

The President's Patch-up Job

WHAT HAD TO BE DONE and said by President Nixon in the Watergate scandal has finally been done and said. Key government figures were swept out of office in a dramatic shakeup. Promises were made to the American people that "the whole truth" will be uncovered; assurances were given that confidence in their leadership need not have been shaken.

It remains to be seen if the public will accept the presidential performance as adequate. On the negative side is the fact that the shakeup, however dramatic, involved only one man who was actually fired. And the President's speech, despite its emotional affirmation of highest ideals, came both with obvious regret that there was no alternative and with a seeming insensitivity to the sweeping importance of a truly historic disgrace.

THE PRESIDENT'S RESPONSE to the challenge of Watergate, in sum, was the bare minimum of what he had to do and say. Even so, with the single exception noted, all the men who lost their jobs are departing with the President's effusive thanks — and primarily because their usefulness has been destroyed. As for himself, having spoken, Mr. Nixon henceforth intends to devote himself to what he regards as more vital matters of state.

There is much more the President could have done and said. He could, for one example, have appointed an unimpeachable outside special prosecutor to explore all ramifications of Watergate instead of leaving that option open to his own new choice for Attorney General, Elliot L. Richardson. He could have done or said something specifically about the wholesale abuse of his campaign funds, and how great chunks of it were obtained.

On the plus side of the President's response was his proper acceptance of ultimate responsibility for what happened. His excuse that he had been kept uninformed by zealous close aides who thought they were acting in his best interests can also be accepted, at least in part, in view of the extraordinary isolation he had constructed for himself.

DESPITE THAT ISOLATION it is difficult to believe that somehow the President could smell no White House entanglement in Watergate until last month. Even more difficult to understand is why he didn't personally take some corrective action right after Republican agents were arrested during their break-in of Democratic headquarters last June. Even though the White House itself may not have been involved, his party was.

We have strongly supported President Nixon in most undertakings of his administration. We will continue to give him such support, whenever merited, but we retain grave reservations about his handling of the Watergate scandal and his personal patch-up job.

Watergate is not going to go away, and may even get worse as time goes on. We regret the President did what he had to do and say at such a very late date. We regret he didn't do and say more.