

# The People's Business

The basic story line of President Nixon's new scenario, as revealed at his Wednesday news conference, is that he has put Watergate behind him and is turning his full attention to "the business of the people." Welcome as is the President's decision to come alive again on his day-to-day responsibilities, his script contains one major flaw. It treats as either/or propositions two quite distinct issues confronting the Presidency. Mr. Nixon does not have the option of ignoring one in order to deal with the other.

As President, Mr. Nixon cannot let the troubles that have engulfed his Administration prevent discharge of his executive functions. The conduct of American foreign policy and the urgent domestic tasks of curbing inflation, easing the energy crisis and responding to the people's needs in housing, health, education as well as a host of other areas are all part of the continuing duties which the President is sworn faithfully to discharge.

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Thus, Watergate never has been a valid excuse for Mr. Nixon's neglect of these duties. But neither can Watergate and the related White House horrors be declared inoperative so long as the President persists in withholding answers to key questions surrounding those scandals. Right as Mr. Nixon is in saying that "the people will be concerned about what the President does," he is deceiving himself and the American people if he pretends that full effectiveness of his office can be restored while the critical Watergate issues remain shrouded in mystery he refuses to help dissipate. The charges made against the Administration are too fundamental to be swept aside as attacks "by innuendo, by leak, by, frankly, leers and sneers of commentators." These allegations relate to serious abuses of government power as well as criminal offenses. They cannot be divorced from the restoration of confidence.

Even apart from Watergate, Mr. Nixon's actions will be under close scrutiny for signs that he genuinely seeks to cooperate with Congress, not dictate to it. If his forthcoming message is merely a re-run of Administration measures already submitted that have got nowhere because they deserved to get nowhere, then there is little hope of averting fresh impasse. When Melvin Laird, the President's domestic affairs adviser, goes to Capitol Hill next week to meet with House Democratic leaders, we hope he will carry word of some recognition by Mr. Nixon that he cannot render his own "initiatives" bipartisan simply by declaring them such.

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It may not be easy for Mr. Nixon to shift gears and adjust to a less imperious exercise of Presidential authority. But that is what he will have to do if he intends to respond to Senator Mike Mansfield's warning: "Negotiations fine; confrontation no." It is precisely because Watergate has brought about this demand for a change in the President's attitude toward Congress that "the business of the people" and Watergate will both have to remain key factors in Mr. Nixon's search for renewed public confidence.

These are not matters of public relations or of image. They go to the heart of responsible government—a government in which each branch earns respect by performance, not evasion.