

James Reston

Now's the Time To Close the Water Gates

Washington

NOTHING MOVES this city to action like a thumping big scandal or a disaster. It took the scandals of the industrial expansion at the turn of the century to produce Teddy Roosevelt's reforms. It took the economic depression to produce the New Deal, the Soviet sputnik to shove us to the moon, the murder of Jack Kennedy to get his program through the Congress. So maybe the hateful Watergate will demonstrate once more "the uses of adversity."

The mood here is almost right for change. The idea has finally begun to get around the country — it has always been known here — that something is desperately wrong with the way men get and use presidential power. For the moment, some people are too sad even to speak out, some too angry with the President to think straight, and others so intrigued with the cops and robbers that they can't concentrate on the remedies. But the time for emotion and rhetoric is about over and the time for legislation and action has come.

President Nixon cannot very well oppose fundamental changes in the campaign spending laws any longer. He is still trying to impose strict restrictions on present and past members of his White House staff about the questions they can answer on Capitol Hill, but the days of his kind of "executive privilege" are over. Restoring executive respect is his problem now and even this won't be easy.

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ACCORDINGLY, the time has come to dust off the library of studies, suggestions and recommendations for campaign spending reform, and get them into a bill that can be passed in this session of the Congress, before people forget the present scandals and get into the fevers of the 1974 congressional elections.

There has never been a time in this generation when there was a better opportunity to get the congressional leaders of both parties to agree on a transformation of the campaign spending rules, but the time will pass unless the opportunity is seized now.

This applies as well to the impractical "equal time" regulations of the Federal Communications Commission, which don't guarantee equality of television time in elections but privilege for the party with the most money.

NEVERTHELESS, it would be wrong to suggest that new laws on campaign spending and broadcasting or new definitions of "executive privilege" will really resolve the present crisis in our political life. They would help, but the crisis is much deeper than that. It is not mainly political but philosophical, and the corruption is not only here in Washington with Maurice Stans and his black bags full of laundered money out of Mexico, but with the people and institutions that produced the cash.

The problem is the assumption that chiseling pays, that dishonesty is the best policy, that loyalty to the President is the same as loyalty to the Republic, and that if the President's objectives or ends are good and honorable, his men can use any means to support him, including discrediting, bugging, burglarizing, or villifying his opponents.

New rules may inhibit but won't remove this malicious nonsense. Nothing has hurt the President and his closest aides in the White House more than their assumption of moral superiority, their lectures on patriotism and defending the flag which they carry in their button holes — all this followed by disclosures that the root assumptions of fair play and decency in the American system were being corrupted by self-righteous manipulators, managers, hucksters, and burglars working out of the White House.

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SO MAYBE in the end the Watergate will do what water gates are supposed to do: keep the cattle from coming up the stream into the garden. It may also make us wonder whether expediency and pragmatism, divorced from right and wrong, are worthy of the American Republic, and even whether they work. This is the important thing about the twisters in this whole tragedy: they were caught.

Espionage and sabotage in the American political process worked in the campaign but are now making it difficult for the President to govern. Many personal tragedies are involved, but the important thing now is how to restore confidence in the system.

Watergate has given us a chance for new and important laws and, what may be more important, maybe even a chance to reconsider the value of character and ideals.

N.Y. Times Service