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Operation Disney World (III)

AFTER PRESIDENT NIXON'S meetings with the Republican governors in Memphis on Monday, Gov. Tom McCall of Oregon said Mr. Nixon "was very believable today—more believable than I've ever seen him before." White House deputy press secretary Gerald L. Warren, for his part, said Mr. Nixon hadn't told the governors anything he hadn't said before. There is only one way to reconcile these two comments and that is to assume that the governors are either so credulous or so hungry for reassurance that they can be inordinately cheered by a little special attention and a superficial plausibility—what White House aides used to call "stroking." For if Mr. Nixon's private sessions with the Republicans have been anything like his public performance before the Associated Press Managing Editors at Disney World last Saturday, he has been serving up generous portions of half-truths, elisions and outright distortions as substitutes for facts.

We have already discussed his penchant for rewriting the record of past Presidents and his confusing, not to say misleading, reconstruction of his role with respect to the Watergate investigation and the missing tapes. There is another pattern in his performance that takes the form of directing attention away from his own conduct and toward his opposition as some sort of justification or excuse for what he may have done. Scapegoating is, of course, a very human trait; but even children usually learn quite early that "everybody does it" and "he hit me first" seldom stand up as viable defenses—even when the finger-pointing has some validity.

Mr. Nixon compounds the weakness in this tactic by twisting the facts. Discussing the financing of the 1972 campaign, he said:

Neither party was without fault . . . They raised \$36 million and some of that, like some of ours, came from corporate sources and was illegal because the law had been changed, and apparently people didn't know it.

Now the fact is that no corporations have admitted or been charged with making illegal gifts to the McGovern campaign, while six have so far been convicted of making large unlawful donations to Mr. Nixon's reelection drive. Furthermore, the law barring such corporate gifts is hardly new; it was enacted in 1907.

There was a similar twist to Mr. Nixon's version of the milk deal—a story he was all too eager to advance. As he told it, the administration's sudden reversal on milk price supports in March 1971 came about not because of large contributions from the dairy lobby, but because "Congress put a gun to our head." Members of Congress comprising about one-fourth of each house, mostly Democrats and including Senator McGovern, were urging an increase to 85 or 90 per cent of parity. According to Mr. Nixon, the furor got so intense his "legislative

leaders" said "there is no way" to avoid passage of a bill and the override of a veto.

There are two things that are unpersuasive about this. First, Democratic pressures don't explain some crucial concurrent events: the dairy lobby's contribution of \$10,000 to the Republicans on March 22, 1971; a presidential meeting with spokesmen for three big dairy co-ops on March 23; another industry contribution of \$25,000 on March 24; and the price support increase on March 25. Nor do Democratic pressures explain either the White

House staff memo, alluding to a dairy industry commitment of \$1 million or more, or any number of other curious facts about the size and the timing of the milk lobby's largesse. Moreover, if Senator McGovern and his colleagues did push Mr. Nixon to change his mind, that would be another historic first. Given the President's penchant for vetoes and extraordinary success in making them stick, this would have been the only time we can think of that the administration was cowed by a group of Democrats not numerous enough even to pass a bill—much less to override a veto.

Then there was the "everybody-does-it" approach to the sensitive matter of presidential taping of conversations. In the course of his tortuous remarks about the missing tapes, Mr. Nixon said in passing that the taping equipment used in President Johnson's term "was incidentally much better equipment . . . and I am not saying that critically." Well, so far as we can determine, the equipment President Johnson actually had was in no way comparable to the extensive, indiscriminate automatic voice-actuated system—"little Sony" or not—which President Nixon installed. Close associates of President Johnson can recall only recorders attached to two telephone consoles, one in the Oval Office and one in the presidential bedroom. Each box reportedly had two cylinders with a total recording time of 30 minutes, and the mechanism had to be activated each time by a toggle switch—and by the President's conscious decision that a particular conversation was sensitive enough to be worth recording on tape. According to his former aides, Mr. Johnson used this equipment, with its limited capabilities, primarily to obtain an exact record of conversations with the military and with foreign diplomats. If Mr. Nixon knows of any other bugging or telephone tapping operations by his predecessor—anything remotely like the all-embracing, voice-activated mechanisms Mr. Nixon himself employed—the facts should be disclosed. If not, the innuendo—"critical" or otherwise—should stop.

There were still more misleading comments, such as Mr. Nixon's description of his telephone conversation with John N. Mitchell on June 20, 1972. As Mr. Nixon

tells it now, Mr. Mitchell "expressed chagrin to me that the organization over which he had control could have gotten out of hand in this way." However, on that same day, Mr. Mitchell was expressing no such chagrin publicly. On the contrary, in a formal public statement he was saying, "This committee did not authorize and does not condone the alleged actions of the five men apprehended Saturday morning . . . The Committee for the Re-election of the President is not legally, morally or ethically accountable for actions taken without its knowledge and beyond the scope of its control."

In one sense, it hardly matters to what extent this constitutes a conscious, deliberate effort to distract and deceive, and to what extent Mr. Nixon has really come to believe that the record he's supposedly setting straight is the truth. Either way, such rhetorical evasions and distortions place an intolerable burden on the public and the government at a time of severe national stress. In short, when you take the trouble to examine with some care the contents of "Operation Candor," you discover that candor is precisely what is lacking in this latest effort by the President to present us, "once and for all," with the facts which could begin the long, slow process of restoring public confidence in Mr. Nixon's conduct of government.