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Just What Is 'National Security'?

It is one thing to ask if the President is misusing "national security" to cover up lapses which have little or nothing to do with national security but it is quite another thing—difficult but important—to try to say just what it is that national security legitimately excuses or requires.

First off, anyone who speaks of national security in 1973 without conceding in word or tone that it is an elastic concept capable of sustaining differing interpretations is really not playing fair. Anyone who seems to evoke "national security" to cultivate the old cold-war reflex of readiness to make sacrifices for the state, makes it hard to get himself a calm hearing either from those swayed by the appeal or from those distrustful of it.

I think Mr. Nixon's Watergate statement of May 22 and his speech to the POWs two days later were flawed on that twin count. For the first requirement of national security is that those weighing it do so in terms reflecting its different and changing aspects and the differing viewpoints which citizens have on it. The President has himself set an excellent example in his state-of-the-world messages which are serious and respectful and appeal to reason rather than habit or fear.

This is more than a matter of good manners, as vital as good manners are to constructive dialogue in a democratic society. It is a matter of the national security's being at this point, to a very large extent, hardly more or less than we say it is. Menace lies in the eye of the beholder: not completely but very considerably. Prudence makes its demands; paranoia's are higher. In between are the hard real choices. If we have not learned this from 25 years of mutual Soviet-American frightening, we have learned very little.

"I wanted justice done with regard to Watergate," Mr. Nixon pleaded, "but in the scale of national priorities with which I had to deal . . ." The excuse does not answer the question; it begs it.

If the United States were now to "simply turn away from the problems of the world," he said, "we would find very soon that we would be living in a terribly dangerous world." A world in which the United States spent, say, only \$70 billion for defense might strike Mr. Nixon as terribly dangerous, but many others, knowing that the country still possessed an effective nuclear deterrent and powerful conventional forces, might sleep easily all the same.

In his latest Watergate pronouncements, Mr. Nixon said that the national security requires the absolute secrecy of diplomatic negotiations. But no diplomat believes this and Mr. Nixon's own example argues otherwise. Calculated leaks are a traditional diplomatic device; Mr. Kissinger's leaks are a Washington institution. On Jan. 25, 1972, the President, saying he was fed up with taking political abuse that he believed to be unwarranted by the facts, went public with the details of 30 months of secret diplomacy. "Just as secret negotiations can sometimes break a public deadlock," he said, "public disclosure may help to break a secret deadlock." This is trying to have it both ways.

Presidents naturally claim that they alone should control the retention or release of diplomatic secrets. But they should acknowledge a parallel obligation to earn the trust of the people in whose name they wish to act secretly. And they should understand that in a democracy, executives cannot assure themselves absolute control.

In Mr. Nixon's case, his plea for secrecy is weakened by two conspicuous facts, the first being that even by his own admission the secrecy justified in the name of security was used for other ends, and the second being that none of the leaks which so alarmed him did any perceptible harm to his foreign policy, which he insists has been a great success. To claim that diplomatic success requires secrecy but that no damage was done when secrecy was broken is, again, to try to have it both ways.

I conclude that, convinced as Mr. Nixon may be that the country faces great perils, he has not mustered the arguments or evidence to persuade a detente-minded public of this view. The more he resorts to the old fearful catchwords like "national security," the more that skeptics will wonder why he avoids arguments and evidence.

Secrecy in the service of presidential power is the hallmark of what has been called the national security state but it is the very condition, the very mentality that permitted the abuses which Mr. Nixon and the nation are reeling under now. What does the national security legitimately and urgently require? Most of all, honest public debate.