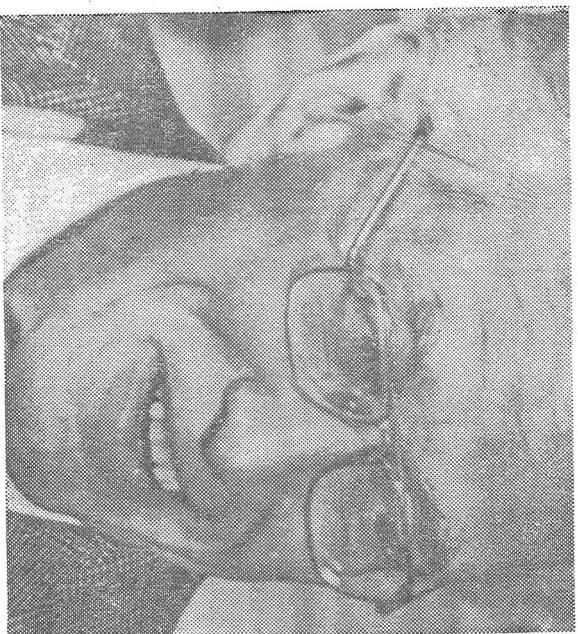
By conventional standards, Metzenbaum should be far ahead of middle-aged astronaut John Glenn, with only routine counting of the ballots standing between him and a full six-year term in the Senate.

Instead, he is running nip-and-tuck with the first man in space, and there are signs that a silent vote is building which falls to show Glenn's real strength. For example, absentee balloting is running ahead of the level in 1970, when Metzenbaum, a rich businessman-lawyer with long and loyal work in the Democratic cause, beat Glenn by 14,000 votes (and went on to lose to Sen. Robert Taft Jr.).

In the intervening years, Metzenbaum has sweetened his close ties to four powerful forces backing him in the May 7 primary election: The state Democratic Party, led by Democratic Gov. John J. Gilligan; the state AFL-CIO, bossed by Frank King, one of labor's shrewdest power brokers; the weighty United Auto Workers Union with 250,000 members in Ohio; and the sizeable black vote, often decisive in Democratic primaries here.

In addition to these formidable assets, Metzenbaum runs as the incumbent senator, thanks to his appointment by Gilligan five months ago to the seat vacated by now-Attorney General William Saxbe. Further, millionaire Metzenbaum has far more to spend than Glenn, particularly on radio and television, and is backed by the muscle of a large Senate staff and senatorial franking privileges (which his staff used illegally in a recent mailing to Ohio editors).

But it is precisely these conventional



John Glenn Jr. and Howard Metzenbaum:

"The incumbent may find that public contempt for politics-as-usual is not confined to Republicans."

assets which pose such a threat to Metzenbaum at a time when Watergate and other political scandals are turning masses of voters against entrenched establishments and away from politics-as-usual.

Glenn has weaved his whole campaign against Metzenbaum's highly exposed income-tax problems. Metzenbaum paid no tax in 1969, writing off a quarter of a million dollars income against his business losses. He is now appealing an adverse Internal Revenue Service ruling in the U.S. Tax Court. Bumper stickers, which Glenn's camp formally disavows, have been appearing with the legend: "Nixon-Metzenbaum Tax Accountants."

Metzenbaum's counterattack last week, when he finally released his tax payments (but not his income-tax files), and when he charged Glenn with also exploiting tax shelters, only partially blunted Glenn's attack on Metzenbaum as a wealthy tax-dodger.

Moreover, Glenn is shrewdly playing on the growing independence of rank-and-file blue-collar workers. He is inviting them to thumb their noses at the labor bosses — playing to anti-leadership sentiment brilliantly exploited by Alabama Gov. George Wallace in the 1972 presidential primary.

The grandees of labor, while turning their headquarters loose to work for Metzenbaum, may be feeling the pressure. King is carefully advising AFL-CIO rank-and-file members to "vote your conscience" despite the formal Metzenbaum endorsement.

Perhaps most important, however, is Glenn's obvious lack of conventional political skills, a blessing in disguise which sets him apart from the image of smooth, political practitioner that is becoming suspect to so many voters. A top organization Democrat inadvertently blurted out this Glenn asset: "The trouble with John," he told us, "is that he is not a politician."

Underlying the campaign is latent anti-Semitism, a factor that some of Metzenbaum's black supporters are trying to turn against Glenn in this city's teeming black wards. When Arnold Pinckney, black president of the school board, introduced the senator to black Baptist preachers here at a breakfast Thursday morning, he quoted a white woman as saying: "I'm for Glenn because Metzenbaum is a Jew who likes colored people."

That could produce a larger Metzenbaum black vote, but it could be a two-edged sword: In blue-collar city families and among small-town rural Ohio Democrats, party leaders claim that anti-Semitism will swell the Glenn vote.

But the real issue even here in a Democratic Midwest primary is Watergate spillover. If Howard Metzenbaum loses, it will have gained its first victim among 1974 Democratic incumbents.