

President Nixon has moved rather swiftly from insisting that no one in his Administration was involved in the Watergate scandals to asserting that people in both parties have always engaged in such scandalous behavior. As part of his effort to diffuse the responsibility as broadly as possible, Mr. Nixon now plans to urge Congress to establish a commission to study campaign ethics, political finance, Electoral College reform, and various related topics and to report back in nine months.

Study commissions as a device for evasion and delay have been much too frequently indulged in by this and previous Administrations. A ritual has evolved which includes the search for a prestigious chairman and a nice balance among the other members, the recruitment of a chief counsel and additional staff, the holding of public hearings, the preparation of a lengthy report with more or less learned appendices, the acceptance of the report by the President in a well-photographed meeting in the oval office—and then the silence of oblivion.

Since there are occasional violations of this ritual when recommendations are actually acted upon, total cynicism is not in order. But President Nixon's record with regard to commissions is notably bad. He early rejected the report of a Cabinet committee headed by George Shultz recommending abolition of fuel oil import quotas. He publicly rejected the recommendation of the Commission on Drug Abuse chaired by former Governor Shafer of Pennsylvania, which urged the decriminalization of marijuana. He rejected the advice of the Commission on Population by John D. Rockefeller 3d with regard to abortion and birth control education.

During the Cambodia-Kent State crisis when campuses were exploding with protest, Mr. Nixon named Chancellor Alexander Heard of Vanderbilt University and President James E. Cheek of Howard University as his co-advisers on campus unrest. When they submitted their final report two months later, he stamped it "file and forget." (Incidentally, Mr. Heard was chairman of the President's (Kennedy) Commission on Campaign Costs a decade ago.) Since Mr. Nixon has been consistently unsympathetic to campaign reform, any prospective members who agreed to serve on this commission would be on notice that they were proceeding at their own risk.

In any event, nine months are scarcely necessary for this task. As Senator Mansfield observed, sixty days would be a more reasonable time. The central issue is the balance between public and private financing of campaigns. There are those who favor the status quo in which private money is in control and those who favor complete public financing. In between, there are those who favor various kinds of public assistance for candidates with corresponding restraints on the size of private contributions.

Since any commission would in all likelihood be divided on this issue, the appropriate committees of Congress are in the end going to strike their own balance. If President Nixon wishes to make a contribution to Congress's thinking, he could do so on the basis of his own experience in his many campaigns for the House, the Senate, the governorship of California, and the Presidency. This is one subject which has been studied enough.