

Reston Reports

Speech That Didn't Do It

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President Nixon left the Watergate crisis about where it was before he spoke.

He rejected the advice of both those who urged him to mount a counter-offensive against the Senate investigating committee and those who urged him to confess error and seek reconciliation. In short, he re-defined the conflict in different words, but he didn't remove it or even change it.

His main theme was that he didn't know about the Watergate burglary or the coverup. And nobody except John Dean had suggested

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that he did, he argued, so now that all these charges have been argued over television for weeks, let's all get on together to more important things.

This was not the appeal of a President who felt trapped or defeated. He looked drawn and a little sad, but his argument was that of a man who felt he was still very much in command.

He seemed to be saying, now that I've explained it all to you, let's put our differences aside and get on to other things. But, in fact, he introduced not a single new fact, answered none of the major ambiguities or contradictions of the Ervin hearings; he merely proclaimed his innocence and appealed for trust.

Paradox

The President spoke in a paradoxical situation. It was the first day of peace for America after nine years of the Indochina war. The dollar, twice devalued in the last year and a half and badly battered in recent weeks on the world money markets, began to rally in the week before the President spoke. Also, the U.S. balance of international payments finally showed a surplus in the second quarter of 1973, just before he went on TV.

Still, mainly because of the Watergate scandals, the President's rating in the popularity polls dropped on the day before his speech to the lowest level of any President in the past 20 years — with only 31 percent of those questioned in a Gallup poll saying they thought he was doing a good job.

CONTRAST

His performance in this situation was quite different from his handling of previous personal crises. In his earlier explanations of the Watergate scandals, he talked about his personal responsibility for creating an atmosphere in which his staff had been too zealous.

This time, while repeating that he took responsibility for whatever was done in his name, he blamed the atmosphere of the '60s, the anti-war demonstrators and their supporters in press, radio and television for establishing the notion that their higher ends justified illegal means. Unfortunately, he suggested, some of his own people made the same mistake in the 1972 election, but

they were merely following the mistaken lead of the dissidents of the '60s. It was all wrong, but it was somebody else's fault — and certainly not his.

THEME

There was another unmistakable theme in the President's speech. This was that the Ervin committee and the press, radio and television were going on and on reporting the Watergate affair, not because it was their duty to report the facts, but somehow, he suggested, because they were trying to exploit the crisis, maybe even glorying in the tragedy, not so interested in getting the facts as in getting the President.

This was stated rather carefully but unmistakably and it is a critical point. For this suggestion, which ran all through the speech — that Watergate was secondary and being used for unworthy reasons to keep the President from getting on with his larger and primary nobler objectives — is likely to be bitterly resented by the executive and legislative investigators.

'CHECKERS'

The contrast between this Nixon speech and his first major "Checkers" speech also was striking. In that other awkward situation, 21 years ago, when he was accused of having a political slush fund, he addressed himself to the moralities of the problem and not to the legalities.

"It isn't a question of whether it was legal or illegal," he said in September of 1952 when he was running with Dwight Eisenhower. "That isn't enough. The question is, was it morally wrong?"

Mr. Nixon did not deal with this question in personal terms last night. Nor did he leave the judgment of right and wrong and his own destiny to the judgment of the people, as he did at the end of the Checkers speech.

He merely repeated what he had said before, what he had directed in his legal brief that denied the tapes to the courts, asserting his innocence and his rights to executive privilege, and his power to deny evidence in his possession of possible criminal activity.

RESULTS

He avoided all the theatrical props this time: No pictures of his family or busts of President Lincoln behind him. Yet, the odd thing about Mr. Nixon's speech is that he raised in the beginning the main questions, which he promised to answer, and then didn't answer them.

In fairness to the President, he said he wasn't going to answer the questions raised by the Senate hearings and he kept his promise. It was suspected that after three months of silence, he would say something that would ease if not remove the doubts of the American people. But, while he didn't make things any worse, he didn't make them any better. He merely asked for trust, but didn't offer any new evidence to change the political conflict or remove the public doubts.