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RICHARD NIXON'S ANTI-IMPEACHMENT CAMPAIGN: AMERICA'S PARADISE LOST

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On the evening of April 29, 1974, in a national radio and television appeal for public judgment of his innocence, Richard Nixon announced the release of Watergate-related transcripts of tapes subpoened by the House Judiciary Committee. This public appeal represented a dramatic reversal in his recent approach to his anti-impeachment campaign--a series of pseudo-events that indirectly addressed Watergate by discussing non-Watergate issues. Daily in the media the American public heard and read snippets of Nixon's positions on world peace, the Middle East, and the energy crisis as he appeared befor favorable audiences in Houston, Chicago, Europe, Ohio, and Mississippi using a strategy he hoped would maintain his position as a strong leader. His campaign trip to Michigan in support of James Sparling's candidacy in Michigan's Eighth Congressional District provided him with a perfect opportunity to confront Watergate directly, but instead he chose another pseudo-event--a hurried motorcade through rural areas with favorable audiences,

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where he made only a few short comments on his policy goals. The Republicans lost in Michigan's Eighth Congressional District.

On the occasion of this April 29th speech the Michigan loss and the deadline for forty-two taped presidential conversations, along with a series of circumstances that increased public doubt, combined to threaten impeachment. This criticism of the speech will explore the nature and assess the effectiveness of Nixon's response to the chain of related events that was weaving a shroud of impeachment around the President; it will focus on the question, "To what extent can he reverse the impeachment process that has already been set in motion?"

THE RHETORICAL PROBLEM: EMERGENCE OF THE WATERGATE DEFENSE

The question of impeachment centered around three separate judgments: the judicial judgments of Nixon's guilt or innocence, the quality and effectiveness of Nixon's leadership of the American people, and the political importance of Nixon's Presidency to those in Congress who would formally judge him. By tracing the development of these three judgments we can see how Watergate escalated from a caper to an incident, to a scandal, to a conspiracy, and for some, to political warfare.

The original pressure on the President was judicial.

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The Watergate seven, caught and convicted of the Watergate burglary, had been employed by his re-election campaign committee. When James McCord dramatically reversed himself and agreed to testify before Judge John Sirica's grand jury, the process began that raised doubts about the President's involvement in a coverup of the Watergate conspiracy. Nixon's legal response to the judicial aspects of Watergate was to restrict information as much as possible in the name of "separation of powers," "executive privilege," and "confidentiality of Presidential conversations." At the same time, however, his strategy was to divert attention from the question of his guilt by publicly arguing 1) that he was a powerful leader who had received a mandate from the people to solve America's problems by implementing the policies of his administration and 2) that the public's will should not be frustrated by concern with Watergate. This strategy appeared in his April, 1973, Watergate Address. The weakness in it was that he treated a judicial problem of public leadership and did not provide a concrete response to the legal aspects.

After McCord's break from the ranks, Nixon's popularity continued to drop, and Nixon's credibility slipped further. Apparently his strategy was failing. When Nixon's leadership popularity plummeted to a low of 26% just after the Senate Watergate Hearing that featured John Dean's testimony, Nixon responded with a series of pseudo-events coupled with the argument that in spite of Watergate he was still a powerful national and political leader. Even though this strategy at times raised his popularity in the polls from five to ten points, it did not succeed in dramatically reversing the low public ratings, nor did the strategy respond to the initial judicial problem which escalated further when seven of his closest aides were indicted.

At about the same time, the Saturday Night Massacre--the firing of Cox and the resignations of Richardson and Ruckelhaus--deepened the sense of coverup and legitimized demands for presidential impeachment. Nixon responded to the deepening crisis in the House by emphasizing his ties with favorable segments of Congress, but with the loss of several special Congressional elections in traditionally Republican strongholds, the political pressure diminished in impact. The negative response of the public to Nixon's effort to provide leadership and the

need of regular Republicans to dissociate themselves from Nixon created a further political problem for him. His strategic response in Michigan, where he faced the issue, was to stage a pseudo-event that would demonstrate that the office of the President had political clout that could elect Republicans. But with the loss in Michigan it became dramatically evident that both his leadership and political treatments of Watergate had failed, and so the chances of impeachment became more likely. In the face of these escalating events and the impeachment threat, Nixon reversed himself and addressed directly the judicial threat of Watergate.

