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Gov. Rockefeller's 'Generosity'

After Watergate and impeachment it seemed to many of us that the country should come off self-criticism and return to the serious business of making the system work. We were prepared to "understand" the pardon, and to dismiss as trivial charges about the CIA in Chile. We wanted Nelson Rockefeller to sail through the congressional hearings on his appointment as Vice President.

But the Rockefeller gifts raise problems that are neither trivial nor easy to understand. So the Congress is now obliged to resolve the doubts in public hearings.

Consider, first, the general principle of the gifts. Gov. Rockefeller claims that he was basically trying to keep brains in government. He points out that all those he aided were working for him anyway. He was just "helping people to meet pressing needs," and there was "no conflict of interest."

But good people are drawn into government by the opportunity to work on challenging problems. While gifts don't necessarily buy corruption, they do tend to foster sycophancy. The prevalence of that disease has tended to make the Rockefeller staff a good deal less strong than the governor seems to realize.

Moreover, there is considerable doubt that the gifts were used to meet "pressing human needs." In some cases, at least, they were used to live high. They were an element in one of our deepest national scandals—the greed of the upper middle class which figures so largely in our present inflationary condition. So it would be useful for the Congress to develop through witnesses a full picture of where the gifts went.

A very special case in point is the case of William Ronan, a longtime Rockefeller aide. Mr. Ronan received a gift of \$550,000 in the form of a canceled debt. He lives well enough to list in Who's Who membership in eight different clubs. He has peremptorily refused to answer questions as to what he did with the gift money.

It happens that Mr. Ronan played a key role in a power play critical to the Rockefeller fortunes in New York. That was the absorption of the Tri-Borough Bridge Authority by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The upshot of that deal, as indicated by Robert Caro in his superb book, "Power Broker," was the political extinction of a chief Rockefeller rival, Robert Moses.



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

The hinge of the deal was a provision whereby the Chase Manhattan Bank agreed to transfer millions of dollars of debt from the Tri-Borough Authority to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The transfer was arranged by Gov. Rockefeller for the state, and his brother, David Rockefeller, acting as head of the Chase Bank. The terms have been kept secret to this day. Mr. Ronan, who was chief of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority at the time, is the only living outsider involved. The Congress should certainly look into his role, and indeed that whole transaction, before passing on the governor as Vice President.

Then there is the matter of the Rockefeller money used to subsidize a book by Victor Lasky, which was clearly designed to smear Arthur Goldberg, the governor's opponent in his 1970 re-election race. Gov. Rockefeller

has belatedly acknowledged that he knew about the book and apologized to Justice Goldberg. But there is more to it than that.

The book was paid for by a well-organized political laundry. The man who did the organizing was a Rockefeller lawyer, John Wells. Mr. Wells has been unavailable for questioning by the press. But he surely has an interesting story to tell. After all, he was a figure in Rockefeller campaigns from 1958 forward.

It may be that the affair of the gifts is entirely innocent. But the best way to establish that point is not for the governor to put out self-serving statements through hired hands.

It is for the congressional committees to go into the matter with witnesses, including Messrs. Ronan and Wells. It is for the governor to confront the issue openly and in person.