

THE STAIN of illegal money on recent American elections becomes steadily more apparent. The activities of the Associated Milk Producers, Inc., first came to general notice in the case of the 1971 milk price support increases, with its strong suggestions of bribery. But that turns out to have been anything but an isolated instance of AMPI's methods. First the investigators for the Senate Watergate Committee and then the lawyers for the Special Prosecutor's Office followed the trail of milk money back through the elections of 1972, 1970 and 1968. Within the past several days, AMPI and two of its former officers have pleaded guilty to charges of engaging in a sustained conspiracy to violate our federal election laws. The violations include not only money passed to President Nixon's re-election campaign but to the Democratic party and the campaigns of three of its most eminent figures, Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey, Sen. Edmund Muskie, and Rep. Wilbur Mills.

AMPI, its former general manager Harold S. Nelson and its former special counsel David L. Parr have all acknowledged funneling \$63,500 to a Democratic dinner just before the 1968 election. Since the money came originally from corporate funds, that contribution was a crime. During that year AMPI loaned one of its staff people illegally to the Humphrey campaign, while continuing to pay his salary and expenses. Another \$38,000 of corporate funds went to the 1968 Humphrey campaigns in seven states.

In the following year, AMPI paid the famous \$100,000 in corporate money to Herbert W. Kalmbach for Mr. Nixon's re-election campaign. It was three and a half years before Mr. Nixon was to run again, but AMPI was nothing if not foresighted. It practiced corruption on a generously nonpartisan scale. The illegal donations were distributed with an eye to one criterion only: where power lay, and where it might be expected to lie in the future.

When Sen. Humphrey ran for the Senate again in 1970, the AMPI poured another illegal \$12,000 into the effort. It gave \$8,400 to Sen. Muskie's re-election campaign in Maine that year, and over the next two years it contributed the modest sum of \$5,000 to Rep. Mills' tentative campaign for the 1972 presidential nomination. In 1971 AMPI paid \$82,000 in corporate funds illegally to a computer mail service, Valentine, Sherman and Associates, for work in several campaigns—partly those of Sen. Humphrey and James Abourezk, but mainly in aid of various candidates in Iowa. One of the partners in the mail service firm, Norman Sherman, is Sen. Humphrey's former press secretary. He and his partner John Valentine now face a criminal charge of taking part in illegal contributions. Finally, Mr. Nelson, the former AMPI general manager, has

pleaded guilty to a conspiracy to pay \$10,000 to the then Secretary of the Treasury, John B. Connally, a transaction that Mr. Connally had denied and on which he faces trial.

Regarding the campaign contributions, AMPI has stated that the recipients had no reason to believe that the money was given illegally. AMPI is undoubtedly correct on this point, as are the various senators and congressmen in their protests of innocence and ignorance. It is common practice in American politics to keep the candidate at a safe distance from the details of the fund-raising done in his behalf. Sometimes candidates assume a higher degree of responsibility for the integrity of their campaign funds, by imposing various screening processes. But particularly in the presidential campaigns, where the costs rise steadily from each election to the next and the pressures to raise enormous sums fast are ferocious, there is reason to believe that illegal conduct is becoming more common.

What lesson is a citizen to draw from the melancholy record of AMPI's largesse? The White House repeatedly seizes each instance of misconduct involving Democrats to repeat its defense: Everybody does it. The suggestion is, apparently, that if everyone does it then the manifold misdeeds of President Nixon's fund-raisers become somehow less offensive. To the contrary, the only acceptable conclusion is precisely the opposite one. The more widespread the pattern of illegal financing, the more dangerous it is to the national election process. If the violations were narrowly limited to Mr. Nixon's campaign, it could be argued that an adequate remedy for at least part of the problem lay in Mr. Nixon's departure from office. But if the violations are as deeply engrained in the practices of both parties as the developing AMPI record indicates, then the end of the Nixon presidency by itself will solve nothing as far as campaign financing practices are concerned.

If the next presidential election is run under the same rules as the last, there will be the same frantic scramble for money and the same reluctance to scrutinize closely its sources.

The Special Prosecutor's office is apparently nowhere near the end of its researches into the milk case. But enough is on the public record already to justify the most careful reconsideration of the way that we finance our national political campaigns. The responsibility for correction now lies most heavily on the House of Representatives. While the Senate has passed a bill to change the rules profoundly, the House remains reluctant. It is a costly reluctance. The latest pleas of guilt in the milk case indicate the danger and doubt that will shadow future candidates of all parties until Congress finally enacts a system of campaign financing that can justify the public's trust.