

... Buying Time on Watergate

Bitter complaints by politicians of both parties that President Nixon's speech Wednesday broke no new ground and yielded up no new facts in the Watergate scandals entirely miss the point of what the President was really seeking.

Far from a detailed, point-by-point refutation of the charges made against him and his top aides, a course long ago discarded as both politically dangerous and factually impossible, Mr. Nixon had one objective in his fourth Watergate defense: in as many months establish a new base or holding pattern, slowly expand it as the Niagara of Watergate slows to a trickle, then resume fulltime normal presidential operations.

But, as White House aides are saying privately, if "the politicians and particularly the media won't allow the President" to free himself from the Watergate coils, he then has a clear option: use the full powers of the presidency to appeal for help directly "out there" to the country.

That explains the obvious ambiguities in Mr. Nixon's 29-minute rhetorical effort Wednesday night.

An example: Mr. Nixon, evoking memories of President Kennedy's appeal for help following the 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster, pledged a "new level of political decency" and took much of the blame for Watergate on his own shoulders.

But in the next breath, he was obligingly criticizing the Democratic Con-

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gress for its "neglect (of) matters of far greater importance" than Watergate, specifically inflation, the possibility of a "tragedy" now being played out in Indochina and U.S. military strength.

The clear warning: Mr. Nixon will not do any more to clear himself of the taints of Watergate because he cannot: if the Democrats do not allow him to get back to the job of President, but continue what one high presidential aide called the "vendetta" against him, his next move will be full retaliation.

Can such a policy work for a President who has tumbled an unheard of 37 percentage points in national popularity in the stink of Watergate?

Some Republicans think it can, on grounds that public interest in the televised Watergate hearings is clearly on the wane and that most of the voters among Dr. George Gallup's 69 percent who disapprove Mr. Nixon's con-

duct as president would overwhelmingly support his continuance in office rather than his resignation or impeachment.

"That is Nixon's real base of support," one Southern Republican leader told us, "and he can't lose it no matter what happens in Watergate."

White House strategists agree, despite public criticism from such Republican conservative stalwarts as Sen. Barry Goldwater. Goldwater told us that the speech "was not effective at all in the Watergate matter." But its appeal to voters, he added, to "let him get on with the presidency" was having a highly favorable reaction at the grass roots.

Nevertheless, there are political dangers in the President's effort to establish a holding pattern now and gradually broaden it, re-converting his crippled presidency back to an activist presidency.

Although Mr. Nixon decreed in his speech he will make no detailed response to Watergate charges, handling that incendiary issue in the press conference now promised within the next few days poses far more problems.

One response now being studied in the White House, with new witnesses (including former White House political aide Charles W. Colson), still to testify, Mr. Nixon can rest on his refusal to deal with specifics until all testimony is in.

As for detailed answers to questions involving his own actions during the long cover-up conspiracy, he may point to the Gallup poll to claim that no matter what he says, the public has already been too confused by the media to draw fair conclusions. In fact, Dr. Gallup reported 9 per cent of the country believes Mr. Nixon "planned the Watergate bugging" from the beginning—a charge no witness has made.

But to Mr. Nixon today, all such questions have become irrelevant details in his long-range recovery strategy. His issue is not Watergate but whether the government can govern. That was the motive of Wednesday night's uncharacteristically soft-spoken rhetoric. If the press and politicians pursue what Mr. Nixon calls the Watergate "obsession with the past," he will become shriller in going over their heads to the voters. In the White House today, there is no alternative to this strategy for presidential recovery.