

Nixon View: Wronged If Not Betrayed

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Richard Nixon's Watergate speech last night was both somber and subtle.

He made no emotional appeals, as he did 21 years ago in his celebrated "Checkers" speech. He was not on the attack, as some had predicted he would be. He was not asking his fellow country-

men, as he has so often in the past, to believe in the American dream. He was not even asking them to consider new evidence that would finally clear the air of the poisonous Watergate scandal.

The President last night once again asked Americans to believe that he was a man wronged, if not betrayed. His basic plea for support

came some 10 minutes into his speech when he said:

"Because I trusted the agencies conducting the investigations and because I believed the reports I was getting, I did not believe the newspaper reports that suggested a cover-up. I was convinced that there was no cover-up, because I was convinced that no one had anything to cover up."

His other major appeal was familiar—that Americans put Watergate behind them and begin to resolve "matters of far greater importance."

But if Mr. Nixon was quiet and restrained, and if his text contained no stunning new disclosures, no irrefutable evidence that would dissipate all the doubts and suspicions, he did make a number of subtle points.

In effect, he was saying it is time to take the Watergate affair out of the hands of Congress and into the courts "where the questions of guilt or innocence belong."

In one veiled but barbed reference he sought to demolish and discredit the testimony of the one man who has imputed presidential complicity in Watergate. Without mentioning John Dean's name in that reference, he said: "My statement has been challenged by only one of the 35 witnesses who appeared—a witness who offered no evidence beyond his own im-

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pressions, and whose testimony has been contradicted by every other witness in a position to know the facts."

As he neared the end of his address, the President uttered another muted warning. It was an appeal for Americans to help "ensure that those who would exploit Watergate in order to keep us from doing what we were elected to do" not be permitted to succeed. The remark was oblique; those critics were not identified. It was one of the few reminders of an older Nixon attack style.

For the most part, the President was notably quiet and measured. Even the setting of his speech was muted. When he spoke to the nation on Watergate April 30, he was flanked by the bust of Lincoln, pictures of his family and the American flag.

Last night, it was the flag and the office, with just a trace of the presidential seal, that were on display. From beginning to end, Mr. Nixon was presidential.

His most difficult explanation concerned the release

of the tape recordings he has made in his office. The president stressed the necessity for confidentiality of conversations. He spoke of the old legal precedent of confidentiality existing between priest and penitent, husband and wife. What he did not say, or suggest, was that his own conversations had been secretly recorded, and that he did not let the people with whom he spoke share that confidential knowledge.

There were other subtle changes in his latest explanation of Watergate. On May 22, he stressed the national security elements that bore on Watergate and Watergate-related incidents such as the break-in of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office. He told how he had instructed his aides to see that the Watergate investigation did not "impinge adversely upon the national security area."

The problems of national security he had spoken of in the past grew out of what he termed the bombings and violent disturbances sweeping the country in the days of 1970 and 1971.

Last night, in still another subtle change in emphasis, he referred back to the violence and disunity of the 1960s when people "asserted the right to take the law into their own hands." Those, of course, were the years of the Democratic Presidents, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

Also missing from his speech last night was any hint that he should have been more alert or concerned about the unfolding Watergate scandal in the days and months following the June, 1972, break-in. Last night, he spoke of trusting the agencies conducting the investigation and relying "on the best law enforcement agencies of the country to find and report the truth."

But in May he had conceded "with hindsight, it is apparent that I should have given more heed to the warning signals I received along the way about a Watergate cover-up . . ."

The President ended, as he had before, with an appeal for help from all citizens and an assistance from the Divin-

ity. "With your help, with God's help, we will achieve those great goals for America," he said. It was, again, a more restrained peroration from his April 30 speech when he said: "God bless America and God bless each and every one of you."

For Richard Nixon, who has been confronted with a series of crises in his political life, last night marked another ordeal before the nation. For the fourth time in four months he was reporting to the American people on Watergate. Each time he clearly has attempted to put Watergate behind him. Each time he has had to respond again.

Last night's speech came at one of his most critical moments, at a time when his personal popularity has plummeted to an even lower point than that of Lyndon Johnson in the last days of 1968. Now he must wait and see if he finally has removed the Watergate specter—or if events and the weight of public opinion compel him to face the country again with more on Watergate.