

1st Reaction Of Politicians Is Positive

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Richard Nixon placed his Watergate case before the court of public opinion last night, and the verdict from the jury of 210 million Americans has yet to be received.

But judging from the first responses of politicians both in Washington and across the country, the President last night may have begun to realize his privately expressed hope that he has finally turned the corner on Watergate.

A sampling of congressmen from both parties and all political persuasions evoked a mixed reaction about the substance of Mr. Nixon's reply to charges that he was involved in the Watergate coverup.

Nearly all, however, thought that the President was likely to receive a positive response from the American people for his appeal to "turn Watergate over to the courts" and "get

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on with the urgent business of the nation."

Rep. Brock Adams of Washington, a liberal Democrat, called the President's speech "defensive" and said he was "trying to shut off Watergate." But Adams added: "I think he's going to be at least partially successful in it."

Another Democrat, Rep. Thaddeus Dulski of New York, said the speech wasn't substantially different from the President's May 22 statement.

"But who am I to take the word of John Dean against that of the President?" Dulski asked.

"He rang the bell tonight," said Rep. Joe D. Waggoner Jr., a moderately conservative Louisiana Democrat. "He came through . . . In this part of the country the people are going to agree with him. The people say they've had enough of it. They say get it off that TV set and let's go on."

Republicans also reacted positively. Some, including GOP National Chairman George Bush, said the President had done better than they expected.

"It's beyond what many of us thought he could do, given the facts," Bush said. "I think it's going to be an important plus in terms of putting Watergate in perspective. He was frank, direct—and he admitted some things had gone wrong. He put his finger on the pulse of the public when he said what the country wants to get on."

Bush's opposite number, Democratic Chairman Robert S. Strauss, said he was "sad and disappointed" by the speech. But Strauss im-

plicitly conceded that Mr. Nixon would stay on as President for the balance of his term.

"Republicans and Democrats know we have three more years of this administration," Strauss said. "They want the President to hold some press conferences, release the tapes, and then forgive his sins of omission or commission and get on with the business of the country."

Strauss also took note of the omission of any direct reference to the burglary of the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

"When he talked about the great privileges existing between husband and wife and between lawyer and client, I wonder why he didn't mention doctor and patient," Strauss said.

Some of the strongest approval for the President from a politician in either party came from Republican Gov. Ronald Reagan of California.

"The President has stated his case and has stated it well," Reagan said. "His message was the voice of reason, which went a long way, I believe, toward putting the whole situation in better perspective and giving a clearer understanding of how these things could have happened. I agree that the case should be decided in the courts where it belongs . . ."

The reaction of Republican politicians in not-for-tribution statements was more muted. It might best be described as a sigh of relief.

One veteran Republican campaign organizer offered this evaluation: "I think it was one of his better speeches. He always

loses me at the end, gets a little flag wavy and corny. But he wasn't so tense this time and he didn't praise [H. R.] Haldeman or [John] Ehrlichman. He showed a little more humility. He is beginning to capture a sense of public mood of Watergate—a mood that people are tired of it. The best part of his speech was his defense on the tapes—he brought in everything but the dogcatcher."

Another Republican called the speech "a holding action" and said the result depends upon its public acceptance.

But the first signs of public response were distinctly less encouraging for Mr. Nixon.

Ehrlichman, in his halcyon days as domestic adviser to President Nixon, used to judge the impact of administration policies on whether they would "play in Peoria."

Last night the Nixon performance played in that Illinois city—and elsewhere—to mixed reviews.

Some Peoria, viewers promised to remember President Nixon in their prayers. Others fell asleep during the speech.

"I was let down," said one elderly woman. "It's not absolutely satisfying. It left me cold."

Dorothy Best said she and her husband thought the speech was "very good," and added, "We know what the President said is true. We remember him in our prayers."

There was reaction from an Ehrlichman in Peoria last night, too, but it came from Mrs. Leonard Ehrlichman, who said that 14 people watched the speech in her living room. Five fell asleep.

"We didn't think he said any more than he had before," Mrs. Ehrlichman said. "He left us hanging."

Walter Koppenhoefer of Peoria wasn't in doubt, however.

"I think it stinks all the way from him on down," Koppenhoefer said.

In Peoria, as elsewhere, the strongest pro-Nixon response came from a politician.

