

Looking Backward

Like a major earthquake, the Watergate scandal has transformed the political scene. But politicians, like other human beings, prefer to look backward and cling to old ways. The members of the Senate Rules Committee, in particular, seem unable to comprehend how much the ground has moved under their feet.

While tens of millions of Americans have sat transfixed for hours before their television screens listening to testimony about secret political contributions, attaché cases stuffed with hundred dollar bills, and dirty political tricks financed by cash from concealed sources, the Rules Committee has quietly been meeting to draft amendments to weaken the Federal Election Campaign Act.

When that law went into effect on April 7 last year, it established reporting procedures which were intended to take some of the mystery out of how political campaigns are financed. Each new revelation about the financing of last year's campaign—mostly before April 7—has brought fresh proof of the need to strengthen rather than weaken the new law and extend the reforms.

American Airlines, for example, has disclosed to Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox that it contributed \$55,000 in corporate funds to the Nixon campaign. Such contributions are illegal under the new law, as indeed they were under the old but unenforced Corrupt Practices Act of 1925. Eastern Airlines has announced that it refused a similar solicitation from the Nixon campaign, but Mr. Cox reportedly has in his possession a secret list compiled for the White House of other corporations which did contribute.

A stockholder's suit against International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation has brought to public attention a memorandum from a former I.T.T. official detailing how he was pressured by his corporate superiors to contribute to Lyndon B. Johnson's Vice-Presidential campaign in 1968 with the understanding that he would be reimbursed out of corporate funds if he filed a fake expense account. Political observers agree that I.T.T. is hardly unique in this devious practice.

Another lawsuit is pending in an effort to uncover the whole story of the substantial contributions made by the dairy lobby immediately before and after President Nixon ordered an increase in dairy price supports. Investigation is also under way into the contributions to the Nixon campaign by the Teamsters Union after a Presidential commutation unexpectedly released former Teamsters president James R. Hoffa from prison.

Against the background of these developments it is astounding that the Senate Rules Committee has the temerity to report out two amendments to the new law which would narrow its scope. The first would remove the requirement that each contributor list his name, address and occupation. Instead, only his name would be reported. Undoubtedly, the existing requirement is now somewhat burdensome to campaign treasurers, but once it is widely known, it will become a matter of simple routine. It is no more onerous for the contributor than providing identification to get a check cashed. If addresses and occupations are not listed, the reports on contributions become much less meaningful.

Another amendment would repeal a section of the law forbidding any individual member of a corporation or union which holds a Government contract—as some unions do under the manpower training program—from making donations to a company-controlled political fund. These funds too easily become vehicles for some of the abuses which the Watergate investigations are bringing into view.

There is need for a strengthening of the existing law and combining it with provision for new sources of campaign financing from public funds. The objective is to achieve a balance between many modest contributions from individual citizens and limited public subsidy for some campaign expenses. There is no need for a return to the mystification and corruption-breeding practices permitted by the old weak law.

Members of the Senate who think they can slip back to the bad old days are misreading the public's post-Watergate sophistication. They run the risk of being retired from public life altogether.