Not only was Nixon's strategic shift dramatic, but in addition the setting for what was probably his most effective Watergate Address was dramatic. Certainly the acquittal of John Mitchell and Maurice Stans on the previous day and the subpoena deadline on the following day added to the dramatic expectations of the audience. The drama was heightened 1) by the tall stacks of documents which the television camera displayed intermittently and 2) by the President's announcement that he would release them not only to the Judiciary Committee but also to the public. Finally, Nixon attempted to climax the dramatic expectations of the audience by asserting, "The materials I make public tomorrow will provide all the additional evidence needed to get Watergate behind us, and get it behind us now."

THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS: A MOMENT IN THE WATERGATE DEFENSE

In a sense Nixon had come full circle. The leadership argument had failed. The political argument had failed. And on April 29th, 1974, he faced the judicial argument head-on; his strategy was to dismiss it and return to the leadership argument. The audience was the American public, which Speaker of the House Carl Albert noted was a strange audience for Nixon to ask to resolve judicial questions. The theme "We must put Watergate behind us" echoed the theme of the April, 1973, speech. Yet in this April, 1974, speech he had to address directly his guilt or innocence and not simply wish it away.

We believe that his strategy to shift focus again from the judicial question to the problem of leadership is best understood if it is viewed in the framework of

Nixon's sense of personal sacrifice: he would give up his privacy to cleanse the evil of the Watergate affair; and thereby he would restore his leadership and turn America toward the achievement of her goals and aspirations.

MY GRAND SACRIFICE

In the first major section of the address which we will describe as "my grand sacrifice," Nixon faced the judicial threat directly in an effort to restrict Watergate and to preclude an expansion to impeachment. His strategy was to amplify his act of surrendering the tapes into a great personal sacrifice.

The personal tone was established with the opening words, "I have asked for this time tonight in order to announce my answer to the House Judiciary Committee's subpoena for additional Watergate tapes." This personal tone was maintained by his using the first person pronoun fourteen times in the first three paragraphs alone.

Having placed his behavior in the context of personal actions, Nixon turned to the details of the release of the transcript to the Committee. Of course, he made no direct reference to the fact that this act fell short of the subpoena's order, and he probably felt the positive context would prevent the audience from immediately making a negative judgment. Not relying on this strategy alone, he explained that Chairman Rodino and the ranking minority member, Congressman Hutchinson, could validate the transcripts againstthe actual tapes, and then Nixon drew the conclusion for the audience, "I believe this arrangement is fair and appropriate."

To a man for whom principle was publicly so important, the release of material which violated principles of privacy, confidentiality, and executive privilege was a great sacrifice. The greater the justice of the principles violated, the greater the sacrifice, and in the speech Nixon amplified extensively on the justice of the principle:

> The problem I confronted was this: unless a president can protect the privacy of the advice he gets, he cannot get the advice that he needs. This principle is recognized in the constitutional doctrine

> of executive privilege, which has been defended and maintained by every president since Washington and recognized by the courts, whenever tested, as inherent in the Presidency. I consider it my constitutional responsibility to defend this principle.

This statement about executive privilege illustrates a strategy that Nixon employed freely throughout the address, a "Rhetoric as Reality" strategy. With this strategy he described a reality that was favorable to his position but one that might or might not correspond to actual events. His critics questioned the constitutional basis for the principle, and Nixon's own refusal to appeal the tape issue to the Supreme Court suggested that he had overstated the strength of the principle. The principle remained nonetheless, and the release became a grand personal sacrifice for Richard Nixon. Nixon's "My Grand Sacrifice" strategy was quite effective because the individual strategies working together tended to make Nixon's act a reluctant violation of just principles and, therefore, an act of victimage or self sacrifice.

