

Watergate Threatens Consumer Bills

By Jack Anderson

The Watergate paralysis, which has brought so many government activities to a grinding halt, is now threatening to stymie consumer legislation.

The 93d Congress started out to champion the consumers, as one bill after another was introduced to keep unscrupulous businessmen from ripping off the public.

But with some of the best spokesmen for the consumers tied up in House impeachment hearings or trying to make up time spent on the Senate Watergate Committee, the consumer bills are dying on the legislative vine.

With a little push from House Speaker Carl Albert and Senate Democratic leader Mike Mansfield, these bills could still be saved. Here is where they stand:

- No-fault auto insurance passed the Senate on May 1. This bill would save billions, which now go to lawyers to settle who is to blame for auto accidents. If the House will act, the billions in legal bills could be used instead to pay the medical bills and repair costs of the accident victims, thus reducing insurance premiums.

- A warranty bill, introduced by Sens. Warren Magnuson (D.-Wash.) and Frank Moss (D.-Utah) left the Senate on Sept. 12, 1973. It would compel manufacturers to repair or replace faulty car parts, appliances and other items if there is a warranty to do so. Most present war-

rants are riddled with loopholes.

- A bill to give the Federal Trade Commission more power to crack down on shoddy advertising also passed the Senate on Sept. 12. It would permit the FTC to move quickly against phony ads, which now may take years to ban.

- A toxic substances bill to require premarket testing of hazardous chemicals passed the Senate almost a year ago. Among other things, it would outlaw the mishandling of polyvinyl chloride, which is now causing cancer in workers and perhaps consumers.

- A safe drinking water bill passed the Senate a year ago. It would require states to fix standards for safe water and would authorize federal officials to step in if the states don't act.

- The consumer food bill is ready for Senate action. Evidence shows a third of the nation's food plants are contaminated. The bill would provide closer supervision of canners and processors.

- As part of the campaign to save energy, the Senate passed a bill to put labels on appliances showing how much electricity they use per year. This would also enable buyers to judge which products are cheaper to operate.

- Sen. John Tunney (D.-Calif.) is trying to push through a bill that, in effect, would establish "consumer courts." It would as-

sist small claims courts and arbitration offices, which are willing to help consumers sue dishonest merchants and landlords.

Even the No. 1 priority of the consumer movement, the Consumer Protection Agency, is now in serious jeopardy from the Watergate lethargy.

The proposed agency would fight for the consumers before the Federal Trade Commission, Food and Drug Administration, Federal Communications Commission and other regulatory agencies.

As a confidential Senate Commerce Committee memo points out, some government offices "have grown sluggish and weak with age and fallen prey to the industries they are supposed to regulate."

Putting it in fisherman's language, Sen. Warren Magnuson (D.-Wash.), the Senate's "Mr. Consumer," explained: "The consumer advocate can be like a pike in a pond full of carp."

"The carp tend to get sluggish, and the pike stirs them to action by nipping at their tails. That is what we want the consumer advocates to do."

Rep. Chet Holifield (D.-Calif.) and Rep. Ben Rosenthal (D.-N.Y.), long enemies, teamed up to get a fine Consumer Protection Agency bill through the House.

Then one of the biggest and best financed lobbies Capitol Hill has ever seen went to work

Washington Wire—Henry Kis-

singer recently took time out from the Middle East crisis to jawbone his fellow Cabinet members on Vietnam. But it wasn't more aid to Saigon but 3,500 Vietnamese orphans that concerned him. Kissinger, himself a refugee from Nazi Germany as a youngster, urged his colleagues in a private note to help him "streamline immigration and adoption procedures to unite many of the eligible children with American families. . . . House impeachment counsel John Doar, while investigating allegations of favoritism against President Nixon, wound up with his daughter Gael on Committee Chairman Peter Rodino's pay in the Senate. When Sens. James Allen (D.-Ala.), Sam Ervin (D.-N.C.) and James Buckley (R.-N.Y.) threatened a filibuster, Senate leader Mike Mansfield lost his enthusiasm for the measure.

Mansfield feels he must get critical legislation through the Senate before the impeachment trial begins, and the mere threat of a long debate on the consumer bill discouraged him.

Thus, the consumers may become the next victims of Watergate.

Another impeachment lawyer, Joseph Woods, has a daughter working for the committee. A committee spokesman explained that Doar had not requested the job for his daughter and that Woods had left the staff before his daughter was hired.

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