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The State of the Presidency

IT WAS A VERY ordinary and conventional State of the Union address, delivered in the most extraordinary and unconventional of circumstances. That, in fact, appears to have been the President's purpose: to create an illusion of normality, to drown out the ugly, insistent sounds of weakness and scandal in the familiar sing-song we have all come to recognize over the years as State of the Unionese. So all the old and eminently forgettable formulations were there—the recital of accomplishment, the promise of easy solutions to difficult problems, the shopworn commitment to peace and prosperity as if these were somehow novel and distinctive goals for a President to have. There were the guaranteed, tried-and-true applause-getting lines. And there was, of course, in consequence, the applause. It was, in short, a ceremonial event, much as the announcement of Gerald Ford's nomination in a glittering East Room extravaganza last fall was ceremonial: the ceremony was invoked as a kind of all-enveloping blanket, one that might serve to muffle the very disagreeable truths and troubles that were on everybody's mind. Last fall it was the disgrace of Mr. Agnew. Wednesday night at the Capitol it was Mr. Nixon's own past failures and uncertain future prospects.

Thus, not until the very end of his lengthy address did the President mention the unmentionable—Watergate. And even then he did so only by way of making a distinction between the Watergate crimes that have shattered and enfeebled his administration and those "great issues" that he considers fit for the attention of the American public. This is a distinction Mr. Nixon has been trying vainly and wrongheadedly to establish almost since the beginning of this dismal affair, and elsewhere on this page today we have assembled a brief chronology of this effort.

It seems to us that there are two aspects of the President's effort over the past many months that are particularly relevant to the renewed attempt he made in his State of the Union address Wednesday night. One is that the President's pre-emptory declarations that the Watergate matter should long since have been laid to rest have neither the force of magic nor the force of law. Indeed, they seem invariably to be followed by new revelations and/or new crimes and improprieties. The other is that the state of political and governmental limbo which has been created by Mr. Nixon's own reluctance to pursue the facts of the scandals has become very much a part of the public business—very much a factor in any reasonable or practical discussion of the State of the Union. For by now we have seen evidence of a gross disfiguration of government institutions and of official morality under Mr. Nixon's administration. We have seen, as well, a continuing, systematic effort on Mr. Nixon's part to evade an accounting to the public for what went wrong. And we have seen, in consequence, a condition of widespread paralysis in the government over which Mr. Nixon presides. True, the administration has prepared a budget; Dr. Kissinger has performed admirably in seeking accommodations in the Mideast; and evidently new programs have been fashioned and have worked their way around the bureaucratic shoals. But in that critical part of the presidential role which calls upon the President to resolve great and divisive policy issues within the executive branch, to bring influence to bear upon Congress forcefully and persuasively, and to present himself as a secure and commanding figure on the world scene, it is an inescapable fact that the unresolved questions arising from that array of misconduct called Watergate are undermining his capacity to function.

We call a surprise witness in this connection. It is Mr. Nixon himself. For again and again he has raised the prospect of a weakened and diverted presidency as

one of the fearsome prices we may have to pay if the Watrgate issue is not speedily laid to rest. To be sure, the President, intent upon demonstrating that he can and does still govern, has not gone so far as to concede that the worst has come true, that he has, in fact, been rendered helpless to deal with the grave pressures of, say, the energy crisis or an unruly economy. But he has vividly suggested that continued concern with the corruption issue could easily and quickly bring the worst to pass. He said as much on Wednesday night:

> *. . . the time has come, my colleagues, for not only the executive, the President, but the members of Congress, for all of us to join together in devoting our full energies to these great issues that I have discussed tonight which involve the welfare of the American people in so many different ways as well as the peace of the world.*

It is a sentiment with which we wholeheartedly agree, even as we agree with Mr. Nixon's other observation, "one year of Watergate is enough." Where we think the President is so desperately wrong is in his calculation of what has prolonged and continues to prolong the Watergate agony.

In this respect one need only consider that more than half of the elapsed year Mr. Nixon so regrets has been largely consumed by a struggle by the Special Watergate Prosecution Force to extract relevant documentary evidence from Mr. Nixon's White House and to account for the disappearance and destruction of some subpoenaed evidence. It is, in fact, Mr. Nixon's own resistance to a full investigation of the Watergate squalors that has been the principal cause of delay.

That is not the way the White House tells it, of course; the official line is that the Watergate uncertainties are being kept alive by some small and "inspired" group of political "grudge fighters" who are seeking to exploit the President's troubles for partisan advantage. But this line of argument necessarily ignores the fact that a number of irreversible constitutional processes have been called into play, some by the President. Mr. Nixon authorized the appointment of a Special Prosecutor; he asked that the Joint Committee on Internal Revenue Taxation in effect audit his tax returns; he suggested that Watergate, as it affected various members of his official family, be turned over to the grand juries and the courts; as to his own possible involvement, it is his lawyers who have argued that this matter can be dealt with only by means of the impeachment machinery that has now been set up by the House. Having managed, one way and the other, to thwart or delay the efforts of almost all these instrumentalities, Mr. Nixon now announces that their time is up.

The situation that has thus been created goes very much to the heart of the general subject Mr. Nixon discussed the other night: the State of the Union. And we will turn shortly to the programs and policy matters that were outlined in the President's speech, for, in ordinary times, they are the soundest guide to a President's perception of what the state of the union is. But first things first, for when the President speaks of harnessing "our full energies . . . to great issues" he seems not to recognize that great national exertions depend for their strength on a generous measure of public confidence in those presiding over our public affairs. That is what was missing from Mr. Nixon's State of the Union report—any awareness on his part that, more than at any time we can remember, the State of the Union is now being determined by the particular state of his presidency.