Subsidizing Politics

By Tom Wicker

IN THE NATION

Hugh W. Sloan Jr. painted for the Ervin Committee a dizzying picture of rivers of money flowing into and out of the Committee for the Re-election of the President. Much of it was in cash, received and disbursed in great stacks of bills, with G. Gordon Liddy, for example, casually picking up a briefcase packed with $83,000 and Herbert G. Kalmbach spending some cash receipts—it is not clear for what—before the money ever reached Mr. Sloan's treasury.

Clearly, the availability of so much money, with so large an amount of it in hard-to-trace cash, not only made possible the Watergate operations and the subsequent cover-up; it also is bound to have encouraged Nixon re-election and White House officials to "think big" about what opportunities might be made available to them by the money on hand. Moreover, as Mr. Sloan pointed out, more than $20 million was raised, and over $1 million disbursed in cash, before the April 7, 1972, changes in the law required strict accountability. Had the new law been in effect two years earlier, Watergate-style operations might have been impossible, at least more difficult to conceal.

Mr. Sloan's and other disclosures, therefore, have produced a climate favorable to even further reform of campaign financing and disclosure laws, and their enforcement. Pending in the Senate, for example, is a measure by Charles Mathias of Maryland that would inject substantial Federal funds into Federal electioneering, while maintaining the right of a private citizen to support his political views with his money.

Mr. Mathias would set spending limits for campaigns for Federal office (15 cents per person of voting age in Presidential elections), then provide a Federal subsidy for one-third the total amount. Private contributions could be accepted for the remaining two-thirds, with both individual and group contributions limited to $5,000—although backers of the measure are prepared, if it seems preferable, to raise the percentage of Federal subsidy and lower the size of allowable contributions.

Several other important reforms are proposed. High among them is the creation of an entirely separate agency—independent of both Congress and the Administration of the moment—both to administer the subsidies and to enforce the stringent disclosure provisions written into the law last year. This agency could bring prosecution and civil actions on its own, without referral to the Department of Justice.

The measure would prohibit cash contributions of more than $25 and make all campaign activities subject to the control and accounting of a single, central campaign committee, which in turn would be accountable to the independent elections agency. The troublesome "equal time" provision that bars many public-service television appearances by candidates would be repealed.

In the Mathias bill, there also is a reasonably good resolution of the minor-party problem that has vexed other Federal financing proposals. Such a party would be entitled to a subsidy not only on the basis of its showing in a previous election but, if it were new, immediately through an equitable but not easy petitions procedure.

This provision is vital, since there is and should be no law that says only two parties can compete; it is nevertheless likely to disturb some ardent defenders of two-party politics, since it can be viewed as encouraging the proliferation of minor parties.

The Mathias bill—unlike one sponsored by Philip Hart of Michigan—also does not provide Federal subsidies for primary campaigns, nor would it help finance state gubernatorial or legislative races. There are understandable reasons why this should be so. On the other hand, many would-be Presidential candidates—Fred Harris and Paul McCloskey come to mind from 1972—have foundered for want of means to wage a primary campaign; and predatory contributors pour money into state as well as national politics. If effectively shut out of Federal campaigns, for example, would big shady money flow into state elections in massive amounts?

A central provision of this Federal subsidy plan, moreover, is the establishment of ironclad spending limits on candidates for President, Senate and House. Yet, despite what seemed to be vast sums expended on politics in America, the question really is whether enough is spent on political education, the discussion of issues, the disclosure of a candidate's plans and views. Some major business concerns spend more to advertise their products than all political candidates spend to discuss the issues before the American people.

Equitable means of making sure that most campaign money—even the Federal portion of it—is spent for essentially educational political purposes may be beyond the power of legislators. Certainly, needed reforms like the independent agency to monitor Federal elections should not be made to wait; nevertheless, the easy assumption that a spending *limit* is necessarily a good thing, or prerequisite to other reforms, ought to be sharply questioned as Congress develops new campaign legislation.