

Perhaps the most extraordinary passage of President Nixon's speech was his bald assertion that it is Watergate that stops him from acting on the nation's urgent problems. "Legislation vital to your health and well-being sits unattended on the Congressional calendar," he declared. That is a strange remark from a Chief Executive who has vetoed three out of the last four Health, Education and Welfare appropriations bills, has impounded health funds and has blocked—even illegally pocket-vetoed—health bills passed by Congress.

It is equally astonishing to find the President blaming the concern over Watergate for his inability to grapple effectively with inflation or the decline in the value of the dollar. While there are worldwide factors that make it unfair to hold the Administration wholly responsible for these economic ills, it is incontestable that the Administration has all but run up the surrender flag in its efforts to contain the runaway rise in prices. As the calamitous advent of Phase 4 makes clear, the White House simply has no program for dealing with inflation—and Watergate is merely a stormcellar in which it now seeks to hide.

The proper and necessary role for the courts is to determine culpability for the specific crimes committed in this far-ranging series of scandals. But the President would be on sounder ground, even in that phase of the inquiry, if he stopped withholding the tapes needed to help establish the truth or falsity of disputed testimony.

Even if Mr. Nixon had not undercut his own claim of confidentiality for these records of White House conversations by permitting H. R. Haldeman to take one of them home after his resignation as a Presidential aide, there would be an easy way to make the tapes available as evidence without creating anxiety about the freedom with which insiders, outsiders or representatives of foreign countries could converse with the President.

The proper course for Mr. Nixon would be to turn the tapes over to a Federal judge or to an impartial screening panel for exclusion of secret military information and anything else that was irrelevant. The material would then be released to the Watergate special prosecutor and the grand jury, thus enabling the courts to get on with their task.

It would also be helpful for the President to make good on the point-by-point rebuttal of specific charges which was long promised by the White House but which was absent from Wednesday's supplementary statement. As long as Mr. Nixon withholds both the tapes and a factual reply, the public will have to conclude that he has no credible defense to offer. Without a convincing Presidential defense, Watergate can only grow rather than diminish in potential significance.