



LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

By Lou Cannon

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Monagan finds a vacuum

It has been four months since Robert T. Monagan exchanged his California political ambitions for the busy anonymity of the federal executive branch. "I've lost all track of time," Monagan says, looking back on it. "I joined a department where the work was on-going, where the legislative program was in-being. I plunged right in. It feels like I've been here for years."

For different reasons, this same time span seems a light year of political distance to those of us who were already in Washington. In the past four months, the Nixon administration has seen its mandate dissipated and its capacity to govern shattered beyond repair. The shadow of Watergate has fallen across every endeavor, weakening the structural foundations of the American political system and obscuring the vital controversies that otherwise would have occurred in the daylight of public debate.

Monagan, looking little different than he did eight years ago when he became the pragmatic insurgent leader of the Republican minority in the Assembly, arrived here just in time for some of these obscured, important struggles. He joined a Department of Transportation then locked in frustrating combat with Congress on issues ranging from the Highway Trust Fund to the Airport Development Bill. And he took over a congressional affairs assistant secretaryship that, in the recent past, has been reduced to little more than an office for departmental errand boys.

Even before Watergate, the administration's grandstanding about budget cuts and the closing down of the Office of Economic Opportunity had obscured a traditional political reality — namely, that it is the executive branch that is progressive and Congress that is reactionary on many issues. One such issue is the Highway Trust Fund, which the Nixon administration has now tried twice to bust and which Congress has twice preserved. Ironically, it was John Volpe, a millionaire former-contractor-turned-Transportation-Secretary, who led the first assault on the fund. He was repelled by the Highway Lobby, operating from its entrenched positions inside the congressional committee system. In the fall of 1972, Volpe went on the surrogate campaign circuit for President Nixon and became one of the few in-house political heroes who valued an old-politics appeal to other second-generation Americans more than a piece of dubious intelligence about the rival candidates. Volpe was rewarded with the ambassadorship to Italy, which is as good a place as any to be during the second Nixon administration, and he left behind something of a vacuum in Transportation's office of congressional affairs. Old pol Volpe was his own best representative before Congress, and Transportation's office of congressional affairs had been largely sublimated to the secretary's personal style. "The office wound up sending runners to the Capitol," says Mona-

gan. "I want to change that, and I think I can."

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Change does not come easily in Washington, however. Following his Sacramento pattern, Monagan arrives at his office by 7:30 or 8 and works an 11- or 12-hour day. But there is nothing unusual about such hours here. "In Sacramento there used to be a quiet time after 5, when the staff went home, but here the staff works until 6:30 or 7:30. Everybody stays."

Sometimes it seems to Monagan that he is working harder than ever to stay in the same place. "There's a problem of patience," he says. "It takes time to fire people, time to hire people. It takes four months to get a chair for the office. I've had to slow down my reaction time." An assistant secretary for congressional and intergovernmental affairs, Monagan bosses a staff of 32, including secretaries and assistants. But six of the 13 professional staff positions are vacant at the moment, partly because of Monagan's high standards and partly because of the difficulty of attracting good people to the government. The jobs pay \$24,000 to \$32,000 a year, but they are political appointments, without protection. No one, least of all Monagan, thinks that the political staff will survive the Nixon administration.

Unlike many another politician who might have made a good governor, Monagan is objective and unromantic about what happened to him in California. He lacked both the charisma and the political financing, and he knew for many years that his faint hopes for the governorship rested on a restoration of Assembly leadership now beyond the immediate hopes of the Republicans. "I wanted to run," says Monagan, "but it didn't work out that way." He is unromantic, also, about the reasons for his move to Washington. "I'm 52," he says. "One of the reasons I took this job was that it was the last time in my life I'd probably be ready to make a big move. I wanted to try it."

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The man who interviewed Monagan before he was hired was Egil (Bud) Krogh, the deposed assistant secretary who is the admitted architect of the break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. Monagan recalls the interview matter-of-factly, and he remembers being impressed by Krogh's apparent dedication and intensity. Those of us who are long off the police beat have learned to recognize a similar quality about others in the administration now shaded by scandal and, in tardy recognition, would be willing to trade this quality so valued by conspirators for the kind of low-key, problem-solving epitomized by Bob Monagan. It is good to have him in Washington. Beneath the shadow of Watergate, the problems of governance continue.

If the ends don't justify the means,
what the hell does?

Robert Moses