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'Inoperative' Is Today's Word

Inoperative is the word for today, class, and for once, I'm happy to say, Ronnie used proper English and chose precisely the right word for the occasion. So we can all stop teasing Ronnie for his dangling participles and misplaced modifiers and generally whimsical syntax.

If you remember, the assignment was to find a word to describe all the statements President Nixon had made about the Watergate burglary up to last Monday.

Some of you submitted some pretty good words, though I must say I was a little shocked at a couple of entries—where do you pick up language like that?

But no matter. Ronnie came through in fine style and gets a straight A. As I'm sure you've all learned after a trip to the dictionary, "inoperative" means, quite simply, that something isn't working. Like, "The campaign chairman complained that his electronic listening device wasn't working."

Note that Ronnie didn't say "inoperable." That means incapable of working, and it's pretty obvious that the President's statements on Watergate had a high workability potential. They did, in fact, work with the smooth, crushing efficiency of a B52 in the crucial months between the break-in and the election.

But conditions change, and the Model T that was operative only yesterday can become inoperative overnight.

This is not to say, as students of both Model Ts and Nixon statements will agree, that the process can't be reversed.

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Just as there is now a flourishing market in spruced-up antique cars, so it is always possible that an old Nixon statement can be rescued from the scrap heap of history, rehabilitated and polished up to look as good as new.

Critics, of course, have been quick to label Ronnie's use of "inoperative" a classic example of administration arrogance or worse. "The nerve of a burglar" is one phrase that comes most easily to mind.

This is unfair. For anyone in Washington to come right out and admit that something he did or said didn't work right or didn't work at all—that is refreshing indeed.

It's a rare day, for instance, when a columnist or commentator says, "What I told you six months ago turns out to be cockeyed, so I'm retracting it. Here is the new truth." The traditional method of dealing with inoperative editorial comment is just to pretend it had never been uttered—a technique that is surprisingly operative, since the inopera-

tive comments are usually as forgotten as the fish they wrapped the day after they appeared.

So here's to Ronnie and the new Era of Frankness. When something doesn't work out, let the politicians declare it openly as they announce the new brainstorm. Let them assess the degree of inoperativity and the cost of the repairs necessary to attain operational success. "This program hasn't worked as well as we in our human frailty thought it would, but we think a little tinkering will make it run."

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The new technique has almost unlimited applicability—to campaign promises, bombings, truces, pollution, farm subsidies, cover-ups, general lying, you name it. And it may be the only way to keep the voters from declaring, at their earliest opportunity, that the election last November is inoperative.

Editor's Note: Murray Chotiner has taken exception to use of his name in Mr. Braaten's satirical column of March 31, on public confusion as to who is involved in the Watergate episode. Mr. Braaten did not intend to imply that Mr. Chotiner or others named were indeed implicated in that affair. The Star-News has no information that Mr. Chotiner was involved.