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Mr. Nixon: Taking a Hard Line

Senior White House aides now plotting a conciliatory approach seeking national unity in Richard M. Nixon's single most important address since his famous self-defense in the Checkers speech 21 years ago are running up against one White House hardliner: Richard M. Nixon.

Pressing the conciliatory theme hard is the top-level White House team of Alexander M. Haig Jr., Ron Ziegler, Melvin R. Laird, Bryce Harlow and Henry A. Kissinger, all in agreement.

"We're all pushing conciliation," one White House adviser told us, "all of us, that is, except the President."

Thus, only days before the scheduled and long-promised presidential effort to escape the entangling coils of Watergate with a major explanation of his own conduct, the tone and mood of the speech have not yet been decided. This ambivalence, which has marked every presidential step of the way since the Watergate crisis began, may conceivably result in a last-minute change of plans—no speech at all.

That would not displease some Republicans—including Mr. Nixon's most stalwart defender on the Watergate committee, Sen. Edward Gurney of Florida. Gurney believes that the complex of disputed facts, contradictions and lies which bristle out of Watergate simply do not lend themselves to a speech format. Much more preferable to Gurney would be interrogation of the President by a small group of reporters or, perhaps, lawyers or politicians.

No such format is under White House consideration today. Present plans call for Mr. Nixon to address a bipartisan audience, including some Congressmen, in the White House East Room over national television. That at least would avoid the forensic sterility of a set-piece Oval Office speech from

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the presidential desk, the setting for Mr. Nixon's April 17 and April 30 speeches. But the President has decreed no questions until a later meeting with the press, devoted to the Watergate atrocities.

In that setting, top White House aides, while not agreeing on every detail, want the President to spin out a blend of courageous mea culpa, admitting having imposed far too much trust in departed aides H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, mixed with a dramatic appeal to "out there"—the voters, not the establishment elite. The appeal: Free the President from the Watergate coils so that he can get on with the job of being President.

This blend of mea culpa and the appeal to free the President to lead the nation must also court the Democrats, these White House aides say. Only a credible Nixon theme of "national unity," according to this thesis, can begin to defuse the Watergate passions and return the nation closer to normality.

William Raspberry is on vacation. His column will resume upon his return.

"The fact that Ray Price (Mr. Nixon's chief speechwriter and a Republican moderate) is writing the speech," one middle-level White House staffer, a hardliner, told us, "makes me worry that he's going to take a mea culpa copout."

That sentiment is hard at odds with the senior staff (Haig-Ziegler-Laird-Harlow-Kissinger) but far more representative of the politics of Richard M. Nixon than the "national unity" theme. Thus, in the words of the middle-level staffer: "When the President works over Ray's draft, he'll take out the mea culpa."

Instead of appealing for bipartisan unity on a theme of post-Watergate conciliation, the hardline theme is specific: Since Mr. Nixon now has the Senate Watergate committee on the run and voters are getting bored, he should attack as "indictive" the political "enemies" now preventing him from doing the job that over 60 per cent of the voters elected him to do. That advice not only conforms to Mr. Nixon's combative instincts but exactly comports with Mr. Nixon's sudden attack on unnamed enemies during his routine toast at a dinner for Prime Minister Tanaka of Japan last week.

Moreover, the President can scarcely ignore the highly favorable reaction that his embattled Vice President received in his all-out public self-defense Wednesday. The fact that Agnew lashed back at his attackers in the press—and Mr. Nixon has not—did not go unnoticed in the White House.

President Nixon's instincts would almost surely carry him down that dangerous path if it were not for unanimous advice of his senior advisers. In fact, he may pick that road anyway—and risk a polarization of deadly danger to the nation.