MYSTERY AND THE DEVIL

Having protrayed his personal action as a major sacrifice, Nixon was prepared to discuss impeachment directly in the "Mystery and the Devil" section of his speech. Here, Nixon's strategy was to undermine the credibility of impeachment by demonstrating that it was based upon "rumor, gossip, innuendo," and the charges of John Dean.

First, Nixon established the traumatic nature of impeachment and the resulting evil of its frivolous use:

> Regardless of whether or not it succeeded, the action of the House in voting a formal accusation requiring trial by the Senate would put the nation through a wrenching ordeal it has endured only once in its lifetime, a century ago, and never

> since America has become a world power with global responsibilities. The impact of such an ordeal would be felt throughout the world and on the lives of all Americans for many years to come.

Given the evil threat posed by impeachment, Nixon explained dual sources for the charges--mystery and the devil.

The importance of mystery was forecast early in the speech when Nixon admitted, "I have been well aware that my efforts to protect the confidentiality of presidential conversations has heightened the sense of mystery about Watergate." The mystery had grown into impeachment, he claimed, because of the pressures of the media about the lack of information. He said:

> During the past year, the wildest accusations have been given banner headlines and ready credence. Rumor, gossip, inuendo, accounts from un-named sources of what a prospective witness might testify to have filled the morning newspapers and evening newscasts day after day.

He explained how this process, repeating itself over and over again, mysteriously created the pressure for impeachment. The mystery had also been amplified by the false and misleading testimony of the devil of the piece, John Dean: "Month by month of rumor, insinuation, and charges by just one Watergate witness--John Dean--suggested that . . . [the president had acted improperly]. This sparked the demands for an impeachment inquiry." These dual diabolical forces would be exorcised by Nixon's sacrificial release of the information. The transcripts would dispel the mystery and help the investigators and the public reject Dean's lies.

Yet Nixon wanted to make it perfectly clear that the surrender of the material was an extreme sacrifice and so he expanded on the justice of the sacrificed principle. He indicated his concern for the people involved, their families and friends, and his administration generally.

Of course, part of the sacrifice would result from what his critics in the media would do:

> I realize that these transcripts will provide grist for many sensational stories in the press. Parts will seem to be contradictory with one another, and parts will be in conflict with some of the testimony given in the Senate Watergate committee hearings.

But despite the agony of disclosure, Nixon would sacrifice the transcripts to eliminate the mystery and to help the people exorcise the devil.

One difficulty with this section of Nixon's speech is its disorganization. We are not sure, but perhaps Nixon thought he could communicate reluctance more effectively if his thoughts were harder to follow; regardless of the motives we believe this part of the address was one of the least persuasive.

PERFECT HERO

In the next, and probably most effective, section of the speech Nixon presented himself as the "Perfect Hero." He did this by juxtaposing John Dean and himself as Devil and God figures and by describing a concrete rhetorical reality as a chronology of events. Nixon apparently felt that he would make a more credible "God" figure if he described the "Devil" first:

> Despite the confusions and contradictions, what does come through clearly is this:
>
> John Dean charged in sworn Senate testimony that I was "fully aware of the cover-up" at the time of our first meeting, on September 15. These transcripts show clearly that I first learned of it when Mr. Dean himself told me about it on March 21--some six months later.

Nixon established the tapes as the arbitrator of their respective credibilities.

At this point his concern for credibility and his need to maintain his own positive image required Nixon to consider what could turn out to be uncomfortable loose ends when the transcripts were made public. His strategy for dealing with these loose ends that could be misinterpreted was the need for "national security." He applied this strategy to the issue of "hush" money for Watergate defendents:

> I was particularly concerned by his [Dean's] report that one of the Watergate defendents, Howard Hunt, was threatening blackmail unless he and his lawyer were immediately given $120,000 for legal fees and family expenses, and that he was attempting to blackmail the White House, not by threatening exposure on the Watergate matter but by threatening to reveal activities that would expose extremely sensitive, highly secret national security matters that he had worked on before Watergate.

