

[At -50]

Q: Mr. President, forgetting all other considerations of whether the Watergate situation was or is as publicized or not, because it's still in the process of being litigated, do you not think that the entire incident has begun to affect the quality of life in this country, particularly the great deal of uncertainties that people have about it, and also has begun to affect the concept of ethics, particularly in our young people - and for these reasons alone would it not be better that you resign at this time and ~~xxx~~ allow yourself the public forum as a private citizen to answer all accusations on all parts? [Applause.]

A: Now, ladies and gentlemen, that's a perfectly proper question, and it has been raised not only by the gentleman who asked it, by - but by several respected publications in this area as well as of other parts of the country and some members of the Congress as well. ~~xx~~

Let me be - respond to it first by saying that of course Watergate has had a disturbing effect, not only on young people but on other people. It was a wrong and very stupid act to begin with. I have said that; I believe it now.

Second, as far as Watergate is concerned, it has been carried on, it has been - I believe - over-publicized, and a lot of charges have been made that frankly have been proved to be false. I am sure that many people in this audience have read at one time or not - or other - either in your news magazines, possibly in a newspaper, certainly heard on television and radio, such charges as this: that the President helped to plan the Watergate thing before and had knowledge of it, that the President was informed of the cover-up on September the 15th of 1973 [sic], that the President was informed that payments were being made on March the 13th, and that a blackmail attempt was being made of the White House on March the 13th, rather than on March the 21st, when I said that the first time those matters were brought to my attention. That the President had authorized the issuance of clemency or a promise [sic] of clemency to some of the defendants, and that the President had ordered the burglarizing [sic] - again, a very stupid act, apart from the fact of it's being wrong and illegal - of Dr. Ellsberg's - uh - psychiatrist's office in California. Now, all of those charges have been made. Many of the Americans, perhaps a majority, believe them. They are all totally false, and the investigations will prove it, whatever the Congress does, the tapes, etc., when they all come out, will establish that they are false.

The President learned, for the first time, on March 31st - on March - uh, uh - 21st of 1973, that a blackmail attempt was being made on the White House, not on March 13th. The President learned for the first time, at that time, that payments had been made to the defendants - and let me point out that payments had been made - but correcting what may have been a misapprehension when I spoke to the press on March the 6th in Washington, it was alleged that the payments that had been made to the defendants were made for the purpose of keeping them still. However, Mr. Ehrlichman, Mr. Haldeman, Mr. Mitchell have all denied that that was the case and they certainly should be allowed the right, in court, to establish their innocence or guilt, without our concluding that that was the case.

But be that as it may, Watergate has hung over the country and it continues to hang over the country; it will continue to as the Judiciary Committee continues its investigation, not of the voluminous documents only that we have already presented to the special prosecutor, not only of all the material that they have from the Ervin Committee that has conducted months of hearings and they have access to that, but in addition scores of tapes and thousands of documents more, which would mean that not just one year, but two years or three years we're going to have this hanging over the country. That's why I want a prompt and just conclusion and will cooperate, as I indicated in answer to the first question, with the committee, consistent with my responsibilities to defend the office of the Presidency, to get that prompt and just conclusion.

Now under these circumstances, because the impression has been created, as you have very well indicated, doubts, e-, mistrust of the President - I recognize that - why doesn't the President resign? Because if the President resigned when he was not guilty of charges,

then every President in the future could be forced out of office by simply levelling some charges and getting the media to carry them, and getting a few congressmen and senators who were on the other side, to exploit them. Why doesn't the President resign because his popularity is low? I already have referred to that question. Because if the time comes in this country when the President makes decisions based on where he stands in the polls, rather than what is right and what is wrong, we'll have a very weak President. The nation and the world [applause] - the nation [applause] - the nation and the world needs a strong President.

Now personally, I will say finally, from a personal standpoint resignation is an easy cop-out. Resignation, of course, might satisfy some of my good, friendly partisans who would rather not have the problem of Watergate bothering 'em, but, on the other hand, apart from the personal standpoint, resignation of this President on charges of which he is not guilty, resignation simply because he happened to be low in the polls, would forever change our form of government, it would lead to weak and unstable Presidencies in the future, and I will not be a party to the destruction [applause] of the Presidency of the United States. [Prolonged applause.]

[Question on detente.]

[At -60]

Q. Mr. President, there is a debate over the definition of an impeachable offense. Should this question be determined by Congress or the judiciary?

A. Well, I think it's determined by the Constitution, and - uh - I think the Con - uh - the Constitution very clearly, as Mr. St. Clair, our very able counsel, pointed out in his brief to the Judiciary Committee, the Constitution in this case defines an impeachable [hesitates] defense [sic], as I indicated earlier, as being treason, bribery or other high crimes or misdemeanors. Now this President is not guilty of any of those crimes, and as far as the Congress is concerned, it would seem to me that particularly members of the Judiciary Committee, all schooled in the law, would want to follow the Constitution rather than to broaden that definition to include something that the Constitution framers did not have in mind. [Applause.]

[Intervening question on what the government and the average person can do about inflation.]

[At 60]

Q. Mr. President, intense two-way loyalty has been a hallmark of your public life and your administration. If it can be shown to you conclusively that your in-person testimony on behalf of your former colleagues is vital to their defense, would you not consider stepping forward and taking the witness stand?

A. I believe that for the President of the United States to appear in a court of law - any court of law - uh - for - uh - the purpose of testifying would be setting a precedent that would be most unfortunate. Uh - I believe that any information that I have - uh - has been made available - uh - which could affect the guilt or innocence of the individuals involved, and I think the appearance of the President of the United States in any one of these cases - uh - would be a precedent which we would regret later. [Applause.]

After finishing his appearance and when he was on his way out of the room, Nixon returned to for the second time to the podium (the first time was with Mayor Daley), and added the following: [I've been told] you're waiting for me to leave and let me say I've appreciated your response and your patience, and while I leave the podium, I don't expect to leave the Presidency till January the 20th, 1974 - 3 - 77.