

How Nixon Got Himself Backed Into the Corner

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Washington

President Nixon's latest statement on the Watergate and associated scandals constitutes a further retreat in the face of extraordinary pressures — a retreat that appears to leave him little room for further withdrawal.

The defense perimeter that once surrounded the entire White House and the Committee for the Re-Election of the President has now shrunk to the Oval Office.

At the beginning, the President's position—as exemplified in his August 29 statement—was that “no one in the White House staff, no one in this administration, presently employed, was involved in this very bizarre incident.” From that absolute denial, Mr. Nixon pulled back on April 17 to the position that any employee who had been involved would be discharged.

The next step was the President's statement of April 30, by which he announced the dismissal of John W. Dean III as his counsel and the resignations of Richard G. Kleindienst as attorney general and H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman as key White House aides. While Mr. Nixon said he was reluctant to discuss “personal wrongdoing,” the word was passed that White House involvement would stop at Dean's level, well below the top.

CONDUCT

Throughout these and other statements, the President offered no apologies for his own conduct, no suggestion that he might have erred. On occasion, he seemed inclined to pass the scandal off as a monetary diversion; at a White House dinner party last week, he told a table companion that it would soon be forgotten.

Tuesday, Mr. Nixon not only conceded the probable involvement of his closest advisers in the Watergate coverup but he also changed his tone.

Unlike the April 30 statement, Tuesday's made no attempt to suggest that Mr. Nixon was putting the Watergate case behind him; unlike the April 30 statement, it showed Mr. Nixon as a chastened man.

His acceptance of responsibility on April 30 was the lofty and indirect acceptance of the commander-in-chief taking the blame for an incompetent lieutenant or two; his acceptance of responsibility Tuesday was far

more personal.

On April 30, Mr. Nixon was emotional; Tuesday he was matter-of-fact. On April 30, his words went to the nation via the vivid medium of television, with all its capacity to transmit emotion; Tuesday, his words were transmitted by ordinary press release, all low-key and black-and-white.

There were three key phrases:

- “I can understand how highly motivated individuals could have felt justified in engaging in specific activities that I would have disapproved had they been brought to my attention.”

- “It is apparent that I should have given more heed to the warning signals I received along the way about a Watergate coverup and less reassurances.”

- “To the extent that I may in any way have contributed to the climate in which (illegal and unethical activities) took place, I did not intend to; to the extent that I failed to prevent them, I should have been more vigilant.”

LESSON

Thus did Mr. Nixon picture himself as a President who inspired excessive loyalty, as a President who had been deceived by close friends, as a President who has learned a lesson.

But painting this picture cost him a heavy price.

He was compelled to admit that he had instructed Haldeman and Ehrlichman to ensure that the Watergate investigation did not compromise any covert operations, and to pass that message to both the Central Intelligence Agency and the FBI.

Mr. Nixon said it was “not my intent, nor my wish” to impede the Watergate inquiry. But according to a memorandum of a conversation between Ehrlichman and Lieutenant General Vernon A. Walters, then the deputy director of the CIA, Ehrlichman asked the CIA to head off one part of the FBI investigation, and said this was “the President's wish.”

To explain the seeming inconsistency, Mr. Nixon said:

“Through whatever complex of individual motives and possible misunderstandings, there were apparently wide-ranging efforts to limit the investigation or to conceal the possible involvement of members of the administration and the campaign committee.”

By saying those words,

Mr. Nixon was saying, however reluctantly and indirectly, that Haldeman or Ehrlichman or both appear to have been involved in the coverup. And there is no one who outranked Haldeman and Ehrlichman at the White House. Either involvement stops with them, or Mr. Nixon himself will be implicated.

PRESSURE

The President was not eager to make Tuesday's statement for that reason, among others. But he felt impelled to do so, according to those in a position to know, not only for the preferred reason — a fear that national security information might be disclosed — but because of great political pressure.

Talk of resignation is in the air. The grumbling on the right is growing louder. Senator Sam Ervin's committee hearings are dominating the television screens, at the expense of Richard Nixon, the man who has used them so well.

Now, for the third time in little more than a month, he has sought to regain the offensive. He has vowed not to resign, to “continue the job I was elected to do.” Whether he will be able to hold to that vow depends largely on whether the new defense perimeter holds, or is pierced by new revelations on Watergate.

Analysis
and
Opinion