National security is an effective strategy which Nixon has used many times; it makes acts that would normally be considered "bad" seem "good," and it can be used to explain questionable conversations.

Having taken care of what might be considered the more difficult aspects of his task, Nixon turned to the most effective phase of his address. To firmly establish himself as the "Perfect Hero," Nixon set forth a chronology of his acts by employing very concretely his rhetoric as "Reality Strategy." He had used this strategy in his two previous speeches, but he was always general in describing reality. This time, by quoting selected passages from the transcripts, he gave his description a ring of reality. He was especially skillful in continuing the Hunt issue:

> I said, "It is wrong, that's for sure." I pointed out: "But in the end, we are going to be bled to death. And in the end, it is all going to come out anyway. Then you get the worst of both worlds.

> We are going to lose, and people are going to--
>
> "And look like dopes!" said Haldeman.

Not only was the reality that Nixon presented concrete, but it continually associated Nixon with getting to the bottom of Watergate and being concerned with uncovering it.

During the specifics of these conversations John Dean emerged clearly as the key to the coverup. At one point Nixon explained that it was John Dean who on March 21 had complete knowledge of the coverup and even then withheld information from the President. In contrast, Nixon was always a prying seeker of information and supporter of divulgence. Earlier in the speech this image had begun to develop as Nixon chronicled his initiating an investigation and demanding cooperation from all White House staff. The devil represented coverup and deceit as well as lies, and the hero represented divulgence, even to the extreme of personal sacrifice.

This "Perfect Hero" section was structured chronologically, but it had another pattern as well. The selected events covered what have become the public issues that possibly involved the President with Watergate planning, covering up, discovery, and national security. This persuasive move was summarized in the peroration of this section;

> If read with an open and a fair mind, and read together with the record of the actions I took, these transcripts will show that what I have stated from the beginning to be the truth has been the truth. That I personally had no knowldge of the break-in before it occurred; that I had no knowledge of the cover-up until I was finally told about it by John Dean on March 21; that I never offered clemency for the defendants, and that after March 21 my actions were directed toward finding the facts and seeing that justice was done, fairly and according to the law. The facts are there. The conversations are there. The record of actions is there.

This peroration served as an effective close to Nixon's "Perfect Hero" section because it employed the critical issues.

PARADISE LOST

The short final section of the speech that we have labeled "Paradise Lost" seemed to be added either as an afterthought or because he seems to think he must end his speeches with a reference to Lincoln and a challenge for the future. That he had already presented his peroration and that the transition into the section was weak were further signs of the problem. One can easily identify the abrupt transition:

> I am confident that for the overwhelming majority of those who study the evidence I shall release tomorrow--those who are willing to look at it fully, fairly and objectively--the evidence will be persuasive.
>
> We live in a time of great opportunity for America.

The "great opportunity for America" was Nixon's way of introducing world peace, limitation on nuclear arms, and a strong economy--the goals that Watergate has kept "your President" and "your Congress" from achieving. Even though Nixon did not say it, one gets the impression that if it had not been for Watergate, Nixon believed Americans would have already gained their paradise.

CRITICS' ASSESSMENT: THE HOPE OF THE WATERGATE DEFENSE

Because Nixon's purpose was to get Watergate and impeachment behind him as soon as possible, we have focused on this question: To what extent can he reverse the impeachment process that has already been set in motion? First, our assessment of the speech will answer this question in terms of the immediate and long-range effect. Second, because we believe theory

and practice are closely related, we will consider an intrinsic and artistic perspective as well.

