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Mr. Nixon's Three-Front War

By James Reston

It's the normal and prudent rule of power and politics that you never try to fight more than one battle at a time, even when you're fighting from a position of strength; but President Nixon is back in Washington, weak, breathless and defiant, fighting on three fronts at the same time.

It is good theater but bad politics. For in his latest press conference, he blamed the Congress for high prices and inflation, blamed the reporters rather than the burglars and spies for his Watergate troubles, and even told the Supreme Court that he would only obey a "definitive" judgment on the Watergate tapes, without explaining what "definitive" meant, or why he alone of all Americans had the right to pass judgment on Supreme Court decisions.

This is very strange. The Congress has come back from its vacation in a compromising mood. Most members seem to be saying that Watergate is an insoluble mess but let's try to make the best of it. Mike Mansfield in the Senate and Tip O'Neill in the House, the Democratic leaders, have been arguing that the crisis is too serious to be exploited for political advantage.

But the President has come back to Washington telling the Congress to shape up. "We have had this year," he told the press, "as far as Congress is concerned, a disappointing performance so far." This has merely irritated the Congress, which doesn't think Mr. Nixon's performance has been very helpful.

The President's approach to the press and the courts is about the same as his attitude toward the Congress: when in trouble, attack! When Richard Valeriani of N.B.C. asked him whether he had a problem of rebuilding confi-

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dence in his leadership, he replied that he did, and then he blamed this lack of confidence, not on the burglaries, financial deceptions and political espionage and sabotage by his own supporters, but on the Congressional investigating and newspaper reporting of these facts.

To have the President "attacked" for four months on prime television time, he said—and attacked "by innuendo, by leak, by, frankly, leers and sneers of commentators," was bound to wear away public confidence in the President, he insisted. In short, he had a confidence problem, as he had an inflation problem, but it was somebody else's fault.

Mr. Nixon was equally skeptical of the courts. Get Watergate off television and into the courts, he said, but he would not give the courts the right to listen to the Watergate tapes in camera, and he would not, he insisted, abide by anything but a "definitive" Supreme Court judgment, which he refused to define.

It could be that this is why he has a "confidence" problem. His trouble is more personal than legal. He is not trusted because he trusts no man and no institution. He lives under the dominion of fear. As he sees it, the world, the Congress, the courts, the press are all against him. He feels that maybe his own national security officials are suspect and have to be bugged, and now it is reported that he even had his own brother followed and wire-tapped by the Secret Service.

The interesting and troubling thing about all this is why, with three and a half years to go and with all his problems, he keeps on proclaiming the independence, freedom and integrity of the Congress, the courts and the press, and then fusses with them, defies them and blames them for his agonies, and insists on fighting on three or four fronts at the same time.

For almost everybody in Washington, it's a bore to keep on psychoanalyzing these strange actions of the President—his restless movements from Camp David to Florida to San Clemente, his long silences and disappearances, and then his sudden appearances and defiant proclamations.

But this is the heart of the President's confidence problem. It is not so much the facts of Watergate, disturbing as they are, but the attitudes and atmosphere that made Watergate possible, and the deceptive manipulations and inconsistent testimony of the case that perpetuate the doubts in the Congress, the courts and the press.

His confidence problem, which is clear in the popularity polls and which he has not yet faced, was defined long ago by Homer:

*For I hold that man as hateful
as the gates of hell,
Who says one thing, while another
in his heart lies hidden well.*