

Where Do We Go From Here?

By James Reston

The President's effort to talk his way out of the Watergate tragedy has failed, but he still has the power to act, and to propose remedies for the crimes he admits were committed. So maybe now he will come forward with practical legislation to correct the system that made Watergate possible.

He has condemned what he calls the "backward-looking obsession with Watergate," and has committed himself to correct the atmosphere in which the Watergate crimes were committed, but he has done absolutely nothing to propose legislation that would stop the fiddling with campaign money, control the irresponsible power of the White House staff or avoid the bugging of private citizens.

As a defense of his Administration's record on the Watergate, or an answer to the troubled questions on the minds of many people, his televised speech after months of silence was a disappointment, if not a disaster. But if he didn't answer the questions of the past, at least he said some hopeful things about the future.

"In the future," he said, "my Administration will be more vigilant in insuring that such abuses [of the past] do not take place, and that officials at every level understand that they are not to take place. . . ."

"I pledge to you tonight that I will do all that I can to insure that one of

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the results of Watergate is a new level of political decency and integrity in America. . . ."

This raises a fundamental question about Mr. Nixon. There is scarcely a noble principle in the American Constitution that he hasn't defended in theory or defied in practice. Few Presidents of this country have been more eloquent in defense of the First Amendment, on freedom of the press or dissent, than Mr. Nixon, or more vicious in opposing those freedoms when they opposed his purposes. And the irony of this contradiction is that he is as positive, and even sincere, in his support of the principle of freedom as in his defiance.

Nevertheless, he still has a chance to act on the positive and future promises of his speech. The Congress is struggling now with new legislation to control political campaign financing, to write new statutes on wiretapping, to define when the telephones of private citizens can be intercepted for "national security" reasons and who shall decide the difference between national security and political or personal convenience.

Mr. Nixon's efforts to prove that he wants to remove "the abuses of the past" would be more effective if he acted upon them rather than merely talked about them, if he suggested legislation to control campaign financing, to stop the bugging of private citizens, and to give the Congress power to confirm the President's appointments of the Haldemans, the Ehrlichmans and the Kissingers, who now exercise more power than the Cabinet out of their offices in the White House.

The President's speech didn't deal with his problem, and it wasn't because he didn't have good advice: The speech he gave was only one of more than a dozen speeches suggested to him, and even drafted for him, by his associates inside the Government and his friends outside the Government.

Most of these drafts suggested that he define the questions on the minds of the American people, that he answer them candidly, admit his own responsibility for the atmosphere that produced the Watergate scandals, and take his chance of telling the truth. But he chose instead to defend everything and admit nothing except the zeal of people who had been misled by the violent dissidents of the sixties.

The result was that he merely appealed for trust without giving persuasive reasons for removing the mistrust of his opponents, and ended up about where he was before. Even so, he still retains the power of the Presidency and can do much more to prove his point by acting than by speaking.

He can change his Government. He has the power to bring new men into his Cabinet, and introduce new policies into his legislative program. He was in trouble after his television speech because he merely went over the same old arguments which had not been persuasive in the past. But he is still the President and he is not as trapped as he seems to be.

"We must not stay so mired in Watergate," he said, "that we fail to respond to challenges of surpassing importance to America and the world. We cannot let an obsession with the past destroy our hopes for the future."

He had the words of the future but not the melody or the program. He neither answered the questions of the past nor proposed specific remedies for the future. But he still has time. Any day now he can come forward with definite and specific proposals to correct the evils that led to Watergate, and these are bound to make a better impression on the country than his disappointing speech.