

The Price of Apathy

Is it really true that "corruption is as American as apple pie?" Is it accurate to say that corruption is "inherent in the American political system"?

A large brokerage firm uses these passages in its monthly newsletter to explain why the American public seems largely indifferent to the massive assault on civil liberties in the Watergate affair and other recent instances of flagrant public corruption.

Evidence of indifference comes from every poll or survey on the Presidential election. Louis Harris reports that 52 per cent of those polled dismiss Watergate as "mostly politics" and nearly two out of three absolve President Nixon from any involvement. The Gallup Poll finds that only 52 per cent of the voters have even heard of Watergate. The New York Times/Yankelovich survey shows Mr. Nixon's standing has not suffered appreciably from the bugging of the Democratic party headquarters.

What are we to make of this massive apathy in the face of what seems to have been an exhaustive exercise against political opponents by illegal means at the highest levels of government? Must we conclude that ordinary Americans are too blind or indifferent to perceive the long-run threat to themselves—to their families, churches, unions and other organizations—in the unprecedented use of sophisticated electronic surveillance at the Watergate and elsewhere?

If the men working for Mr. Nixon's re-election can bug Larry O'Brien they can bug any of us. If they can plant on a receptive newspaper a bogus letter that helps destroy Edmund S. Muskie's Presidential chances, such forgeries can become commonplace, with incalculable damage to American political life. If such men can deploy almost unlimited resources for pervasive spying on Mr. Nixon's opponents, how well-protected are we from a police state? Nor can Mr. Nixon himself escape responsibility for a White House political climate that produced Watergate, even if it turns out that he was not personally involved in planning it.

Looking back on the incredible scandals perpetrated under President Harding in the early 1920's, Frederick Lewis Allen wrote: "The public at large . . . knew little and cared less about what was happening behind the scenes. Their eyes—when they bothered to look at all—were upon the well-lighted stage where the Harding Administration was playing a drama of discreet and seemly statesmanship."

In that time of yearning for what Harding called "normalcy," there were also glib cynics who doubtless told their friends that corruption was "as American as the Model T," and "inherent" in our system. They were wrong, even as their Wall Street counterpart is wrong today; but the United States paid a heavy price, in self-esteem and in the regard of others, for its citizens' apathy in this disgraceful period.

The point is, however, that the Harding scandals were merely a disgrace; the Watergate practices, if not scourged by a citizenry somehow aroused to their portent, could ultimately be fatal for a free society. The problem of how to arouse Americans to the clear and present danger is the most important one before the nation in this election year.