

Unkind Cuts

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, May 21—"But yesterday," a Shakespeare buff wrote me after President Nixon's Watergate speech, "the word of Nixon might have stood against the world; now lies his credibility there, and none so poor to do it reverence."

Mr. Nixon is no Julius Caesar, a funeral oration is quite premature, and the role of Marc Antony could go to either Spiro Agnew or new Republican John Connally. (The President probably casts Senator Charles Percy, who drafted the Senate resolution calling for a special prosecutor, as Brutus—"Et tu, Chuck?")

Let's examine the criticism of the President's speech.

1. *He didn't point the finger of guilt at anybody.*

There is an Alice-in-Wonderland quality to this charge, reminiscent of the edict of the Queen of Hearts: "Sentence first, verdict afterwards." The same people who jumped all over the President's reference to murderer Charles Manson as guilty before the accused man had been convicted are now disappointed that the President is not actively interfering in the judicial process. Anybody who wants the President to prejudice the case with pre-judgments is asking, in effect, for him to obstruct justice—which is what a large part of the case is all about.

Ah, but could he not have fired his closest aides with a greater show of displeasure? Yes. In these off-with-their-heads days, compassion for failings is taken as a sign of weakness or complicity, and the President could have picked up a few points by slamming the door behind his departing friends. But a fond farewell is not a vote of confidence.

2. *He didn't grovel enough.*

Mr. Nixon has been on a six-year winning streak, and his opponents feel they are entitled to what the New Republic's John Osborne calls "ferocious satisfaction with the plight of a President whom most of us have always distrusted."

The President, on television, only took off his right arm, Haldeman, and then took off his left arm, Ehrlichman. He praised the people who broke the case and included, loud and clear, "a

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vigorous free press." He promised "I will do everything in my power to insure that the guilty are brought to justice and that such abuses are purged from our political processes. . . ."

But to his old enemies he fell short of a really satisfying self-immolation, live and in flaming color, right before the nation's eyes. The reason for his restraint had to do with his decision that he would go on being President. Presidents do not grovel; Presidents, if they are to continue in authority, pick up the pieces and go on. Nobody votes for Mayor Culp.

3. *He wrapped himself in the flag.*

Critics were angered by the accoutrements of his television appearance: a picture of his family and the American flag to his right, a bust of Lincoln to his left, a flag pin in his lapel. Consider, however, the reaction if he had done it the other way: "In an awkward attempt to change his image, Nixon turned his family photo to the wall, removed the flag and the bust of Lincoln from behind his desk and, for the first time in years, appeared on television without the familiar pin of an American flag in his lapel. The 'new, new Nixon,' designed to appeal to his detractors, fooled nobody."

4. *He parodied himself with that I won't-take-the-easy-way stuff.*

This criticism is valid. One day the President will say, "I could have taken the easy way, and frankly it looked pretty good, so I did," and 21 million Americans, regardless of party, will reach out and clasp him to their bosoms.

But a double standard might be pointed out here. When John F. Kennedy publicly took responsibility for the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the reaction was, "He's bravely taking the blame for something not his fault." When Mr. Nixon accepted ultimate responsibility for the Watergate atrocity, the reaction of critics seems to be, "He's trying in his devious way to make us think he's bravely taking the blame for something not his fault."

5. *He spoke too soon.*

This concern is voiced by some of the President's supporters, who believe he should have waited until all the damaging facts were laid bare: Since the situation will get worse before it gets better, he might have avoided a mistake in tone by taking action silently, later presenting to the public not his anguish but his anger.

But a President must step up to a crisis. It might have been better to wait until the worst was over, but a leader cannot always wait for the "best" time. He spoke when he had to and performed as much surgery as he decided was necessary.

6. *He was emotional.*

That he was. Mr. Nixon's Watergate speech was not an activities report or a legal brief. Described in his opening line as coming "from my heart," it was a reach by a man, neither a hollow man nor a plastic man, for a people's trust, centered on his pledge to be "worthy of that trust," later "worthy of their hopes" and finally, to reporters afterward, "worthy of your trust."

We should not feign surprise or take offense at the display of sincere emotion from a man, deeply wounded but determined not to quit, whose greatest ambition now is to prove himself "worthy."

If, because he permitted zealotry to grow in his own backyard, this President is zealously pronounced unworthy to fulfill his dream of building a stable world peace, then that—for him and for all the rest of us—would be in Marc Antony's words, "the most unkindest cut of all."