

Audience Is Gripped by the 'State of the Presidency'

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President Nixon went before a joint session of Congress tonight to deliver a report on the State of the Union, but he seized his audience most firmly when he discussed the state of his Presidency.

After almost 40 minutes during which he never alluded to the Watergate tempest that has imperiled his future, Mr. Nixon closed the manila folder containing his text and discussed the scandals. His promise to remain in office drew cheers from the Republicans on the floor but stony silence from most of the Democrats.

And when the President promised to cooperate with investigations of his Administration as long as they did not weaken the office of the Presidency, hisses twice rang out across the packed chamber of the House of Representatives. They appeared to come from no more than a dozen liberal Democrats.

It was Mr. Nixon's first address on Capitol Hill since he reported buoyantly to Congress on June 1, 1972, on the results of his trips to China and the Soviet Union.

Voice Is Subdued

Tonight, Mr. Nixon was far from buoyant. Eschewing gestures, reading in a subdued and occasionally tremulous voice, he soberly reviewed what he described as his accomplishments in office and laid out an agenda for what he described as "the three remaining years" of his Presidency.

The President, dressed in a blue suit, had good color in his face as he spoke. He perspired profusely under the intense lights rigged for television, but his hands were calm, and he did not fidget at the rostrum.

His speech was a fulfillment of the constitutional mandate that the President "shall from time to time give the Congress information of the state of the Union." But for many it was transformed, like much in American public life these days, into another episode in the President's fight for survival.

The President was confronting his possible accusers (the House of Representatives, which is empowered to impeach) and his possible jurors (the Senate, which is empowered to judge his guilt or innocence if the House impeaches him).

If the Watergate affair had hitherto evolved in courtrooms, in news articles quoting faceless sources, in fusillades of words fired from opposite ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, tonight the main actors of the drama came face to face.

Ervin Doesn't Applaud

To the President's right sat Senator Sam Ervin Jr., Democrat of North Carolina, the chairman of the Senate Watergate committee. At the beginning and at the end, he stood with his colleagues, but he never once applauded.

Representative Peter W. Rodino Jr., Democrat of New Jersey, chairman of the House committee that is considering impeachment, sat mute when the President promised to cooperate within certain bounds. And there were murmurs of disbelief when Mr. Nixon pledged a new effort to insure citizens' personal privacy.

The applause was sustained if not wildly enthusiastic as the President entered and left the chamber, with members of both parties joining in.

But it was almost exclusively Republicans who broke into cheers and applause when Mr. Nixon spoke emotionally about his hopes for lasting peace, and then, in his extemporaneous end-piece, stated his determination not to resign. Only a small knot of Southern Democrats, including Senators John C. Stennis of Mississippi and James B. Allen of Alabama, joined with the Republicans.

The first hurried comments from the members of Congress were, for the most part, divided along partisan lines.

'Very Strong Speech'

To Senator Robert A. Taft Jr. of Ohio it was a "very strong speech." Other Republicans agreed. Senator Carl T. Curtis of Nebraska said that it was "the greatest speech" he had heard in listening to such addresses for 36 years.

No such words were heard from the Democrats. Representative Lucien N. Nedzi of Michigan said, for example, "He shouldn't have wasted his time coming up here." Mr. Ervin, referring to Mr. Nixon's appeal for an end to Watergate investigations, said:

"If the President hadn't spent so much time withholding information from the Senate committee, the committee would have completed its investigation months ago."

Senator Russell B. Long of Louisiana, like several other

prominent Southern Democrats, seemed more impressed. He said that he would "vote for a lot" of the speech. But Representative Joe L. Evins, a Tennessee conservative, spoke scathingly of the speech, saying "The people wanted to hear the State of the Union today, not five years ago."

Representative Silvo O. Conte of Massachusetts, a leader among moderate Republicans, said, "It's nice to know we have peace and prosperity. My people don't believe it."

Over all, according to those who have listened to dozens of State of the Union speeches, Mr. Nixon was accorded an unusually tepid reception. One such observer compared the mood of the chamber tonight to that which greeted Harry S. Truman during the gloomiest days of his Presidency in the nineteen fifties.

A Rare Opportunity

Before, during and after the holiday recess, the members of the House have been trying to come to grips with the questions of whether Mr. Nixon is impeachable or not, and, if so, for what specific or general "offenses."

For many, particularly the rank-and-file majority Democrats who are not often favored with invitations to the White House, tonight's address was a rare opportunity to study Mr. Nixon in action.

"We are waiting to see what he says about policy, sure," one Democratic liberal said this afternoon, "but we're also waiting to see what he says about Watergate—and even more than that, we're waiting to see how he handles himself."

The state of the President's health and emotions has been one of the principal topics of backstairs conversation in Washington for months. Few politicians mention it at news conferences or in set speeches, but nearly all discuss it endlessly at cocktail parties and over lunch: Is Mr. Nixon fit to continue to bear the burdens and pressures of the Presidency?

In the last month, Mr. Nixon has remained largely in seclusion at the White House and at his retreats in San Clemente, Calif., and Camp David, Md. He has held no news conferences and has made no speeches of consequence during that time—a period during which his associates have taken an increasingly hard line toward those whom they consider his enemies.

It has been reported that Mr. Nixon was having difficulty sleeping, and that he was feeling unusually restless. However, his personal physician, Maj. Gen. Walter Ktach of the Air Force, has described him as "extremely fit," and there has been no suggestion from any official source that the President's health has been undermined by Watergate pressures.

But many who watched him earlier this month as he announced the agreement for disengagement in the Middle East said that he had a haggard and expressionless appearance.

The President spoke to two audiences tonight—the people on the floor of the House and the uncounted millions watching the proceedings on television.

White House officials had known and freely conceded for weeks that the speech could be decisive with both constituencies. With both public and Congressional confidence waning, Mr. Nixon was reported to be determined to demonstrate by his words and his manner that he was ready to put Watergate behind him and press on with "the nation's business."

As the President journeyed to Capitol Hill, his standing in the Gallup Poll stood at 27 per cent approval—his lowest ever. Since the poll began, only Harry S. Truman, with 23 per cent, had ever seen his popularity ebb so strikingly.

Likewise, among members of the House, Mr. Nixon found himself in a parlous state. A National Broadcasting Company survey last week showed that 90 of the 431 members were committed to impeachment, a situation unprecedented in this country. However, the number is substantially short of a majority of 216.

But the President had made it clear, in the days leading up to his speech tonight, that he was prepared—in his own words—to "fight like hell" to stay in office. He and his spokesmen had given no encouragement whatever to those in Congress and elsewhere who suspected that he was prepared to resign if the House voted to impeach him.

Some in the White House had suggested that he propose a national referendum on his continuance in office. But Mr. Nixon vetoed that idea, telling his associates that he would fulfill his 1972 electoral mandate without resort to any extra-constitutional devices.