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The President's Press Conference

Post

In his first press conference in five months, President Nixon covered a lot of territory—and he left it strewn with suggestions and assertions that require more than a little scrutiny. So we will defer comment for the moment on some of the President's more startling responses and on those particularly tangled questions of fact to which he addressed himself. His allusion to "large scale" authorizations of "burglary" under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson (which he said were "quite well known"), his suggestion that his two predecessors had also approved a "taping capacity" similar to that which he had installed (after having had theirs dismantled), and his account of H. R. Haldeman's sojourn with the forbidden tapes are among those subjects to which we intend shortly to return. For now, it is the press conference as a whole—as an event—that seems to us to merit comment.

Mr. Nixon, by his own written and verbal account over the years, has been fascinated with endurance and ordeal in public life, and few who watched him on TV or thought about the circumstances in which he found himself, could suppose that the President was not under great stress or engaged in a particular test of endurance. His bearing was that of an anxious man fully aware of being in a situation of considerable peril, but fully determined not to appear either anxious or in anything less than full command of the situation he faced. And because these human responses are so readily conveyed from speaker to listener and are so eminently familiar to us all, the President managed to spread and share his unease, so that watching him was not—could not have been—a reassuring or settling experience. One admired the effort, its sheer doggedness—and remained uneasy, sympathetic on one level and profoundly disturbed and unsatisfied on another.

We expect that these outward and visible signs of unease have a great deal to do with one simple fact that is unrelated to exhaustion or hounding by the press or any of the other proximate causes that have been suggested. It is that the President has somehow got himself astride a mountain of contradictions, and here we are not so much thinking of contradictions in testimony con-

cerning this fact or that as contradictions in the very structure of his position. In one breath, for instance, the President tells us that his office possesses "inherent" powers that are virtually uncheckable by anyone else, except perhaps as public opinion and congressional pressure may act as a check. And yet in the next he expresses his thinly veiled contempt for those organs and agencies of the public that seek to have an effect on the way he uses his power. Again, though Mr. Nixon professes to accept all the "blame" for what has gone wrong, his running commentary suggests that he actually lays off on others responsibility for practically every act that has come into public disfavor: His advisers told him he should install the tapes, Clark Macgregor was in charge of the failed Reelection Committee investigation, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson did all the things he has been most criticized for and nobody fussed about them, Judge Byrne was the one who should have found the job overture during a trial offensive and he did not, John Mitchell didn't volunteer information the President needed, and so on. Mr. Nixon's recurrent and unper-suasive "forgiveness" of those he is in the process of accusing, his constant assertion that he is not criticizing those to whom he is actually laying waste, only seems to us to reinforce the impression of a man who deeply feels one thing and yet feels equally deeply an obligation to say another.

And this brings us to the heart of the matter, namely, the President's own perception, his own understanding, of what the Watergate means. Mr. Nixon reserved his hostility for those who are most troubled about the Watergate scandals, as distinct from those who perpetrated them. He declined to identify those nameless persons he has said are using the scandals strictly to keep him from fulfilling his mandate, but he did put forward in this connection a strange distinction between the Watergate and what he called "the people's business." Mr. President, the Watergate is the people's business; and the vitality of the presidency and the honor of government are the people's first concern. That is what accounts for their distress—and that is what must be understood.