

What's Going on Here?

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Aug. 21—The Government of the United States has often been described as a kind of organized disorder, but lately the normal confusion has declined into an illogical and sometimes even into an irrational babble of contradictions.

Last week, President Nixon was appealing to the nation over TV to forget the past and settle down to the positive programs of the future, but this week in New Orleans he was raking over all the old arguments of the war, engaging in an angry shoving match on TV with his own press secretary and fussing with his own Secret Service for taking prudent precautions to protect his own life.

Instead of settling down, Mr. Nixon seems to be getting more restless, frustrated and separated from his own office and from his Administration.

When he finished his latest report to the people last week, he flew off to his house in Florida for the weekend, then took off for New Orleans to address the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and is now at his house in San Clemente where he intends to stay for a couple of weeks.

Meanwhile, in his absence, we have a public row between Vice President Agnew and Attorney General Elliot Richardson, with the Vice President accusing the Department of Justice of trying to indict and convict him in the press and demanding on TV that Mr. Richardson put Justice Department officials under oath to discover the source of the leaks.

The atmosphere now is poisonous with rumors that Mr. Nixon's people leaked the news that Mr. Agnew was being investigated for criminal activity in order to divert attention from the Watergate to the Vice President, and even that the alleged assassination conspiracy in New Orleans was blown up to create sympathy for the President.

The President's last two speeches illustrate confusion of thought and purpose. In the first, the President concluded with a plea to the people for

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understanding, for re-dedication to "the principles of decency, honor and respect for our institutions," and for "a commitment by all of us to show a renewed respect for the mutual restraints that are the mark of a free and a civilized society."

But less than a week later, after condemning those who put their ends

ahead of their means, he was proclaiming that his objective of peace justified the bombing of Cambodia and keeping this secret from the American people. And while calling for a new spirit of conciliation at home, he was attacking those who criticized his policies and asserting that he was not only right in bombing but that he would do it again.

He simply dismissed the protests against the bombing by saying they are "absurd" and defended the secrecy by saying the bombings were disclosed, not to the leaders of Congress, but to "the appropriate Congressional leaders," meaning those who favored his policies.

He sees no conflict in this with his statement in the TV speech that the abuses of Watergate "resulted from the assumption by those involved that their cause placed them beyond the reach of those rules that apply to other persons . . ."

No conflict in his refusal to hand over any incriminating evidence out of the Watergate tapes with his statement: "Far from trying to hide the facts, my effort throughout has been to discover the facts and to lay those facts before the appropriate law enforcement authorities. . ."

No conflict in his appeal for "confidentiality" with the admitted fact that he was bugging the conversations of his visitors without their knowledge, no conflict in his appeal for privacy in the relations between lawyer and client, priest and penitent, husband and wife with the violation of that privacy in the burgling of Ellsberg's psychiatrist's files.

"The time has come to turn Watergate over to the courts," he says, because "a continued backward looking obsession with Watergate is causing this nation to neglect matters of far greater importance to all the American people."

This may be true if it is affecting the emotions and logic of the President, but the fact is that Watergate is not responsible for the price of beef, the state of the dollar or the conduct of our foreign policy. In fact, in his New Orleans speech he took credit, and fair enough, for bringing peace and ending major controversies with the Chinese and the Russians. Despite Watergate, he could say: "It's a good time, a good time."

It is easy to say, and understandable enough, that many people are sick of Watergate and all this contention, but the main point is that the mentality that conducted the war and produced Watergate is still with us.

The President is still asserting that the Ervin committee and the critics are "increasingly absorbed in trying to implicate the President personally in the illegal activities that took place" and that others unnamed are trying to "exploit Watergate in order to keep us from doing what we were elected to do. . ."

In one speech he plays the role of the great conciliator, calling for forgetfulness of the past, and in the next he is a glory merchant, forgetting nothing and forgiving nothing. It is all very odd, and even a little frightening.