

George F. Will

Divide and Conquer?

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Mr. Nixon's speech was an exercise in what administration theoreticians used to call "positive polarization." His new tactic is to rally his remaining supporters around the notion that the nation's welfare is threatened by government paralysis caused by the Watergate investigation. Thus he now uses the "bully pulpit" to preach nonsense about the functioning of government today.

The truth is that most government operations are not affected by a plunge in the popularity of a President. And the government's performance today is most conspicuously miserable in the area—economic policy—where Mr. Nixon is conspicuously free to do what he wants.

The government is a juggernaut with an awesome momentum of its own. Over 70 per cent of the budget consists of "uncontrollables"—expenditures authorized by existing law. These are not affected by Watergate, or anything else.

Most of the ways the government touches the lives of the average American are impervious to political squalls. For example, contrary to what you might think, neither wheat nor college football is the largest source of income in Nebraska. Social security is. We could raze the White House and suspend Congress and the government computers would still churn out the checks. And, for that matter, the wheat subsidy payments are not influenced by the President's standing in the Gallup Poll.

Mr. Nixon implies that, because of Watergate, the congressional calendar is gathering cobwebs. What nonsense. The guts of government are the appropriation bills. The House is well ahead of last year's pace in getting those bills out of committee. The Senate is further behind the House than usual, but the reasons for this are unrelated to Watergate.

For example, for reasons known but

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to God and Senate Majority Whip Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) the Senate has been wasting an enormous amount of time casting record votes on the sort of things that could be, and in other years were, disposed of with voice votes, such votes are quicker and draw fewer members from committee work. Last year the Senate cast 532 record votes, an all-time high. This year the Senate is ahead of that pace. This does not prove much about anything, but it is evidence that the Senate is burning up a lot of calories, and that it is not immobilized by Watergate.

The administration's most miserable performance is in dealing with the economy. But come hell or low Gallup

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Polls, nothing can interfere with Mr. Nixon's freedom to control, freeze, and generally tinker with the economy.

In 1970, Congress, looking around for some more power to give the executive, concocted the economic stabilization act. This lean piece of mischief contains 406 words, the important 22 being: "The President is authorized to issue such orders and regulations as he may deem appropriate to stabilize prices, rents, wages and salaries." Thus Mr. Nixon has been able to act on his own in making the economy what it is today.

It is going to take some exotic reasoning by Mr. Nixon to convince the public that Sen. Lowell Weicker is to blame for raging inflation, beef

shortages, turkey rustlers and other signs of the time. But that is what he tried to do in his speech when he put controlling inflation at the head of the list of things he was elected to do, things which "those who would exploit Watergate" allegedly want to keep him from doing.

Obviously Mr. Nixon does not want the public to understand the facts about government any more than he wants it to understand the facts about his administration's felonies. He has virtually declared the truth about both irrelevant.

If this approach "plays in Peoria" it will be because Mr. Nixon succeeds in inciting Peoria against the press, Congress, and especially the Senate Watergate committee. If he reiterates this line in a series of public speeches, American politics is going to resemble nature "red in tooth and claw." Mr. Nixon is trying to set against one another those who do and those who do not want to proceed with the Senate investigation until the truth about his administration's felonies is known.

Perhaps the only advantage of this tactic is that it will help us see if the committee has the kidney to "tough it out." Senator Ervin is running for reelection. Senator Baker is running for President. We know what kind of television personalities they are when the going is smooth. Now we shall see what kind of men they are.

Mr. Nixon's speech was empty of everything but divisiveness, and from that we learn something. The reason he went three months without saying anything on his own behalf is that he has nothing to say. His employees went as long as they could saying (as St. Augustine said of God) that Mr. Nixon is "justly secret and secretly just." This was an unsatisfactory posture, but it was more satisfactory than "positive polarization!" If Mr. Nixon really gets energetic about dividing the nation, we may soon be hoping that the cat again will get his tongue.