

# Trusting Government

Social studies teachers know that the most thoroughly learned civics lessons occur outside the classroom. So, when the Watergate story first began to develop, many of us looked upon it as an opportunity to bring the real world of politics into our classes.

Hours were spent studying political campaign tactics, party organization,

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campaign financing, the limits of national security, executive privilege and the meaning of impeachment.

But what began as an example of the abuse of partisan politics has become a scandal touching some of our government's most trusted institutions: the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service, the Justice Department and the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The sum of it all seemed to form a powerfully implied civics lesson: the system and those who run it are tainted.

Over the past year I have noticed that it is the brightest and most aware students who have reacted most negatively to Watergate. They appear to move further and further from confidence in any political leader or system. It was to them that Gordon Strachan was speaking when he told the Senate Watergate Committee that his advice to young people was to "stay away" from politics.

If the brightest of our young take his advice, who will fill the political leadership vacuum?

What about the average student? The majority of young people with whom I come in contact was never enthralled by politics. Now they seem to be sinking even deeper into an apolitical torpor. Watergate is teaching them not to care. One student told me recently, "what difference does it make who you vote for? Once they're elected they do what they want."

I see the Silent Majority growing in my classroom every school day. It is a frightening development. If the youthful majority turns from the political system in disgust, who will be left to care about the results of future elections?

Perhaps social studies teachers should drop Watergate as a subject because it has become overwhelmingly negative, even though its outcome may

ultimately vindicate the system. Perhaps we should shift the focus of our students' attention to state and local government—but even that could be dangerous.

Last December students from Mark Keppel High School in Monterey Park, Calif., were encouraged to research and prepare a proposal for a state law of particular interest to them. One group, which called itself the Committee for Better State Leadership, decided to look into the state's automobile leasing program.

Since their project coincided with the peak of the gasoline shortage, they became interested in the size of cars leased by members of the legislature. That's when they discovered that many assemblymen and senators drive so-called "full-sized luxury cars."

The students went on to contact many legislators in an effort to change the state contract with the Hertz Corp. so that only smaller, more economical vehicles would be available under the state leasing program. With the exception of a single assemblyman, the Mark Keppel students were either ignored or summarily put off. One administrative assistant informed the group that an "iron-clad rule of politics" prevented any legislator from interfering with the privileges of others.

What the students learned was that sincere, well-reasoned ideas rarely make it on merit alone. Considerations like the "iron-clad rule of politics" of ten carry more weight than public interest.

Since negative civics lessons do not originate only on the national level, students are left to wonder whether Watergate is a unique event or the inevitable product of our political system.

Social studies teachers are charged with instructing young people to accept and believe in the American democratic process. I am not sure that we can or should continue to accept this charge. I have the feeling that we are behind many of our students in political savvy. Our persistence in defending, justifying and rationalizing the existing political system has created a credibility gap of our own. We are slow learners—and our students know it.

How do we—students and teachers—resolve this dilemma? Since the problem originated outside the classroom, it is from there that its remedy must come.