Rep. Robert H. Michel, a nine-term Republican congressman, said he "thought the President did as good a job as he could in as clear language as he could," and predicted that the courts would rule in his favor on the tapes.

However, Michel added that the average citizen finds the President's case "a hard one to grasp."

The public puzzlement on Watergate was shared — if the first calls to newspapers are any guide—from McLean to Miami, Fla.

Twenty of the first 23 calls to The Washington Post were negative to the speech. The Miami Herald found opinion equally divided among 30 people who called. The Atlanta Constitution found that three out of four of 30 incoming calls were negative. The St. Louis Globe-Democrat reported a 5-to-3 margin against the speech in street interviews.

Some sample calls from metropolitan Washington:

"It was an insult to the intelligence of the American people. I was extremely dissatisfied."

"King Richard has spoken, and I don't believe him now anymore than I did the 'Checkmate' thing." (This was a reference to Mr. Nixon's

1952 speech when he defended himself against charges that he was the recipient of a Republican "slush fund.")

"I very much support the speech. He has my full support."

A random sampling by United Press International bureaus around the nation indicated generally skeptical public reaction. Some persons praised the President, but many said bluntly that they did not believe him.

President Nixon's speech came at a time when a new Gallup Poll reported that his popularity had sunk to an all-time low of 31 per cent after a high of 68 per cent in January. It was the poorest support figure for a President in 20 years.

An hour and a half after the President's address, the White House switchboard was receiving an unusually large volume of telephone calls. Deputy press secretary Gerald L. Warren said that they were "predominantly in support of the President."

"I can't recall a reaction like this since the early Vietnam speeches," Warren said.

Even though several Democratic congressmen thought Mr. Nixon's attempt to put Watergate behind him may have been politically effective, most said he didn't begin to dispel the gnawing doubts about Watergate. Predictably, most Republicans defended the President.

One of the most non-committal reactions came from Sen. Howard H. Baker (R-Tenn.), vice chairman of the Senate Watergate committee.

"As I have said previous-

ly, I welcome any information that the President can give us on the matter now under investigation," Baker said. "His comments tonight, along with any future statements, will be given every consideration as the committee attempts to write a meaningful report."

Another member of the Watergate committee, Democratic Sen. Joseph Montoya of New Mexico, said Mr. Nixon failed to inform the public about essential facts.

Rep. Barber Conable (R-N.Y.) said that Mr. Nixon's speech wasn't going to have any dramatic effect on the public, but he did see it as "a reassertion of leadership" by the President.

Sen. Robert Taft (R-Ohio) called the speech "a strong appeal, well delivered, competent."

Sen. George Aiken (R-Vt.) called it "Mr. Nixon's strongest speech, and I think it will help him."

Not all Republican senators shared this view.

Sen. Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts criticized Mr. Nixon for not dealing more specifically with Watergate. Sen. Jacob Javits of New York said it was "distressing" that the President had referred unfavorably to the Senate hearings, and Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona said, "The President did not add anything to his other speeches that would tend to divert suspicion from him."

Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), the Majority Whip, said he was "disappointed" with the speech.

"The President stressed the principle of confidentiality with respect to the tapes, but that very principle was undermined when partici-

pants in private conversations with the President were not told that their conversations were being recorded," Byrd said.

Rep. John Anderson (R-Ill.) said that the President was "banking very heavily on his political instinct that the public is suffering from an overdose of Watergate."

Anderson said his feeling is that many people feel this way but that there is "a larger group that is still very disturbed. I don't think they're prepared to just dismiss it as some kind of obsession."

Mr. Nixon is scheduled to make one of his rare public speeches Monday when he travels to New Orleans to address the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Mississippi Republican State Chairman Clarke Reed said that Mr. Nixon was going to the right place because there is "a strong reservoir of support for him down here in the South."

Nationally, however, doubts remain about the long-term effectiveness of the President's speech. This was perhaps attested to last night by what wasn't said—principally from Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, Sen. Walter Mondale of Minnesota and the defeated Democratic presidential candidate of 1972, Sen. George McGovern.

All these and many other senators declined comment. They were awaiting the long-run verdict of the American jury.

Also contributing to this story were George Lardner Jr., Marilyn Berger, William Elsen, Peter Jay, Healey Burrell, John Hanrahan and Bridget Gallagher.