

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

CREEP Funds . . . Gasoline Trouble Ahead?

In its latest outrage, the Committee for the Re-Election of the President (CREEP), which earmarked its remaining millions for possible payment of legal costs of former CREEP officials facing criminal prosecution, continued its arrogant tradition by failing to consult Republican leaders desperate for campaign funds.

The new ruling was approved without even talking to Republican national chairman George Bush, who has long coveted CREEP money for depleted party war chests. Nor was any hint given Sen. William Brock of Tennessee or Rep. Bob Michel of Illinois, chairmen of the Senate and House Republican Campaign Committees. Thus, CREEP continues its brazenly independent escapades long after Watergate.

The \$3.5 million of unspent 1972 Nixon campaign money may now be used to pay huge legal costs of former Attorney General John Mitchell, former Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans, and any other former CREEP official acquitted of Watergate charges or found guilty only of a misdemeanor. Indeed, Stans is one of three trustees controlling the \$3.5 million who have lifted the prohibition against using the money for personal legal defense.

Brock and Michel, hard put to sell tickets to their annual fund-raising dinner for Republican congressional

candidates here March 27, were furious and frustrated.

As chief fund-raiser for House Republican candidates, Michel has been trying—without success, so far—to get CREEP money into the party's campaign coffers for the fall campaign. Earmarking a substantial part of that \$3.5 million for legal fees, he said, "is certain to exacerbate an already bad situation."

Brock and Michel have raised little more than \$400,000 for the March 27 fund-raiser, far short of the \$1 million minimum target. Big contributors are scarcely enthusiastic about buying \$1,000 dinner tickets while tens of thousands of CREEP dollars are earmarked for legal costs growing out of scandals that menace Republican prospects.

Bush, Brock, Michel and even some politically experienced White House aides did not know that Stans and his co-trustees were considering the policy switch. CREEP's campaign practices of 1972, operating in isolation from the Republican Party and under White House protection, thus continue as though there had been no Watergate, no Republican crisis and no outrage by party fatcats who saw their contributions go down the Watergate drain.

Working-level officials at the Federal Energy Office (FEO) do not view shortened gasoline station lines in metropolitan areas as an unmixing blessing

but as a harbinger of possible disaster late in March.

The reason: Government and industry sources believe many service station owners are pumping gasoline too rapidly in confidence that federal energy czar William Simon will bail them out with an emergency allocation from inventories just as he did in February. Indeed, these intentions were voiced openly at a recent meeting in Washington of FEO's gasoline dealers advisory committee.

But, confide some FEO officials, there is not enough gasoline in inventory to meet such an emergency. Hence, they see the danger of a real gasoline shortage crippling many areas, particularly the megalopolis running from Boston to Washington.

Top FEO officials scoff at these fears, contending that heavy pumping is a result of both a larger March allocation and late arriving gasoline from the February emergency allocation. Moreover, they contend there is enough gasoline in inventory to cope with any emergency.

Nevertheless, some critical FEO officials believe Simon's tendency to respond quickly to demands for emergency help—whether from service station owners or truck drivers—has built unreasonably high expectations, and hence the condition for disaster.

Caspar W. Weinberger, Secretary of

Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), has been named to the top secret inner circle planning the 1976 campaign for President by Gov. Ronald Reagan, of California.

A cabinet member breaking Nixon administration neutrality to support one candidate for the Republican presidential nomination is an act of dubious propriety. Nevertheless, Weinberger is expected to attend the extremely private meetings of the Reagan planning group whenever he is home in California. Weinberger, state finance director in the Reagan administration before coming to Washington, was unsuccessfully promoted by the Reagan forces for the governorship this year.

Other than Weinberger, the Reagan planning group—consisting of less than 10 members—is dominated by senior Reagan staffers and longtime political intimates (such as lawyer William French Smith and auto dealer Holmes Tuttle, both of Los Angeles).

A footnote: Conservative political mastermind F. Clifton White, who managed Reagan's late-blooming presidential campaign in 1968, is no favorite of Reagan's staff and has been kept off the planning group. But White maintains contact with Reagan himself and could yet play a key role in his 1976 campaign.