

# Let's Hear From Congress

By James Reston

The Congress has been asking all the tough questions lately about President Nixon and the Watergate "horrors," but now the Congress itself is going to have to come up with some remedies for the outrages it deplors.

Otherwise, it will be hard to avoid the conclusion that members of Congress, and particularly the Democratic leaders and majorities of both houses, are more interested in condemning the political scandals of the last Presidential election than in reforming the financial causes of the corruption.

This is a complicated subject, but the simple fact is that the present system of financing Presidential and Congressional campaigns is a national disgrace, and most members of Congress who solicit funds from big givers, and most of the big givers, concede the point.

Also, it is generally agreed that now is the time if ever, while the evidence of Watergate corruption is still coming out, to get corrective legislation through the Congress, and to provide some consolation that the 1972 scandals will at least result in a more equal and corruption-proof system of paying for political campaigns.

Many members of Congress, including Hugh Scott, the Republican minority leader in the Senate, Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, and Fritz Mondale of Minnesota, have been working on a bill that would provide public financing for both Presidential and Congressional campaigns, but many others are opposing it and the whole question is in danger of getting caught up in a parliamentary tangle.

One reason for the tangle is that the campaign financing bill already passed by the Senate would provide an equal amount of Federal funds for both major candidates in a Congressional race—a minimum amount of \$90,000, for example, for candidates in the House.

Members now sitting in the House are not in general enthusiastic about this principle of financial equality. They got where they are today under the old system of private financing, and might be in trouble if any opponent had an equal chance to unseat them. So while they denounce Watergate, and proclaim the virtues of equality in Congressional campaigns, many of them exploit the complexity of the issue to oppose new legislation that might help their opponents.

Another point: The campaign financing question, while fundamental to Congressmen and campaign financing reform, is so complicated that it is seldom mentioned in the network news shows and usually winds up back in the newspapers among the Exxon ads urging people not to buy gas. Even papers that howl for campaign financing reform on their editorial pages bury the news of the legislative battle for reform in their news pages.

It may be, however, that the only thing we will get out of the Watergate tragedy is not the resignation or impeachment of the President, but new laws to control campaign financing, to outlaw the bugging of private citizen, and even public servants, and to supervise the activities of White House types like Messrs. Ehrlichman and Haldeman, and powerful agencies like the C.I.A., the F.B.I. and the Internal Revenue Service.

Some members of Congress, like the two unusual Senators from Wisconsin, Proxmire and Nelson, keep looking beyond Watergate to the lessons of that silly exercise, but most of their colleagues keep concentrating on the past.

The public, and even most of the newspapers, do the same. But the promises of the President to disclose everything, which he doesn't disclose; and of Rose Mary Woods to explain everything, which she doesn't explain; and of J. Fred Buzhardt, the President's lawyer, to trust things that are almost beyond belief—only add to the confusion and doubts about the integrity of the Executive.

The question now lies with the future and the Congress, and whether the gentlemen on Capitol Hill will play politics with the problem or try to correct it.

The Congressmen have been complaining for almost a quarter of a century that their constitutional responsibilities have been taken away by the White House and by a press that looked to the President for leadership, but now they have the opportunity to pass laws to correct the political corruption they have been complaining about and benefiting from.

The issue is plain before them in bills to be passed or rejected, and while they are complicated bills, it will be interesting to see whether they vote for the interest of the nation or make the same mistake as the President and vote for their own selfish and parochial concerns.