

Ford's Reputation For Honesty



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THE AGNEW AFFAIR points up the limitations of investigative reporting. The bloodhounds of the press are expected to sniff out scandal in high places with little more to guide them than their nose for news.

Two years ago, for example, we investigated whispers that Spiro Agnew had pocketed bribes from Maryland contractors. We went into Maryland armed only with a notebook and a pencil. But a notebook is no substitute for a subpoena, and a pencil is a poor prod compared to the Justice Department's power to grant witnesses immunity.

We were told about the pattern of pay-offs. We even dug out two witnesses who admitted to us they had slipped cash payments to Agnew. But in each case, no one else saw the money passed, and the cash couldn't be traced. Eventually, we laid our findings before Agnew but he categorically denied everything. The evidence simply wasn't sufficient to accuse the Vice President of the United States of a crime. It took the Justice Department to do that two years later.

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IN CONTRAST with Agnew, his designated successor, Gerald Ford, has a reputation for openness and honesty. Sources close to him say he won't accept cash contributions, although he has a politician's constant need for campaign funds.

But we have never heard the slightest suggestion that he has ever diverted a dime to his own personal use.

The closest to a political skeleton we have found in his closet was a bespectacled lobbyist named Robert Winter-Berger, who had been associated with fixer Nathan Voloshen and convicted House aide Martin Sweig.

We reported on January 26, 1970, that Winter-Berger "operated occasionally out of Ford's office." We stressed: "No one who knows Jerry Ford believes he would allow his name to be used by an influence-peddling ring. But in the backscratching, favor-swapping environment on Capitol Hill, it is easy for a con man to take advantage of a congressman's potent name."

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TWO YEARS LATER, Winter-Berger gave up lobbying and published his confessions in a book called "The Washington Pay-Off." He boasted of his dealings with Ford.

The vice presidential nominee has now made his files on Winter-Berger available to us. These show the lobbyist gained access to Ford on the recommendation of a trusted friend. The congressman's late administrative assistant, Frank Meyer, arranged some routine political favors for Winter-Berger's clients.

In return for these political favors, the lobbyist made a few nominal contributions to GOP campaign chests. These donations ranged from \$125 to \$500. Ford thanked him for them in letters addressed "Dear Bob" and signed "Jerry."