

The President On Watergate

PRESIDENT NIXON'S remarkable, 4000-word statement on the Watergate case invites speculation along two lines — why it was made and what changes in attitude it reflects, if any.

Here is a lawyer's defense case, point by point, on which the outcome of the trial is now being risked.

What was seen as vulnerable is conceded. Thus the President now admits that he did, in fact, order concealment of some aspects of the scandal — but only in the interests of national security and not as a cover-up.

What was seen as invulnerable to challenge is reiterated: The President had no advance knowledge of the Watergate break-in. He neither authorized nor encouraged his aides to do anything illegal or improper. He was not advised of what they actually were doing.

Such, in essence, is the defense case spelled out by Mr. Nixon's detailed position paper. It corrects previous statements seen as misleading, in error or misinterpreted. It elaborates points seen as helpful. It is thoroughly considered, complete, final.

Issuance of the paper constitutes a direct challenge for Watergate probers to disprove any of its claims, and will be seen as such. Meanwhile the President has constructed an all but invulnerable shield for parrying potentially embarrassing questions at future press conferences.

IN STATING his definitive case, the President for the first time has clearly retreated from the somewhat cavalier attitude that seemed to assume that the Watergate storm was beneath his dignity and would blow itself out.

The change was demonstrated most notably in the following untypical admission:

"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."

It can be argued that the President still fails to comprehend the enormity of the problem he faces — as hinted by the words he chose in declaring he will not resign because of Watergate: "I will continue to do the job I was elected to do."

To do that job, Mr. Nixon is not only going to have to win his personal case but somehow restore public confidence in his bespattered administration.

We hope he will succeed. But it will take much more decisive action and leadership than the President has given in the Watergate mess to date.