

No Defense . . .

President Nixon's speech on the Watergate scandals and the supplementary statement issued by the White House are as remarkable for what they omit as for what they contain. In essence, they constitute a concession by Mr. Nixon that he has no detailed defense to offer against the damaging testimony before the Senate Watergate committee. In place of a rebuttal, he offers an omnibus denial and a plea for the public to turn its attention to other pressing public issues. It is a sad, disappointing and wholly unconvincing performance.

Insofar as he ventures into specifics, Mr. Nixon makes statements that are highly questionable. This applies particularly to the President's repeated assertion that, beginning on March 21, "I launched an intensive effort of my own to get the facts and to get the facts out." The unhappy fact is that throughout this entire year of scandals and denials, the White House has volunteered only one material bit of information. That was the fact of the burglary of the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. And for this disclosure Mr. Nixon can take no credit. By his own statement, he knew of the break-in for more than a month before the judge in the Ellsberg trial was notified; and he made the reluctant disclosure only because it was plain that Attorney General Kleindienst and Assistant Attorney General Petersen would have resigned if he had not.

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In urging that Americans leave Watergate to the courts and turn their attention elsewhere, Mr. Nixon seems still unaware that the issues involved far transcend the conviction of particular individuals. Watergate does not just refer to a bungled burglary in a Washington office building; it is a shorthand description of lawlessness and ruthlessness on the part of the White House, the Nixon campaign organization and certain members of the Nixon Cabinet. The vast powers of the Government were being used corruptly and irresponsibly to serve partisan and private ends.

Much of this wrongdoing has been concealed under a fog blanket of "national security" and "internal security." Despite his assurance that he can protect the nation's security "by constitutional means," the President even now has not really condemned this wrongdoing. He mitigates it as due to an excess of zeal when, in fact, some of the worst excesses resulted from settled policy which he defined and from calculated decisions which he or senior members of his staff approved. It was Mr. Nixon himself, after all, who set up the White House "plumbers" and who personally briefed Egil Krogh, the chief plumber, on the importance of his mission. Each current word of Presidential criticism is more than offset by a balancing comment: "It is essential that such mistakes not be repeated. But it is also essential that we do not overreact to particular mistakes by tying the President's hands in a way that would risk sacrificing our security."

Can the public really believe that the President has learned the lessons of Watergate when he displays so little recognition that his high-ranking aides gravely distorted traditional concepts of individual freedom and democratic process in the name of "security."