

Watergate — yes, it could happen here

THERE is a depressing, and self-deceiving, smugness about the attitude of many Australians to America's present political trauma: that slow agony which is leading to the eventual trial by impeachment of Richard Milhous Nixon.

Many Australians are self-righteously sure that it couldn't happen here — or that, if it did, we would manage the whole affair much better.

I am not so sure. Although it depends a little on what one thinks the "it" is — the crimes and political misdemeanors of which President Nixon is accused and for which he is presently being dragged to impeachment through the long process of legal and congressional investigation.

But if the substance of the charge against the President is that he knowingly used his position of power improperly to protect those who acted improperly to preserve his power, I can think of no good reason to assume that it could not happen here, given the appropriate circumstances — the flawed man and the tormented times.

[Similarly, I would not be greatly surprised if, one day, we were confronted with evidence of the existence of secret, paramilitary organisations in this country, like those recently reported in Britain, committed to the self-appointed task of "taking over" from the elected Government in the event of "a breakdown of law and order". After all, groups of that nature — the New Guard and the White Army — were formed in Australia in the 1930s.]

What I am not at all convinced of is that we would necessarily uncover and display any similar political malpractice in Australia with the same remorseless rigor that President Nixon's alleged sins have been exposed to.

It is not just that the American Press is more bloodyminded, or less inhibited by restrictive libel laws or the heavy constraints of the Australian Crimes Act, though I think that is both true and relevant.

It also has something to do with the strong strain of idealism which survives in American politics, despite the repeated evidence of the corruptibility of man in general and politicians in particular.

We begin with a more sceptical view of what we are entitled to expect of our political system and our politicians. We are less readily shocked than we might be at the prospect that we could get less than we deserve from our politicians.

By contrast, Americans seem both to expect more of their politicians — and to be more shocked when they don't get it.



It is the passionate quality of American politics — the combination of high idealism, verging on the romantic, and the insistence on rigorous retribution — which has helped to prolong the agony of Watergate for more than two years.

And it is this, I think, that worries foreign observers, Australian in particular, most.

There is a general feeling here that we could cope much better with a case of serious political scandal. If we discovered a Prime Minister or a Premier cheating the system, using the apparatus of government to perpetuate his power, we would have it out into the open immediately and he would either resign, like a gentleman, or be driven from office by his colleagues.

And then we could all get on with the business of "normal" politics.

Perhaps. But it seems to me that the great virtue of the American method of dragging an accused President slowly through the painfully complicated procedures of judicial and congressional investigation is that the open enforcement of political standards becomes a real part of the process of public education.

Our system may produce a cleaner, neater, more efficient result: like playing political oranges and lemons — "chip-

chop, chip-chop, the last head off!"

But political scandals in most Western democracies tend to be nine-day wonders. We are given to forgetting them before we have discovered what they were all about, and what they might have meant for the system as a whole.

Look, for example, at the way most people have already shrugged off the consequences of the Rae report on the manipulation of the securities market during the last stock exchange boom.

We now pretend that we knew all along that it was really rather a nasty business. Or we dismiss the evidence of stock exchange skulduggery as something that happened a couple of years ago: stale history; flat beer.

We will probably get a nice, new, shiny piece of administrative machinery out of it all: a securities and exchange commission. But how much will we care about that? And what differences will it make to the way people behave, or think they are entitled to behave?

There is a rigor about the American system that provides a counterbalance to its romanticism.

By the time the Watergate affair is all over, everyone will know what it is all about and how much it meant for the health of the system as a whole.

It may not prevent the same sort of thing happening all over again. But at least this generation has been out on the alert to the essential fragility of principled politics.

There is much to be said for a system in which politics is memorable. Here we tend to treat even our political crises as something of a bore.

—Creighton Burns