'Lucky' Common Cause reformers survive 70s

david broder

WASHINGTON–The 1970s–that paradox of a decade –gave us a set of stunning contrasts. There was Watergate, the classic political scandal, but there was also Common Cause, the classic good government "reform" group. There was John Mitchell, the jailed attorney general, but there was also Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor who was fired by Richard Nixon because he would not obey corrupt commands.

The trouble with symbols is that they do not always age gracefully–and that is particularly so with symbols of civic or personal virtue. Some of the heroes of Watergate, like some of the heroes of the civil rights movement, have celebrated their own righteousness so often and so well that they have become, quite frankly, bores.

Archibald Cox, at age 67, and Common Cause, nearing age 10, do not seem to be in danger of succumbing to that temptation.

When Cox was elected last Saturday as the third chairman of Common Cause (following founder John Gardner and Nan Waterman, who held the post for the past three years), the meeting of the organization's governing board was described by my colleague, Chris Colford, as being characterized by "vast hope, immense vitality, and a remarkably well-informed discussion."

The Carter administration could not bend its age guidelines for judicial appointments to give Cox a circuit court judgeship (in part, one suspects, because he was proposed by Edward M. Kennedy). But Common Cause is wisely not bound by such foolish consistency. Its board recognized that two days a week of Cox's time (all he can spare from his Harvard Law School duties) is worth almost anyone else's full-time services.

Cox is fond of speaking in nautical images, and in an interview the day before his election, he described government as if it were a ship–the Enterprise–that is drifting in circles.

"We have to move the Enterprise along," Cox said. "When people don't see the Enterprise working, they lose confidence and they have to look out for themselves."

The modern bureaucratic-political state that Cox glorifies as the Enterprise (with all its space-age connotations) others see as Leviathan, crushing the citizenry in its path.

For all its avowed nonpartisanship, Common Cause is an embodiment of the liberal view that the public good is best defined and achieved by the state–and private goals are comparatively "selfish." That view suffuses its rhetorical assaults on "special interest" groups, and fuels its unending crusade to rid the political system of supposedly wicked private contributions and to flood it, instead, with the purity of public (or tax-supported) subsidies.

There is a great deal open to challenge in that view of the world, but there is also a great deal to be said for the political utility of having a vigorous organization acting on that faith.

It is quite true, as Common Cause President David Cohen said, that the organization has become a bulwark to many of the "institutional people" in Congress–Republicans like Barber Conable and Tom Railsback, Democrats like Tom Foley and David Obey–who really are interested in improving the effectiveness of the institution.

It is also true that this viewpoint–and its organizational embodiment in Common Cause–is a motivating force for many who would otherwise have abandoned politics as a hopeless morass. As Common Cause board member Kathleen Gilligan Sebelius of Kansas remarked, after a just-completed tour of Common Cause groups in 25 states, "We found that there are thousands of people out there who are absolutely convinced that they can have an effect on decision-making. That's pretty fantastic in this day and age."

Common Cause went through a decline in the late 1970s, like a lot of other organizations. Its membership dropped one-third from its peak to 213,000 members. But at the end of 1979 it was back up to 229,000 members–with an extraordinary 74 percent renewal rate.

From its beginning, Common Cause has been lucky. Fifteen months after Gardner launched the organization with a principal goal of cleaning up the system of campaign finance, the Watergate burglars provided one of history's most dramatic examples of the evils of secret political caches–and Common Cause soared.

Finding Archie Cox with some free time is another bit of luck. On the very day he was elected chairman of Common Cause, talking about the continuing need to "improve the character of the political machinery," the FBI blew the whistle on eight more alleged congressional cheaters.

The timing was incredible. In reform politics–as in every other kind of politics–sometimes it's more important to be lucky in your timing than right in all your views.