

The State Of Things

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By Val Hymes



Maryland's Mini-Watergate

"Every public official has been affected by Watergate. It's no longer a partisan issue. It's gone above and beyond that. It affects the whole country and all of the people. I think they feel very let down by what's happened. It has eroded the confidence of the people in their officeholders" — Marvin Mandel at the National Governors Conference.

Maryland had enjoyed a gracious but almost anonymous low profile over the years. Its scandals erupted briefly, captured the headlines for a week or two, then vanished.

Now it seems that the water gates have split and the scandal has spilled across the state line, staining first one official then another. Maryland's new pride in boasting a vice president, a national governors chairman, a national party chairman and cabinet member has been replaced by a despair in being engulfed in this phenomenon called Watergate.

None of us likes it. We blame it on the press. Why get so worked up over some good old-fashioned dirty politics?

But how do you ignore the suicide of a congressman who feared the glare of public scrutiny although no evidence has shown he had anything to hide?

How do you ignore a grand jury investigation? The indictment of a banker? A government audit of campaign reports? Can you help wincing when the name of your state party chairman leaps out at you from the Senate committee hearings in a context of political intrigue and unreported funds?

This is not to say we didn't have our moments before Watergate. One of the classic "dirty tricks" of all times — a doctored photograph — ended the distinguished Senate career of Millard Tydings. A similar hoax was used on his son Joseph. And we have had our share of dirty linen paraded in courthouses, such as Tom Johnson, Daniel Brewster, Jesse Baggett and Leonard Blondes. All of these, a partisan may be quick to point out, were Democrats.

And it's not all ancient history,

either. Two members of the Maryland Legislature are currently under indictment, and both of them call the charges politically inspired. A photograph of Mandel with a Baltimore Block figure is circulated to local television stations. He blames it on the Federal Strike Force (employed by Republicans.)

Look at Baltimore County, where federal and state grand juries are probing the county administration and state's attorney, while the police are under a microscope in the city. The Justice Department is investigating the Democrats for Nixon.

The 1972 campaigns here, it turns out, were full of questionable activities. Political sabotage is so common in Maryland politics, Anne Arundel County Executive Joseph W. Alton Jr. told a recent news conference, that he wouldn't even consider naming names.

Many seasoned politicians responded, "So what else is new?"

The Holt-Fornos race in the Fourth District was peppered with charges and counter-charges of espionage and sabotage. And in the nearby Fifth District, even law-and-order candidate Lawrence Hogan, a former FBI agent, was the victim of five burglaries during the last campaign. In one of them, a watchdog was killed.

Nobody will ever know the full truth of political sabotage and dirty tricks, because politicians will continue to consider them "all part of the game."

But because of Watergate, more details are coming to the surface rather than disappearing beneath the next day's headlines. State GOP Chairman Alexander Lankler characterized the difference this way: "We're all cannibalizing each other."

And not only the politicians have been tarred by the Watergate brush. A Baltimore caterer who, with a customary flourish, donated a plate of cold hors d'oeuvres to the Agnew Salute VIP's, was listed in the Blagden H. Wharton indictment

as an unreported contributor. What does this do to the thousands of housewives who gave coffees, brunches or cocktail parties for their favorite candidates?

Federal and State investigators are still auditing campaign reports, and grand juries are still in session. They will find that virtually every state and national candidate has violated if not the letter, at least the spirit, of today's tangled web of election laws.

Election reform is the answer.

It's easy to say, but impossible to do, it seems. The disclosure bill's problems may provide an inkling into the pitfalls involved in trying to bring the world of politics out into the sunshine. No proposed reform program has yet covered all of the intricacies of 20th Century politics. When the stakes are so high, the costs so great, the need for backing so vital, the law, no matter what it says, will be bent if not broken. And the public knows it.

One woman, listed as a contributor to the Agnew Salute when the Watergate hearings disclosed that the money came instead from the Nixon Committee, was indignant, but not only about the deception: "Why did they list me for only \$2,000 when they know I'm good for at least \$5,000?"

Watergate, partly because of the backlash that is already evident, will not cleanse politics. But it has cracked the door of the smoke-filled room.

As Lankler said, what was acceptable a year ago is unacceptable now because "Watergate has revolutionized attitudes toward political financing methods."

But will a disillusioned public become more vigilant — or more apathetic?