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No man stands above the law

SOME DESPAIRING AMERICANS say the Spiro Agnew graft case proves that the American political system is corrupt from top to bottom.

Quite the contrary.

The Agnew case proves anew that in this country no man stands above the law.

In many if not most of the world's older societies the power of position or the power of money often puts men beyond the reach of the criminal law. Not in the United States.

Political leaders are mere men. And man is frail. The list of political figures caught in corrupt conduct in recent years seems dismayingly long.

FORMER U.S. Sen. Daniel Brewster of Agnew's Maryland was sentenced to prison a few months ago for taking a bribe. The late Sen. Thomas Dodd of Maryland was censured by the Senate for diverting campaign money to his personal use.

Congressman John Dowdy of Texas was convicted of taking a bribe. Congressman Cornelius Gallagher of New Jersey confessed to income tax evasion. Congressman J. Irving Whalley of Pennsylvania pleaded guilty to forcing kickbacks from his staff. Congressman Mario Biaggi of New York City took the Fifth Amendment on the circumstances of a huge legal fee and has been ordered to return \$100,000 of it.

Federal Judge Otto Kerner, a former governor of Illinois, was convicted of bribery and other charges. Theodore Isaacs, former revenue director of Illinois, was convicted in the same case.

Martin Sweig, a senior assistant to former House Speaker John McCormack, was sent to prison for peddling influence. A year earlier the same fate befell Bobby Baker, a senior Senate employe and protege of the late President Lyndon Johnson.

Two Texas state legislators, one of them speaker of the Texas House, were convicted of fraud. Two Arkansas state senators were fined for income tax invasion. In New Jersey the mayors of Newark and Jersey City and a former secretary of state were found guilty in graft cases and others are under indictment. In New York City a protege of Mayor Lindsay pleaded guilty to taking bribes.

Nineteen Chicago police were found guilty of bribery and extortion. Two Chicago alderman are under indictment on misconduct charges.

SOME OF THESE PEOPLE are Democrats, some Republicans. In some cases the prosecutors were of the opposite party, in others the prosecutors the same party. Republican Agnew was brought down by Republican prosecutors.

As we said, the list seems dismayingly long. But it isn't really when one stops to realize that the country has hundreds of thousands of public officials.

The great majority go their honest way. A handful, the flawed ones, go wrong and very often go to prison, just as do flawed bankers and merchants and farmers and union leaders.

The important fact is that venality, when discovered, is not hushed up but punished. Our political and legal systems continually purge the poisons from the body politic. It is a cleansing process that will be necessary as long as mankind remains fallible.