

Lessons of Watergate

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Aug. 19—The reaction to the President's speech last week centers on what he did not say, or what he should have said, rather than what he did say.

Many of his critics suggest that the President should have offered "new facts," or given a point-by-point refutation of John Dean's charges.

Had he done so, adopting a lawyer-like, defensive posture, the same critics would have dismissed it all with "Okay, now let's have the tapes."

Many of his supporters complain that he did not blast the Ervin committee and other tormentors out of the water for being partisan, unfair and afflicted with a double standard.

Had the President taken the slam-bang, I've-had-enough route, he might have rallied troops that admire a Trumanesque scrapper, but he would have guaranteed the nation three more years of passionate acrimony.

Instead, he made a thoughtful speech about what he believed to be "the important lessons of Watergate."

He addressed himself to root causes, which—let's admit it—is an approach that many of his supporters scorned as "permissivist" in considering action against crime. Now, with poetic justice, many liberals so long accused of being "bleeding hearts" are no longer interested in root causes, but want to hear the clank of prison doors.

One root cause of Watergate was the ready tolerance of an attitude that placed the dictates of individual conscience above the law, which, the President said, "became fashionable in the nineteen-sixties, as individuals and groups increasingly asserted the right to take the law into their own hand, insisting that their purposes served a higher morality.

"The notion that the end justifies the means proved contagious," the

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President went on: "Thus it is not surprising, even though it is deplorable, that some persons in 1972 adopted the morality that they themselves had rightly condemned, and committed acts that have no place in our political system."

An effort to understand why is not a way of copping a plea, or of shifting responsibility: "Those acts cannot be defended," the President asserted. But motives must be explored if we are to understand what brought all this about, and avert Watergates in the future.

Others, with a simpler explanation, want no complexities or shadings introduced: Nixon and his gang wanted to be tyrants, they feel, and it is "us-against-them" same as ever, no quarter asked or given.

The New York Times, for one, dismisses any examination of the motives of some of the lawbreakers and zealots by adopting a technique of rhetoric it so often condemns in Mr. Nixon: stretching a point to its ridiculous extreme, and then attacking the straw-man of the extreme.

Thus, the look into root causes is derided: "The violent action of a few irresponsible radicals such as the Weathermen can hardly justify illegal activity by high officials of the White House." The President never remotely suggested that it should; the Times's attack is irrelevant but effective, keeping the lines of implacable enmity drawn up tight, rejecting any overtures to rational discussion.

Isn't it about time we all recognized that a policy of "us against them," an exaltation of political hatred, an impugning of opposition motives, is what leads to excess, repression and lawlessness?

Wouldn't this be a good moment to consider where "higher morality" leads, and without trying to equate civil disobedience with official misconduct, to grope our way back to a greater respect for the rule of law?

If those who now feel vindicated turn vindictive, they will have joined the forces they have most condemned; if the President is at the top of your enemies list, think for a moment: What are you doing with a political enemies list?

The President of the United States has learned, and admits publicly he has learned, that "one excess begets another." In our time, no Chief Executive has ever learned a more costly lesson; now he is trying to suggest a new civility to supporters and opponents alike.

In the mutual siege mentality of "us against them," the leader of "us" has learned the futility of excess; but what about "them"? Do they really want to come in and clean out the sanctuaries, and extract total humiliation? Is the hard way the only way to learn?

No. Take it from a President who, tempered in the fires of excessive partisanship, has become far more temperate. He has found that the future of creative controversy "lies in a commitment by all of us to show a renewed respect for the mutual restraints that are the mark of a free and civilized society.

"It requires," the President said, "that we learn once again to work together, if not united in all of our purposes, then at least united in respect for the system by which our conflicts are peacefully resolved and our liberties maintained . . .

"If we learn the important lessons of Watergate, if we do what is necessary to prevent such abuses in the future—on both sides—we can emerge from this experience a better and a stronger nation."