Pay Scales, Politics And Parkway Police

More than three years ago, the State Legislature authorized the merger of the Long Island State Parkway Police with the Nassau and Suffolk County police departments. Since then the members of the parkway force—whose pay lags far behind the two county departments—have been given a classic bureaucratic run-around.

The merger hasn't taken place, and there is little hope that it will happen soon. So it's little wonder the parkway police benevolent association decided to endorse the entire Democratic slate of candidates for statewide office. We find it regrettable that this or any other police organization should become involved in partisan politics, but it's not as though the parkway cops haven't exhausted the usual channels of protest.

The reason the parkway officers have been given such short shrift in Albany, Mineola and Hauppauge is that they lack the clout to make the politicians sit up and take notice. Theirs is only a 213-man force. So in the preparation of the past three state budgets, the policymakers felt free to ignore the parkway police and withhold the money that would be needed to complete the mergers.

In Nassau County, the PBA is larger (almost 4,000 men) and more political. Its leadership, in fact, has been fighting Section 426 of the New York State Election Law, which forbids policemen to "become a member of any political club, association, society or committee." The Nassau PBA was able to negotiate a contract that called for both a big pay raise and shorter hours. Those negotiations took place last year early in County Executive Caso's campaign for reelection, and it was clear he wanted to get the contract out of the way so he wouldn't have any trouble with the PBA around election day.

The parkway police are not the first Long Island PBA unit to endorse candidates this year. According to the letter of the law, this practice is probably legal, but we're still sorry the parkway PBA had to involve itself in politics even to that extent. Prohibitions on police in politics have been on the statute books in this state since 1899, and we support them.

The stationhouse cannot be allowed to become a clubhouse. But if the Rockefeller-Wilson administration had treated the parkway police as something more than factors in a political equation, they might not have felt it necessary to get involved in the endorsement of candidates.

It's hard to conceive of a more difficult test for the American system of justice than the Watergate cover-up trial. The stature of the defendants would make it so even if the issues didn't. Yet Judge John Sirica's task has become even more complicated because of the special circumstances in which the trial must be conducted.

Jury selection and indeed the whole concept of fair trial are hindered by the wide publicity already given the evidence. A key witness, Richard Nixon, may not be able to testify. In fact, the premature pardoning of Nixon raises serious questions as to the equity of the whole proceeding.

In these circumstances, the judge, the jurors, counsel on both sides and the media carry a rare burden on their country's behalf: They must render justice not only to five defendants but to the whole system by which Americans govern themselves.

Judge Sirica is not an unknown quantity; he has amply demonstrated his respect for the consequences of this case. And the jury system is well proven, although national television now complicates the law's traditional equation of impartiality with ignorance. So we'll address our cautionary comments to the two other participants in the unfolding of justice, the bar and the press.

No group of citizens has been more sullied by Watergate than the lawyers.

All save one of today's defendants are attorneys—one a former chief law officer of the land. Other lawyers are indicted or imprisoned. By demonstrating their devotion to the law's real purpose, the counsel in this trial have an opportunity to begin restoring the profession's image.

As for the news media, we too have a grave responsibility. When it seemed the justice system was failing, the press rightly moved in to investigate and publicize the truth about Watergate. Now that the trial is beginning, the press's role is not the same. We must take great pains to avoid the slightest interference with the constitutional rights of the defendants, the impartiality of the jury or the dignity of the proceedings.

The trial begins during a congressional race and will probably extend into the first maneuvers of a presidential campaign. Americans must persevere in separating the one from the others in their minds. It is not Richard Nixon on trial, or the Republican Party, or the conservative ideology, but five particular men, for various particular deeds. Nor is their guilt or innocence determined by the arguments of lawyers, the sentiments of witnesses or the leanings of public opinion. The sole determinant must be the deeds of these men as revealed by the evidence and measured against the language of the law. It may never be more difficult, but neither could it be more important.

We don't know what Senator Jacob Javits expected to gain by taking off on a three-day flying visit to Cuba with his Foreign Relations Committee colleague Claiborne Pell. Certainly the senators saw very little that their hosts didn't want them to see, and in any case the move toward resumption of Cuban-American diplomatic relations was already well advanced before they left Florida.

In fact, their visit may actually have set back the day when the Organization of American States will formerly lift its 10-year-old embargo on trade with Cuba. Without the retinue of American newsmen that accompanied the senators, Premier Fidel Castro's anti-American pronouncements at a huge rally in Havana Sunday would have gone all but unnoticed in this country. The extra media exposure can only multiply the political obstacles the Ford administration will face when it finally decides to recognize the Castro government. Still, a trip to Cuba in an election year by a New York Republican already in trouble with conservative voters suggests that those obstacles may be a lot less formidable than anyone thought just a few months ago.

All of which convinces us more firmly than ever that the United States should join the move to lift the Cuban trade embargo at next month's OAS meeting in Ecuador. Castro has run his country for 15 years, after all, and his efforts to subvert other Latin American governments have dwindled until they seem pale indeed compared to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's $8,000,000 slush fund for undermining the last legitimately elected government of Chile.

The Watergate Trial

A Weekend in Cuba