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Campaigning in the shadow of Watergate

WASHINGTON — The presidential campaign thus far is a dreary disappointment. Not one of the major candidates has marched forward to talk directly about the real issue underlying this election.

That issue is Richard Nixon, the ghost of politics past, and what he did to us and what we should do about it.

Until he went under bad in Texas, Ford thought he could just ignore the preceding six years. On the eve of Ronald Reagan's big breakthrough, Ford observed that he never mentioned Nixon by name because "it is better for all of us just not to remind ourselves" of the Watergate era.

Fiddlesticks, who could forget it? The gripping story of Nixon's last months in the White House, "Final Days" by reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, is on the best-seller list. "All the President's Men" is packing them in at movie houses across the country.

Julie Eisenhower had a full-page column in Newsweek last week defending her mother's behavior as the President's disgrace became inevitable. John Ehrlichman, once Nixon's chief domestic affairs adviser, has just lost an appeal of his conviction. So did G. Gordon Liddy, who worked for the Nixon White House. Spiro Agnew, who was forced to resign on official charges of tax evasion, is all over the television talk shows peddling a novel.

The spectre of Nixon hangs over this campaign, whether the candidates want to face up to it directly or not.

It is easier to sympathize with Ford's caution than the others. His advisers are concerned that if he attacks too sharply Nixon might call a press conference and return the favor.

Reagan has opted for silence out of fear of offending the few die-hard conservatives (there must be some) who are still trying to pretend Nixon never happened.

And as for the Democrats — so far they have simply been too preoccupied with each other to get around to the real reason the Democratic nomination looks so desirable.

Meanwhile, the public knows what the politicians won't say. Richard Nixon will never fade quietly away, like the old soldier.