



Cynicism, Skepticism Cover the Nation

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IN A WAY undreamt of in the poor philosophy of Washington, the United States is shaped by the actions and reactions of millions of throbbing operators scattered all across the country. Following a presidential candidate around is an instructive experience.

Being on the road is a way of putting the calipers on a mood that is constantly changing. This is my sense, after several weeks of following George McGovern around the East, the Middle West and the Pacific Coast.

Perhaps the best handle is the attitude toward corruption and dishonesty in government. All the celebrated scandals are well-known to the public. There was instant crowd recognition whenever McGovern mentioned Watergate or the wheat deal or ITT. But there were few signs of anger, or even irritation.

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JUST WHY is something of a mystery. My own experience, however, suggests that people have become so used to dishonesty in high places that one more set of frauds is no big deal. Thus a leading Democratic politico in Seattle said of the attempt to break into Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate: "It doesn't hurt anybody out here. To most people, it's just one bunch of thieves robbing another bunch of thieves."

An unwitting confirmation of that analysis came in San Francisco from a former aide to President Johnson. He was asserting indignantly that the participation of former White House aides in the Water-

gate affair showed the low quality of the Nixon Administration. "Why," he said, speaking of one of Mr. Johnson's top assistants, "even Marvin Watson wouldn't have been caught doing that."

A similarly cynical attitude seems to extend to the major issues. Law and order was a phrase I heard on a lot of lips in New York and New Jersey immediately after a professor at the Columbia Law School was stabbed to death in Harlem. But unless constantly whipped up by dramatic happenings, issues seem to sink into a swamp of frustration and apathy.

McGovern practically apologized in Los Angeles when he told a group he was going to make a "moral" issue out of the bombing of North Vietnam. Taxes and inflation, to be sure, do stir intense interest — but chiefly as emblems of disbelief in political leadership.

After hearing McGovern talk about high food prices, a college senior asked: "Why would anyone who was seriously concerned about inflation vote for a Democrat?"

Another example of the skeptical attitude comes from the blacks. An aide to Governor Milton Shapp of Pennsylvania pointed out that even Senator Edward Kennedy, who was then traveling with McGovern, "can't turn on the blacks this year."

If there are no heroes, however, there are plenty of villains. McGovern draws good rounds of boos whenever he mentions President Nixon or the former Texas governor, John Connally.

My best guess now is that this fairly dull election is going to have a fairly dull result.