

The President: Standing 'Above the Battle' . . .

The President has said his say about the Watergate horror, and one must wait to see the signs of the country's response to him. The evidence from the grass roots is pretty strong already that most people feel they have already heard enough about Watergate and allied misdeeds. Hence President Nixon stands a reasonable chance of a friendly national response, over-all.

If that is the outcome, the Senate will hear about it from the grass roots soon enough. And in that event, we may shortly see the end of the most perilous phase of the Watergate exposure. One must add that this phase of sustained attack on the President and the presidency has been perilous for no sort of moral reason. For bleakly practical reasons, it is always dangerous to have a crippled American President.

But the response to the speech is in the future. For the present, it is more worth noting that this endlessly redrafted address by Richard M. Nixon bore quite visible traces of the prolonged conflict among the President's most trusted remaining advisers. The conflict has been going on for months; and on Wednesday, it reached its climax and its end.

The conflict has been about what stance the President ought to adopt under the perpetual drumfire of accusation and attack. The majority of his present staff members have always favored a moderate, patient, above-the-battle stance. The main outlines of Wednesday's speech clearly followed

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the blueprint of this group, which has been led by Gen. Alexander Haig and the White House new legal adviser, J. Fred Buzhardt.

But there have been others, notably among the congressional rightwingers and the President's own circle of private friends, who have repeatedly urged him to, "come out swinging with both fists." The President has repeatedly been tempted to listen to these urgings. The main trace of this—and a clear trace, too—was to be found in the reference in his speech to unauthorized wire-tapping in previous administrations.

On this subject, we have heard a lot of high-toned preaching from people who should know better, if they know anything whatever about the life of this dreary city. The President is of course right that the practice now so loudly condemned in the Nixon administration was quite as common—in a couple of cases, very much more common—in all four of the previous ad-

ministrations since the second world war.

This reporter first learned that he was being wiretapped in the Truman administration, when an old friend and a great Secretary of Defense, Robert A. Lovett, led the way silently from his Pentagon office into the corridor. There he gave a clear warning that it would be wise to be careful about telephone calls for a good while, since a "security" investigation was in progress. The fact that the warning had to be conveyed in the corridor was not without meaning, either.

The record of the previous four administrations' wiretapping of officials of those administrations, reporters and the rest, were remarkably hard for President Nixon to come by. He wanted the complete records, which are said to be fairly eye-popping, even by the standards of cynicism and experience. He only got them, however, as the result of a hand-search of 25,000 FBI files.

The simple fact that such a search was made is proof enough of the temptation the President has continuously felt to follow a much, much tougher course. The results of the search, above-summarized, are also proof that the President has exercised a lot of self-restraint thus far.

After all, it cannot have been easy for him to be publicly portrayed as a monster of iniquity for doing precisely what his most admired predecessors had also done, and sometimes on a far larger, more surprising scale. It cannot have been easy for him, either, to hear the indignant but grossly ill-informed denials that this could possibly have been true; or to watch the eagerness with which those denials were generally accepted, on the basis of no sort of adequate factual inquiry.

Then, too, whatever you may think about Watergate, you have to face the fact if you are honest about such matters, that Richard M. Nixon has suffered from what he must regard as an unfair double standard. Think of this Nixonian Bay of Pigs, for instance, as against what happened in 1961 and what was then said about it.

All this is of some importance, finally. If the recent speech does not produce the results the President wants, he will then do what he has already come to doing. He will use all the awe-inspiring resources of his office to "come out swinging with both fists." Divisive will be a mild way of describing the predictable results.