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The Traveling Witness

President Nixon has become a traveling witness in his own behalf. After addressing all the Republican members and a few of the Democratic members of the House and Senate in six large groups at the White House last week, Mr. Nixon journeyed to Florida for a press conference, to Georgia for a speech and to Tennessee for a meeting with the Republican Governors.

This political barnstorming might be effective if Mr. Nixon were caught up in a controversy over public policy. But Watergate is a shorthand expression not only for actions of doubtful constitutionality but also for specific crimes and conspiracies to commit crimes.

The issues cannot be resolved with a broad brush treatment, with rambling monologues over scrambled eggs to forty or fifty Congressmen, or with self-serving, incomplete and contradictory answers at a new conference. After the applause has died away and the television lights have been turned off, the stark questions return. Who lied? Who was responsible? What is the evidence and what does it show?

Mr. Nixon's embarrassing and depressing performance before The Associated Press managing editors on Saturday evening demonstrated that from a serious evidentiary standpoint, this public relations blitz is useless. With regard to the tapes of his Watergate-related conversations, for example, Mr. Nixon told the editors that he first knew that two of the nine tapes were missing on Sept. 29 or 30 and that this fact was "finally determined" on Oct. 26. Why would it take 27 days to trace two missing tapes? Why was an inventory of the tapes not made in July when Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox first requested them?

The President assured his audience that the tapes would clear him and once again expressed the wistful hope that everyone could hear them. Judge Sirica ruled last week that the President could, of course, at any time waive executive privilege and release any or all of the tapes if he wished to do so. Nothing stands in the way of full disclosure.

In answering a question about his astonishingly small

income-tax payments in 1970 and 1971, Mr. Nixon stated: "It wasn't because of the deductions for, shall we say, a cattle ranch or interest, or, you know all these gimmicks."

On the contrary, Mr. Nixon must have claimed a huge deduction for interest payments. The deduction for the gift of his Vice-Presidential papers to the National Archives, a gift whose legal status is decidedly in doubt, was limited by law to 50 per cent of his income. He therefore could not possibly have reduced the tax on his \$200,000 salary to less than \$800 if he did not avail himself of deductions for interest payments or some other "gimmick."

Mr. Nixon made a brazen attempt to shift the responsibility for the dairy price support scandal to Congress. According to Mr. Nixon, he raised the dairy price supports in 1971 because if he had not done so, the Democrats would have enacted a law requiring him to raise them even higher. The dairy lobby's promise of \$2 million in campaign contributions, he insists, had nothing to do with his decision. But when he acted, a dairy bill had not cleared a committee in either house, much less reached his desk. If such a bill had passed, he could have vetoed it and been reasonably certain his veto would be upheld as most of his other vetoes have been.

There are other contradictions, misleading statements, and unexplained gaps in Mr. Nixon's answers at this Saturday news conference. Moreover, information filtering out from last week's meetings of the President and members of Congress is equally disturbing. With regard to the I.T.T. antitrust settlement, Mr. Nixon reportedly contradicted sworn testimony last year by former Attorney General John N. Mitchell. With regard to the firing of the special prosecutor, he contradicted the testimony of former Attorney General Elliot Richardson, of Mr. Cox and of the documentary evidence.

Speeches, news conferences and meetings with Governors all have their usefulness in many situations. But Watergate is not a normal situation. If Mr. Nixon wants to bear witness in his own behalf, he may testify under oath in the only appropriate forums—a court of law, the Senate Watergate Committee, or an impeachment trial by the Senate.