Largely because of his shift in strategy from previous Watergate speeches, Nixon received this immediate impact upon his primary audience: the general public was quite favorable. Because his tone was more straight-forward and because he maintained a better sense of control, he communicated a higher level of sincerity, an essential characteristic of a speech for which credibility is both a primary issue and a strategy. In this more straight-forward approach, for the first time, he offered very specific information and addressed himself directly to the allegations against him. These factors made this address his most successful Watergate performance.

Reinforcing the immediate impact was the timing. The day before the speech, the media had reported the acquittal of Mitchell and Stans and the doubts of Vice President Gerald Ford and Julie Nixon Eisenhower about John Dean's credibility as a witness. These reports prepared the public for Nixon's accusation that Dean had lied and helped establish the idea that people who appear guilty to the public may not be convicted by a jury. These strategies and circumstances supported general acceptance of Nixon's message.

However, in the long run the speech will probably not have a significant impact; in fact, it might even be counter-productive. We have suggested that Nixon's rhetorical problems really lie in three areas: judicial, leadership, and political. He had taken the judicial question and shifted it to a question of leadership. A major reason for the failure of this strategy in the early stages of the Watergate escalation was that each area--judicial, leadership, and political--had an independent existence and a momentum of its own. Nixon may convince the general public of his and his aides' innocence, but the legal processes continue regardless of public opinion. Likewise, the House Judiciary Committee will continue to go forward with its procedures. The leadership judgment, of course, does influence judicial and political judgments, but this influence will be determined more by succeeding events than by this single speech. The appeal to leadership may buy time and delay the Committee's pursuit of the actual tapes. During this

time if events reinforce Nixon's description and theory about Watergate and impeachment, then the speech will be seen as an important turning point in his anti-impeachment campaign. But given the pattern of previous events and some of the judicial events promised soon, we would predict to the contrary: that the immediate impact of the speech will be overshadowed.

In fact, future events could even make the speech counter-productive. By juxtaposing his credibility to Dean's, Nixon's risk was that any increase in Dean's credibility would diminish his own. He might have been wiser not to portray Dean as such an enemy. In addition, his specific description created the opportunity for verifying accounts of events that could lead to rejection. From the perspective of the effects we think the positive immediate reaction will be over-shadowed by future judicial and political events --the speech will continually be redefined as these events unfold.

We can also evaluate some intrinsic characteristics of the speech. We have argued that the immediate impact of the speech will be favorable; however, a few intrinsic features undermine the general effectiveness. First, the organization noted earlier in the second and third sections of the speech became difficult to follow. Second, some strategies were contradictory. In being very concrete Nixon assumed his audience would remember details and later support his position. On the other hand, when he overstated to the point of distortion, he assumed the audience would not remember the details. Two examples will serve to illustrate the problem. First, Nixon continually directed attention to the tall stacks of documents he was surrendering and making public. But the following day everyone would be able to see that the transcript occupied only a single volume of 1308 pages and was only two and one-quarter inches tall, about the size of a telephone directory. Second, Nixon accused John Dean of lying about Nixon's being "fully aware of the cover-up" at the time of their first meeting on September 15. He assumed that people would not remember, nor later realize, that Dean refused to testify that he knew for a fact that it was only his impression that the President was fully aware of the coverup.

Nixon's rhetorical problem and primary strategy for development were also contradictory. Watergate had eroded Nixon's credibility as his diminished leadership made apparent, yet his defense contained numerous assertions supported only by his credibility.

We can assess Nixon's speech from a third perspective by examining his artistic application of a general rhetorical theory. Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" (Philosophy and Rhetoric, January 1968) provides a basis for assessing the speech as "situational rhetoric," and Nixon's speech was clearly a rhetorical response to a situation designed to constrain human action in response to an exigence. From this perspective the speech treated Watergate as a situation and impeachment as the exigence, a relationship that Nixon handled quite well. At this point the theory illuminates a weakness of the speech because the rhetoric should be, but is not, directed toward the mediators of change. We have indicated that Nixon's primary audience appeared to be the general public, but the general public is not the mediator of change in this instance. On the other hand, Nixon's act of releasing the transcripts rather than the tapes was directed toward the Judiciary Committee and could even be directed toward the Special Prosecutor. If this act, coupled with rallied public opinion, discouraged further pursuit of the tapes themselves, as well as pursuit of any additional material, then the rhetorical act would be effective. Still, from an artistic point of view, the speech was directed toward the wrong audience.

