

The Real Corruption

By TOM WICKER

IN THE NATION

Taking note of the barrage recently leveled at him by George McGovern, President Nixon at his news conference last week adroitly fired back without seeming to fire back:

"I have noted that this Administration has been charged with being the most corrupt in history, and I have been charged with being the most deceitful President in history. The President of the United States has been compared in his policies with Adolf Hitler. The policies of the U.S. Government to prevent a Communist take-over by force in South Vietnam have been called the worst crime since the Nazi extermination of the Jews in Germany. And the President who went to China and to Moscow and who has brought 500,000 home from Vietnam, has been called the Number One war-maker in the world. . . . I think the responsible members of the Democratic party will be turned off by this kind of campaigning. . . ."

This makes Mr. McGovern sound shrill and irresponsible but, in fact, his point has been that Mr. Nixon's savage bombing of North and South Vietnam—not merely his policy to "prevent a Communist take-over"—is, as he said last Saturday in Kansas City, "the worst barbarism since Hitler." And while it is true that Mr. Nixon has brought home 500,000 men from Vietnam, the question Mr. McGovern has consistently and properly asked is—as he put it in St. Louis at a mammoth rally in a shopping center parking lot—"Why was it necessary for another twenty thousand young Americans to die before you could move toward peace?"

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Mr. Nixon's press conference remarks was that he did not mention Mr. McGovern's frequent references to another kind of "corruption"—the I.T.F. scandal, the Watergate outrage, the dubious circumstances of the big grain deal with the Soviet Union, the way in which Republican fund-raisers have been on the take from, and have concealed the identity of, some of the wealthiest interests in the country.

When he was asked specifically about the grain deal and the Watergate, Mr. Nixon merely said they were being investigated—by, of course, his own Administration. Quite clearly, he would rather hear as little of these matters as possible, while he thinks the balance of public opinion is in his favor on the issues of Vietnam, war and peace.

A few days travel with the McGovern entourage suggests that, on balance, it may be the other way around. Nothing, that is, seemed to evoke the enthusiasm and approval of the large McGovern crowds more than his ex-coriation of Mr. Nixon's war policies; on the other hand, when he tore into

the Administration for the other kind of "corruption"—money and political influence—he not only sounded out of character but appeared to get a less enthusiastic reaction.

Thus, one of his most sustained ovations came from a big crowd that had paid \$5 a head to eat chicken and apples ("After four years of Nixon's inflation," observed the candidate in a rare essay at a joke, "a piece of chicken and an apple cost you almost five dollars") in the famous Livestock Arena at the Iowa State Fairgrounds.

"I think the people of this country want an end to the longest, the cruellest and the stupidest war in our history," Mr. McGovern observed in his earnest, preacher's-son manner, and the crowd stood up and shook the rafters. So did a group of black ministers, whom he addressed in Chicago, when he referred to Mr. Nixon's conduct of the war as "murderous and barbaric."

That is criticism, however severe, on a recognizable moral issue, as well as on a matter of major national policy. Even if the Presidency lost its mystique of omnipotence in the sixties, most Americans still seem to want the office criticized in such high-level terms. And since it is doubtful that many of them make such distinction between the office and the man occupying it, no matter how justified an attack on that man's integrity may be, it tends to sound like an attack on the office itself.

When the man who makes such an attack, moreover, is himself seeking the same office, he runs the risk of seeming to demean it rather than hammer away on such matters as the Watergate in terms of civil liberties, or on the grain deal in the traditional Democratic idiom of "special interests" and "fat cats"; it may be quite another to refer to the President of the United States as "Tricky Dick," and to picture him as virtual crook who is—as Mr. McGovern told a St. Louis fund-raising dinner—"bringing suitcases full of cash up from the Mexican border."

This may be hard on a Presidential candidate who needs to topple his opponent from the loftier reaches of the White House, but it is a natural advantage of the incumbent. On the whole, Mr. McGovern probably would do well to bear down most heavily on the true corruption of Vietnam and the bombing, and leave the muck-raking to others.

After all, the American people for many years have had ample exposure to Richard Nixon; if they don't know him by now, there's not much George McGovern can do about it in a Presidential campaign.