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Setting a Trap for Himself

The terrible trap President Nixon has dug for himself is defined exactly by his State of the Union Message. In order to rally his followers, the President has to sound confident and upbeat, as he did in the message actually delivered to the Congress and seen on television.

But the facts, as laid out in the full written text of the message, do not justify ringing claims. The effect is to deepen public mistrust of Mr. Nixon, which goes to the heart of his basic problem and thus promotes even more the chance that he will be forced out of office one way or another.

Consider first the major claim staked by the President. That is the claim that the economy will be in good shape this year. "Let me speak to that issue head-on," he said boldly in the remarks delivered to the Congress and over national television. "There will be no recession in the United States."

But in his written remarks, and even more in the economic message, Mr. Nixon was far more cautious. His written State of the Union Message said:

"We have known for some time that a slowdown of economic growth is inevitable in 1974 . . . unfortunately the very mild slowdown which we anticipated in 1974 now threatens to be more pronounced . . . we expect, therefore, that during the early part of this year output will rise little if at all, unemployment will rise somewhat and inflation will be high." To most Americans, a recession is precisely stagnant output and rising unemployment. The

addition of high inflation hardly makes matters better. So the President's boast, on examination, turns out to have no foundation. The more so as he seems to have no timely measures in mind for perking up the slumping economy.

Consider next the cherry note sounded by Mr. Nixon with respect to the energy crisis. In his spoken address to the Congress and the nation, the big emphasis was on "a goal to which I am deeply dedicated. Let us do everything we can to avoid gasoline rationing." On top of that, the President announced that "I have been assured, through my personal contacts with friendly leaders in the Mideast area, that an urgent meeting will be called in the immediate future to discuss the lifting of the oil embargo."

But the fine print of the written message struck a different note. It said: "We still face genuine shortages . . . and sharply increased prices." Moreover, it turned out that "the urgent meeting" arranged through "my personal contacts" had in fact been scheduled long ago by Arab leaders on their own initiative.

What this says to me is that Mr. Nixon is once more trying to con the American public. On television he makes marvelous music and paints beautiful pictures. He seems to promise no rationing and no recession.

In fact, he knows full well that the promises are dubious. Even his own advisers, a supine lot, do not go along

with his rhetoric. Nor do they have any programs for averting the trouble that looms ahead.

Accordingly, it seems to me that the State of the Union has a negative relation to Mr. Nixon's impeachment problem. The impeachment proceeding is now rolling. The House, thanks to careful preparation by Chairman Peter Rodino of the House Judiciary Committee and Chief Counsel John Doar, is not going to be stampeded.

It is going to move in a deliberate and careful way. The voting of subpoena power assures that it will get what information is required. Thus the process cannot be stopped in its tracks by a mere presidential speech—or indeed any external event.

In the present case, however, my sense is that the President deepens his troubles. He has once more shown cynical disregard for keeping faith with the American people. He is once more misrepresenting. He is once more abusing the popular trust which in this country is the fount of legitimacy.

So the speech cannot put an end, as the President hopes, to what he is pleased to disparage as a year of Watergate. On the contrary, it shows that Mr. Nixon cannot level with the American people now anymore than in the past. It thus underlines the importance and urgency of unraveling to the end the complex of frauds and abuses and lies for which Watergate is merely a shorthand term.

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