The "Quest Story" provides another theory for assessing Nixon's artistry. Hermann Stelzner believed that the theory worked well in explaining Nixon's November 3, 1969, Vietnam Address. A Hero in a quest took a long Journey, seeking a Special Object or Person, and with Helpers he overcame the Guardians of the Object. This "Quest Story" approach is a typical Nixon pattern because he is continually seeking to overcome obstacles in his trip toward world peace. But from the perspective of the quest, the Watergate speech failed to satisfy the patterns. First, the special object of peace was added as an after-thought rather than as a topic that was woven into the fabric

of the speech. Second, because the hero is so far from grasping the special object, his self-sacrifice seems a flaw in the Hero's character. His guilt also leaves the hero blemished. "We have met the enemy and they are us" is not the pose of the quest hero. Fourth, the helpers of the quest are those who assist the hero. But the American people as the helpers in Nixon's quest have become an obstacle because of their doubts about the hero's innocence. The speech could fit the quest pattern; indeed, our "Perfect Hero" and "Paradise Lost" sections suggest the link, but the pattern suggests problems that discourage conversion to the quest.

The nature of the event and the language we have used in describing it both point toward the "dramatistic" theory as a perspective for viewing the speech. Kenneth Burke's "Dramatistic" approach implies four general stages in the process of order: pollution, guilt, purification, and redemption. From the perspective of dramatism, Nixon's describing the pollution of impeachment, his attributing guilt to the lack of information and false testimony of Dean, his offering transcripts as purifying self-sacrifice, and his implying the purifying purge of John Dean, suggest the path to redemption of the Paradise Lost. Yet Nixon's redemption is impure. First, his self-sacrifice was incomplete because the sacrificial lamb was unwilling to offer the total sacrifice of the tapes. Second, the self-sacrifice was not the total sacrifice, but only his willingness to sacrifice principles. Thus, redemption is a paradise, but after the sacrificial offering Nixon is still the leader. Redemption was never really posed as a hope because it was not adequately related to the act of purification. Some might find such an offer of sacrifice hollow. Nixon's speech was dramatic because of the setting and the terms and strategies he employed, but it was not an artistic application of the "Dramatistic" theory. Any number of rhetorical theories could be used to explain the argument and strategy of Nixon's speech. We have considered three theories that seem appropriate for the event and address--the rhetorical situation, the "Quest Story," and the "Dramatistic"--but Nixon did not apply any of these artistically.

A lot of water had passed through the Watergate by April, 1974. For only the second time in two centuries the House seemed on the verge of impeaching a President. In his April 29 speech Nixon's use of specific details and his recognition of the need to supply information for the inquiry constituted dramatic shifts from positions he had taken in previous speeches. Yet that these characteristics seemed so new probably indicated the distance between Richard Nixon's perception of the situation and the actual danger threatening his political life. Nixon's strategy was an attempt to avoid the central judicial issue by forcing it into a reassertion of the very leadership that was slipping away. This reality gap may be the essence of the Watergate Address. The tremendous strategic difficulty arose from the problem of this gap. The power of the new frankness resulted from the narrowing of the gap. The insufficiency of the strategy evidenced the great width of the remaining gap. A rhetor must exercise control over his situation To the extent that he fails to grasp the situation and to the extent that the situation is controlled by forces other than the rhetor, rhetoric fails. This is the question of the April 1974 Watergate address: had Richard Nixon regained control of his fate? The answer ultimately depends on the width of the gap between the Watergate Nixon presented and the Watergate the public would progressively understand.