

Waiting for Reforms

With a splendid show of indignation, the leaders of Congress are investigating the Watergate scandals. But they have quietly buried the reforms that would prevent future Watergates from happening.

The scandals have dramatized the need, above all, for campaign reforms to clean up the political process. Something should also be done to snap Congress out of its legislative lethargy. And the monarchical claims of President Nixon ought to be curbed.

These reforms have been wafted around Capitol Hill on great gusts of hot air only to drift, inevitably, into some obscure and unattended corner. Meanwhile, most congressmen solemnly declare their devotion to changes which, marvelously, never seem to occur.

The most urgent need is for a "Clean Elections Act," which Rep. John Anderson (R-Ill.) and Morris Udall (D-Ariz.) have offered. It would largely eliminate the campaign fundraising abuses, which the Watergate prosecutors say have produced "the largest number of criminal investigations still pending."

Already, they have filed criminal charges against 16 individuals and 13 corporations. And of the 56 separate allegations of improper conduct originally lodged against President Nixon, more than 20 were related directly to the influence which campaign contributions had on governmental decisions.

An army of lobbyists, packing thick bankrolls, also swarm over Capitol Hill. They stay in the gray shadows, cool, convivial and, if possible, invisible. A few deliver cash in sealed envelopes or in brown paper bags. But the more sophisticated approach is through campaign contributions. It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between a subtle bribe and a campaign donation.

Yet the "Clean Elections Act," which would help change all this, is languishing in the House Administration Committee.

A year ago, the Democratic leadership started to prod the committee by adopting a resolution calling for a campaign bill in time for the 1974 election. But Chairman Wayne Hays (D-Ohio) persuaded the policymakers that he intended to act swiftly. So instead, the leadership commended his committee for its fine intentions. The committee has now reached page seven of a 30-page bill.



The feisty, flamboyant Hays, meanwhile, found time to slip through an amendment, which abolished an earlier reform. His measure scraps the requirement that congressional travel expenses be printed in the Congressional Record for the constituents back home to read.

Hays has claimed his action has saved the taxpayers about \$9,000 in printing expenses. There is no longer any public record, of course, of how much of the taxpayers' money has been squandered by globe-trotting congressmen.

Presiding over all this chicanery is a small clique of tired old men who have achieved power by their dogged ability to hold on to their seats. Most are from districts or states where the rival party is too weak to challenge them. Their ability to stay in Congress under such circumstances and their good judgment in picking such states for residency are the only criteria by which committee chairmen are selected.

Their power is tremendous. They

can stimulate legislation or destroy it to suit their friends, contributors or their own financial interests.

To stop the abuses, Speaker Carl Albert appointed a special panel to revamp the House's committee system. Its carefully researched recommendations were presented to the Democratic Caucus three weeks ago. A secret vote was taken behind closed doors and the reforms were pigeonholed.

This has produced a backlash from some of the more conscientious congressmen. In a letter stamped "Personal and Confidential," Rep. Lloyd Meeds (D-Wash.) has protested to Rep. Julia Butler Hansen (D-Wash.), who has been given custody of the reforms:

"I cannot conceive that the American people, given the revelations of Watergate and their revulsion to backroom decision making, will tolerate the reference—by secret ballot—of this nationally important matter to a partisan group of Democrats . . .

"I do not contend," continues the Meeds letter, "that the work of the Select Committee on Committees is perfect. Indeed, there will probably be changes made. But those changes should be made in the full glare of public scrutiny on the floor of the House of Representatives by members of both parties."

Meeds' sentiments are echoed by Rep. John Culver (D-Iowa), who has circulated a letter among the leadership, protesting: "Thus far we have managed only to bring a series of self-inflicted wounds upon ourselves—by treating committee reform as primarily an intra-party issue, by taking caucus decisions on them in secret and without individual accountability. . . ."

The hypocrisy of the Democrats, in condemning Nixon corruption but killing reforms, has been compounded by a House Government Operations Committee measure that would write the specious Nixon doctrine of executive privilege into law.

An astonished Rep. Jack Brooks (D-Tex.) has warned: "The Constitution places no limits upon the kinds of information which the executive branch is to furnish to Congress."

Congress occasionally has produced statesmen of heroic mold, but more typical has been the limited politician with a narrow background and parochial interests.

The negative kind of power available to him is often more of a temptation than a challenge. His is not the ennobling power to shape bold national policies or the awesome authority to make great decisions for which he will be held accountable by the country and by history.

More characteristically, his is the petty privilege to frustrate and delay the proposals of others, to hold up reforms and to bargain selfishly for patronage and pork as the price of his support for national programs.

The founding fathers envisioned Congress as the most responsive branch of the federal government. But unhappily, the current members seem more worried about their own individual power than the strength of the institution.

Footnote: One man who has been obstructing reforms, Wayne Hays, disputes our conclusions. He promised that his committee will produce "a strong campaign disclosure bill" and that 90 per cent of the congressional reforms will also be adopted.