

# A Speech That Didn't Wash

WASHINGTON — It was vintage Nixon, circa 1952, when the President said with an air of nervous gallantry: "The easiest course would be for me to blame those to whom I delegated the responsibility to run the campaign. But that would be a cowardly thing to do."

"I will not place the blame on subordinates — on people whose zeal exceeded their judgment, and who may have done wrong in a cause they deeply believed to be right. In any organization, the man at the top must bear the responsibility. That responsibility, therefore, belongs here, in this office. I accept it."

**THE WORDS HAD** a noble ring, but the truth is that the President WAS placing the blame on subordinates.

It was H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman who were going off the White House payroll, their lives now cloaked in tragedy, not Richard Nixon. It was John Wesley Dean III who was being pushed out of the White House with a devious suggestion that he was the villain.

It was Richard Kleindienst who was surrendering the job of attorney general. And L. Patrick Gray III who had left the acting directorship of the FBI after the incredible revelation that he had destroyed documents taken from the office of E. Howard Hunt, a man the FBI was investigating for suspected criminal behavior. It was Jeb Stuart Magruder who had bowed out of government to face possible criminal indictment.

Was Richard M. Nixon resigning? No.

Was Nixon promising to pay some kind of penalty? No. Was the President volunteering to spend part of G. Gordon Liddy's 6 to 20 years in prison? No. Was Mr. Nixon saying that he would pay some grinding penance for this unprecedented corruption of the presidential election process? No.

Mr. Nixon made it clear that "for specific criminal actions by specific individuals, those who committed those actions must, of course, bear the liability and pay the penalty."

What, then, did the President's assumption of responsibility for Watergate mean? Exactly nothing. It was just a flourish of slick rhetoric. It was another Checkers speech — minus his little dog Checkers.

Some of my journalistic colleagues think that the "unsophisticated" public will swallow this speech whole, sugar-coated as it was with its platitudes of patriotism like "God Bless America" and its emotional hokum like "I want the next 1361 days to be the best days in the history of America."

**BUT THE SPEECH** won't wash in the long run, because the platitudes and cliches did not answer the questions the American people are asking about presidential knowledge of or involvement in the dirty money-raising tactics, the misuse of funds for espionage and sabotage, or his awareness of the outrageous coverup that produced 10 months of evasions, lies and deception.

At no time did this obviously nervous President categorically deny personal knowledge of the dirty work.