

High-Level Crime Wave

The indictment of John B. Connally, former Governor of Texas and later Secretary of the Treasury, brought to a sensational end a month in which an astonishing number of high public figures have been subjected to the processes of the law. Senator Edward J. Gurney of Florida was indicted on charges of bribery and conspiracy, California's Lieutenant Governor Ed Reinecke was convicted of perjury. Representative Frank Brasco of New York was convicted of peddling his influence for money. In the same short span, Otto Kerner, once Governor of Illinois and until a few days ago a judge of the United States Circuit Court of Appeals, started a three-year prison sentence for assorted crimes connected with the taking of a bribe. So did his former director of state revenue.

For the most part, this sad roster is only indirectly or not at all connected with Watergate. That complex skein has already entangled three other former Cabinet officers, nearly a score of White House aides and advisers and now confronts the President himself with the lively possibility of impeachment—a fate that his first Vice President escaped only by resigning and pleading guilty to one charge out of many which the Government was preparing to press.

This quick succession of vigorous prosecutions undercuts the contention that the rich and influential can easily escape the law. In spite of some plea bargaining (which, however regrettable, goes on in every criminal court in the land), the rate of convictions for highly placed politicians has been at least as high as that for run-of-the-mill muggers—and the percentage of those freed on probation considerably lower.

Nevertheless, the sense of a spreading corruption at this high level of American life is intolerable and cannot admit of complacency. As with crime on any other level, it calls not merely for punishing the guilty but for getting at the cause and if possible finding a cure.

To an appreciable extent, both are obvious. The cause in large part is to be found in the role of money in the political process. Even when the feverishly rising costs of running for public office are not a direct factor, the very machinery of financing campaigns invites corruption and provides a channel for personal bribery. The cure is a drastic reform of the laws governing campaign finance—with heavy emphasis on public funding.

If Congress is serious about restoring faith in the system and lifting the public morale, it has in such pending legislation the instrument it needs. The leaders of the House of Representatives have only to put it on the calendar.