

The Week of the President's Speech

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It is not corruption in the classic or commonplace sense. That may have something to do with the difficulty people have had in putting it all together, in deciding how to think about Watergate. To be sure, all the familiar components are there: money moving around in vast quantities, misused influence and the abuse of official authority, an endless series of secret transactions and an apparent commitment to cover up their meaning in an equally endless series of evasions and lies. But the components have arranged themselves in an unfamiliar way—unfamiliar at least to Americans who are accustomed to corruption that implies a totally different relationship between political power and personal greed.

For what is distinctive about that collection of events we have come to call Watergate—and what is distinctively sinister about it—is that this has not been a case of the misuse of influence or power for the sake of acquiring money. It has been just the other way around: money has been misused for the sake of acquiring power—and more power. True, the Robert Vescos of this world appear to have been seeking favors from officialdom in an all too conventional way. But no one accuses Mr. Mitchell or Mr. Stans or Mr. Ehrlichman or Mr. Haldeman of feathering their nests with those suitcases full of hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash. That would be crooked, but it wouldn't be frightening. What is frightening is what the money went for. It went to buy burglary and break-in and surveillance and hidden manipulation of the American political system. It went, in short, to buy more power for Mr. Nixon—power over people and events and institutions we ordinarily think of as being beyond the reach of White House control.

That is what the conspiracy has been all about—it is hard to put the past few months' revelations together any other way. And that is why the President's effort to explain it all the other evening apparently left so many Americans feeling uneasy and unsatisfied, Americans who—like ourselves—desperately want to believe that the President and the presidency can yet come out of this thing with a measure of respect and honor sufficient to maintain presidential authority. For Mr. Nixon has not asked us to believe that a sizeable network of his closest and most important associates conspired to serve their own personal self-interest without his knowledge over a prolonged period of time. Rather, he has asked us to believe that he neither knew nor suspected anything of an elaborate series of criminal maneuvers designed for

the sole purpose of enhancing *his* personal and political power. Therein lie the seeds of much of the continuing public uneasiness over the President's presentation the other evening. It offered not much more solace to true believers than to skeptics. For Mr. Nixon left the public with a choice of believing that he—the President of the United States and a man whose actions can be of life and death importance to people around the world—was either a victim (over at least 10 months) of this well-organized conspiracy or a part of it.

We reduce the maelstrom of the week's and month's events to these stark and ugly terms because we think the formulation, painful as it is to regard, represents the essentials of the situation in which the American people now find themselves and which both they and the President must ultimately address. We do so as well because we believe that only a pitiless acknowledgment of this predicament will suffice to make people address what is going on with the candor and seriousness so clearly called for. We have in mind, in the first place, anyone who would seek to find entertainment or satisfaction or—God help us—pleasure in the present turmoil. But we also have in mind—prominently—Mr. Nixon himself and some of his political constituents from whom some pretty pointless and unsatisfactory explanations and justifications have come forth over the past several days.

Chief among these, we would argue, is Mr. Nixon's own line of reasoning the other night, which held that the whole situation could be pretty much described as one in which a number of his assistants were simply guilty of an excess of "zeal" in the furtherance of "a cause they deeply believed to be right." Who are these men to have their belief in what was "right" given even a moment's consideration by Mr. Nixon or by the rest of us? How can we credit respectable, let alone moral, motives to men who evidently perverted the public trust, deformed our processes of criminal justice, conspired to use the authority of the U.S. government not just to break laws but to cover up crimes already committed? No, an excess of "zeal" won't do. An attempt to rationalize it all as no more than an incautious reaction to the potential excesses of the other side won't do either. Nor, we would add, will a belated effort to demonstrate that "everyone does it," and so it really isn't so bad. We are dealing here with a distinctive and sinister situation. It won't go away. There is yet much more to be heard from the courts. And there is yet much more to be heard from Mr. Nixon.