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Policy of Non-Disclosure

I watched the President's Watergate telecast with a Republican senator who had repeatedly proclaimed that full disclosure would vindicate Mr. Nixon. At the end of the speech, the senator called his press secretary to say he would issue no statement. "I feel," he said, "like throwing up."

The reason for that feeling is that Mr. Nixon has once more decided against full disclosure on Watergate. Instead of telling it as it was, he has set up an adversary proceeding in which one group of former White House aides, praised by Mr. Nixon, will pit their stories against the version of another group, whose reputations are now being blackened by the White House.

The best evidence of the non-disclosure policy lies in the recent events not mentioned by the President. Forget all about the crossing of the Watergate affair with the Ellsberg case. Say nothing of the disclosure by L. Patrick Gray, the former acting head of the FBI, that he had burned papers taken from the office of men implicated in the Watergate break-in and given to him by John Ehrlichman and John Dean of the White House staff. Overlook the fact that Mr. Dean had threatened to spill the beans if he were made a "scapegoat" for Watergate.

Think only of the behavior of Atty. Gen. John Mitchell. He had publicly acknowledged attending high-level meetings at which the project for bugging the Democrats had been discussed. Having heard of the plans in advance, Mr. Mitchell had to know what was involved when the men breaking into Watergate were apprehended on June 17.

Since he was serving as head of the Committee to Reelect the President, it is hard to believe he would not have signalled some kind of word to his close friend in the White House. But in his speech the President made no mention of that semi-confession as though it were a mere bagatelle—the kind of thing a former attorney general does every day of the week.

What Mr. Nixon said was almost as confusing as what he left unsaid. On the one hand, for example, he warmly praised the two top White House aides whose resignations were announced on the day of the speech. He called John Ehrlichman and the White House chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, "two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know." At the Cabinet

meeting the next day, he pounded the table angrily and denounced as a stupid act the posting of FBI men in the office of Ehrlichman and Haldeman.

In harsh contrast was the treatment accorded Mr. Dean and Mr. Gray. Mr. Dean was dropped without any praise in a way that made it seem clear he was fired. Mr. Gray was pulled back from a resignation he was about to offer on April 26 so that White House press secretary Ron Ziegler could announce a resignation next day with the kind of winks and nudges and hints which suggested that Mr. Gray had been fired.

The contrast in treatment coincides with different versions of Watergate. Messrs. Haldeman and Ehrlichman are insisting on their own innocence and that of the President. Hence the White House has an interest in making them seem credible witnesses. Messrs. Dean and Gray are telling stories that implicate the highest White House aides, hence Mr. Nixon's interest in blackening their reputation.

In the end, I have no doubt that a large part of the story will come out. A grand jury is sitting. There will be indictments and a public trial. A Senate investigating committee will air the whole episode. The press is not exactly inactive.

Moreover, a new attorney general, Elliot Richardson, is looking into the whole business. Mr. Richardson fancies himself as President, and he has shown in past service at the departments of Defense and HEW a willingness to front for Mr. Nixon's dirty work.

But Mr. Richardson is also a distinguished attorney with a deep respect for our history and laws. He has the authority to appoint a special prosecutor. If he doesn't appoint a special prosecutor, he will be under the strongest possible pressure to do a thorough job.

So I doubt the President's TV statement will do much more than buy time before most of the story emerges. The big question is why Mr. Nixon uses so many stratagems to muddy the story and drag out its telling. The answer that suggests itself is what made the senator feel like throwing up. It is that Mr. Nixon himself may not have clean hands.