

Mr. Nixon on TV

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It was a speech of large silences and vague insinuations, hardly what the public had been led to expect from the accounts of presidential preparation for Wednesday night's television address. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of that address as a whole and its accompanying "white paper" was the curiously detached status—almost that of bemused spectator—which Mr. Nixon assumed for himself. "The time has come for the rest of us to get on with the urgent business of our nation," he said.

"The 'rest of us'? But surely this is Mr. Nixon's administration, and surely it was in his name and in his behalf that men who were his appointees and closest confidants committed the crimes and excesses that the President now "deplores." And surely he cannot expect us to regard him as just another outraged American registering his reactions from somewhere in the third balcony. Yet that was the attitude Mr. Nixon assumed the other evening, and it was, in our view, this studied sense of remoteness that vitiated his more straightforward statements concerning the nature of the wrongdoing that has been exposed. "In a free society," Mr. Nixon said, "the institutions of Government belong to the people. They must never be used against the people." And again: "No political campaign ever justifies obstructing justice, or harassing individuals, or compromising those great agencies of Government that should and must be above politics." What rendered these unexceptionable statements so lifeless, what made them seem so pro forma, was the context in which they were made. Mr. Nixon now acknowledges that plenty went wrong. But he will not seriously consider *why* it went wrong.

We are certainly not recommending here some lachrymose televised "confession" of guilt or even of fault. We have in mind nothing more demanding or dramatic than a candid and realistic appraisal by the President of Watergate cause and effect. Mr. Nixon's former attorney general and former commerce secretary have been indicted. Others of his most important appointees are under criminal investigation. The FBI, the CIA and the federal courts were all subjected to improper pressures in his behalf. Does he really believe—and does he expect us to believe—that all this can be explained as the consequence of some "contagious" virus of the 1960s? What is the President trying to tell us? That Abbie Hoffman set a bad example for John Mitchell and that the former chief law officer of the land was very impressionable? What kind of "explanation" is that?

Just as Mr. Nixon seemed to blame the upheavals of the 1960s for the wholly distinct misbehavior (and worse) that has marked his administration, so he also seemed the other evening to blame the law enforcement

agencies of government for failing to inform him of the dimensions of the Watergate disgrace—even though sworn testimony indicates that his own White House agents were trying in his name to stop those agencies from doing their job. Similarly, he tended to blame the Congress for the paralysis of his own White House and to blame the "critics" of the Watergate scandals—not the perpetrators of those scandals—for the ill effects of Watergate on government. It is undoubtedly true that there would be more faith in the U.S. government here and abroad if people were not talking so much about the Watergate scandals. But people wouldn't be talking about them at all if they hadn't happened—and that surely is the point.

This whole array of misplaced blame is what we found so disheartening about the President's speech and it was of a piece with his own assumed air of personal detachment. Both suggest to us that Mr. Nixon has yet to face up to the meaning of Watergate, has yet to acknowledge, even to himself, what went wrong. In a number of passages, the President made statements that conflict one way and another with sworn testimony of several Senate committee witnesses. But these passages, and the disputes they reflect, seem to us less important at the moment than the overall tenor of the President's speech. For it really will not do for Mr. Nixon to let it be known merely that he is bored with the show. And it will not do for him to suggest that he is being prevented from doing the nation's business by this tiresome affair or that the public's attention is being focused on these unprecedented squalors only because some people are trying to keep him from fulfilling his "mandate." None of the improper activities that are under consideration by the Ervin committee was "mandated" by the voters. Indeed, had they not been suppressed before the election, his "mandate" might have been somewhat more modest. And until people are satisfied that those activities—which are not such ancient history as Mr. Nixon implies—have been properly aired and dealt with, Mr. Nixon's administration will continue to operate under a cloud.

The President cannot have it both ways. He cannot disassociate himself from those acts of his administration that have appalled people and take credit for those of which they approve. He cannot say the uncertainties caused by the scandals are wrecking his opportunities to get on with a higher mission—and then blame the uncertainties on someone else. Mr. Nixon accuses the Senate committee and some commentators of "an effort to implicate the President personally in the illegal activities that took place." Well, the President is implicated: he is the President, these things took place under his roof, and he has yet to convey to the American people that he understands either his own responsibility or their justifiable dismay.