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'What Catastrophe?' 'What Scandal?'

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No one seems to have noticed it, but there are some truly striking parallels between the President's economic policy and his Watergate policy.

Not the least of them, of course, is the fact that they aren't policies at all, but haphazard reactions forced by circumstances beyond his control.

The President's initial reaction to both disasters was: tough it out; ignore it and maybe it'll go away.

And so for long after it seemed clear to nearly everyone else that something had to be done about the catastrophic wage-price spiral, the President was saying, in effect, "What catastrophe?" The indicators were indicating, and the corner had been cornered and things were looking very good indeed, no matter what the doomsayers in the press and in the opposition party were saying.

And he kept on talking, reiterating his opposition to controls, until circumstances cut the ground from under him, and he instituted Phase I. It was the least he could have done.

Likewise with Watergate, the press and political opponents, he tried to tell us, were attempting to turn a third-rate burglary into a major political scandal. Well, he'd show them. He would just let The Washington Post keep jabbering away until the people got bored. Meanwhile, he assumed his "What scandal?" posture and spoke of other matters.

But then Judge Sirica started squeezing and James McCord started behaving like a tube of toothpaste. The result

was the President's April 17 speech in which he announced "major developments" and "serious charges which came to my attention."

Watergate, he was finally admitting, was a serious problem that wasn't going to be blown away by a brave countenance. In other words, Phase I. It was the least he could have done.

But if April 17 temporarily checked the momentum of the public reaction to Watergate, it wasn't calculated to provide more than a respite during which longer-range plans could be formulated. As in the Economic Phase II wage-price freeze, Mr. Nixon was buying time.

But there's no point in buying time if you don't do something with your purchase. The President didn't. In the case of the economy, he introduced the voluntarism of Phase III, and in the case of Watergate, he delivered his April 30 God-Bless-America speech in which he took 30 prime-time minutes to look his fellow Americans in the eye and tell them nothing at all.

In both cases, the ploy was disastrous. And in both cases it was followed by yet another attempt to tough it out. He subsequently yielded, of course, but with more confusion than grace.

The other day, with nation's economic troubles beyond debating, we got Phase III-and-a-half, with a promise that Phase IV, whatever it is, will be short-lived.

As regards Watergate, I'm not sure what we got.

Nor is my point to force the two crises into lock-step. The point is the President's way of dealing with them: Don't do anything unless and until you have to, and then only what you must.

That's not the formula that has made Richard Nixon a formidable politician. The political Nixon has been the planner, the schemer, the tough-minded guy with the long view.

But Richard Nixon *knows* politics, and that is the difference. His reactions to both the economy and Watergate have been laced with confusion. He's only vaguely aware of what the situation is, and not at all sure how to deal with it. He'd rather not do anything at all, but now and then circumstances force him to act.

It finally becomes clear that while the President is asking the people to have confidence in him, he hasn't any confidence in himself. He plays doctor because he has to, but he's nervous about writing prescriptions because he doesn't understand the disease.

And so he keeps dealing with symptoms, putting bandages on the chancres as they appear and hoping that the body politic will somehow cure itself.

Maybe that's the only thing he can do. The unacceptable alternative just might be a confession that he cannot play physician because—at least in the case of Watergate—he is the disease.