

The Watergate State of the Union



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IF IT IS not too late to write about the President's State of the Union message, let me weigh in with a few observations: It was a great speech, by anyone else but him.

That is the damnable fallout of Watergate. The poisonous rain of this whole evil affair has drenched everything Mr. Nixon undertakes to do. The most virtuous acts drown in the muck.

This was a good speech. It was well-organized; it had a beginning, a middle, and an end. At least on the home television screen, the President looked fine. At 60, he had the voice and forceful drive of a man 20 years younger. Forensically speaking, this was a knockout.

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CONTENT, of course, counts for more than form. The content was excellent also. One purpose of a State of the Union message is to let the people know that a particular President has been a great help to the state of the Union. Mr. Nixon splendidly pursued this ritual art. As he ticked off one situation after another, and drew comparisons from five years ago, he laid valid claim to a notable record.

Finally, the speech rang convincingly of a certain nobility of purpose on the President's part. He understands, in common with the old Roman emperors, that the best of all ways to maintain a durable peace is constantly to prepare for war. Mr. Nixon means to be the pre-eminent peacemaker of this century.

Pathetically, all this suffered from the Watergate syndrome. Like the ghost of Banquo, the malevolent spirit of recent

events hovered over the dais. No mere forensics could exorcize the demon.

Thus on the matter of personal privacy, this was the eighth of Mr. Nixon's ten goals: to erect new safeguards against intrusion into our private lives. But when Mr. Nixon reached this point in his address, a couple of non-political friends, watching the TV tube with me, broke into audible snickers.

It is an ironical proposition to hear privacy defended by an administration that tapped telephones wholesale, kept its "enemies" under surveillance, and sanctioned burglary, in an effort to get at psychiatric files on Daniel Ellsberg. It was the old cynical business of exhorting one's subjects to do as I say, not as I do.

The same specter intruded when Mr. Nixon began talking of "windfall profits" and equitable taxes for the oil companies. An ephemeral thought got between the viewer and the TV screen: Who is Richard Nixon to be talking about equitable taxes? His own example, by which he sought legally to take advantage of every windfall that came his way, is scarcely inspiring.

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THE PRESIDENT'S legislative aims were ably spelled out. These ought to command wide bipartisan support. He said all the right things about health care, education, and welfare. But the nagging thought will not go away that Mr. Nixon, because of Watergate, will have serious trouble in pushing his ideas through.

The hell of it is that Watergate can't be shoved into some closet of the public consciousness. That is the unhappy state of the Union.