

Mr. Rockefeller, the Gifts and the Book

THE COMBINATION of the 25th Amendment, the post-Watergate ethics, and a fortune almost beyond comprehension have suddenly put in jeopardy the nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller to be vice president. His financial affairs are being subjected to a kind of minute scrutiny seldom seen in public life, and what is being found there is obviously perplexing to many congressmen as well as to many other citizens. It is not easy to decide what standards of financial behavior ought to be applied to a vice presidential nominee in the post-Watergate political climate. And the problem of figuring out how to apply them, even if they were clear, is compounded by the fact that Mr. Rockefeller's almost incomprehensible wealth is totally foreign to the experiences of most of the rest of America.

The problem with Mr. Rockefeller's money is just the reverse of what the problem has been in the past when questions were raised about the finances of other nominees for other offices. The questions concerning Mr. Rockefeller do not relate to how he got his money—by and large he was born with it—but what he has done with it. His gifts to various friends and associates have been staggering by the standards on which most Americans judge gifts. The idea that someone could give \$50,000 to, say, Henry Kissinger without getting something substantial in return is an idea that boggles the mind of the average American who has never seen and never expects to see \$50,000 at one time. Raise the figure to \$550,000, the amount that went to William J. Ronan, and the idea of such a quid without a pro becomes preposterous.

There are at least two ways to try to look at those gifts. One is to relate them to Mr. Rockefeller's personal financing; a \$50,000 gift from him is a smaller part of his net worth than a \$500 gift would be of former President Nixon's net worth. In other words, Mr. Rockefeller can give away \$50,000 or \$550,000 without noticing it. The other way to look at the gifts is to try to determine why Mr. Rockefeller gave them. Were they an attempt to buy various people for political or business reasons? Did he believe that by giving Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Ronan and others these sums he was ensuring their personal loyalty and services to him in their new jobs?

While we have seen nothing to suggest that Mr. Rockefeller thought he was buying these men or that these particular men could be bought, this is one of the questions that the two relevant congressional committees should now explore. At the same time, they can attempt to establish, as David S. Broder suggests elsewhere on this page, whether Mr. Rockefeller now understands the problem of excessive largesse even when the definition of "excessive" may not be one with which he agrees.

The problem presented by the \$60,000 put up by one of Mr. Rockefeller's brothers for a shabby political book presents different considerations. It was a political dirty trick. But was it a sufficiently dirty trick to disqualify Mr. Rockefeller from being vice president? It may be, in the post-Watergate climate when higher standards of political behavior are being required, that a revelation of how such a book was published would have severe adverse effects during a political campaign. But would such a revelation about that book at the time it was published have been considered anything other than a demonstration of stupid and slightly underhanded politics? We doubt it.

Both of these questions—whether there was impropriety in the gifts and whether the book was a damning political trick—would be answered by the voters if Mr.

Rockefeller were being considered for vice president in the normal way. The candidates for the other parties could make a political issue of them and he could defend them. We have seen other, similar issues in presidential campaigns in the past.

In theory, of course, the confirmation vote now pending in each House of Congress under the 25th Amendment replaces the choice made by the voters in the normal process of choosing vice presidents. But, unfortunately, that normal process yields little guidance for Congress in determining what standards it should now apply to these two questions. No one really knows what standards of integrity the voters have applied in the past nor what standards they will apply in the wake of Watergate. Generally speaking, the qualifications of candidates for vice president have not been a major factor in presidential elections.

Nor does the process through which men become candidates for vice president yield any standards by which Congress can now act. The political conventions which select such candidates have traditionally been rubber stamps, ratifying a dark-of-night decision in a crowded hotel room by a weary presidential candidate with no time to conduct a serious investigation into the qualifications of his choice. The shortcomings of this arrangement are all too clear. So are the shortcomings of the procedures under which Congress has selected those who stand in the line of presidential succession. At the moment, for instance, the Speaker of the House would become president if something happened to President Ford, and just behind the Speaker in that line is the president pro tem of the Senate. Neither was picked for his job with any consideration, so far as we know, of his qualifications to be president.

What, then, is the standard by which Congress should judge Mr. Rockefeller, the gifts and the book? The only one, it seems to us, that is feasible is whether he has done things which put in substantial doubt his personal integrity and honesty. We have heard things which raise questions about other aspects of his character—an insensitivity to the awe with which most Americans hold the economic power of the Rockefeller family, an inability to comprehend how others can regard his enormous generosity with suspicion. But we have heard nothing yet which indicates a lack of integrity or an inclination to use political or economic power corruptly. However, there are enough disturbing implications and unanswered questions arising from the disclosures of the past week or so to require much more thorough congressional inquiry.

That said, it is important to remember several things. Mr. Rockefeller is unbelievably rich; he is inextricably a member of a family possessing extraordinary economic power. For many sincere people, there is something strangely menacing about this. On the other side of the ledger, however, is the Rockefeller record of public service—by the family with its charities, its foundation and its institute, and by the vice presidential nominee himself, who has devoted most of his life to government. It seems to us that in the search for the right standards to apply under the 25th Amendment, there is at least some danger that a level of conduct may be asked of Mr. Rockefeller which few, if any, other figures in public life could meet. In the end, it seems to us that a simple proposition needs to be kept in mind: While it is Congress' duty to explore any evidence of wrongdoing, Mr. Rockefeller should not be held to standards radically different from those which have been applied to all other political figures in the past.