

White House Blocks GAO Probe

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'Executive Privilege' Cited

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Washington

The White House invoked executive privilege to block an inspection of tax-paid flights by administration officials during last fall's presidential campaign, a House subcommittee learned yesterday.

Counsel to the president John W. Dean III held last November 20 that the passenger lists and flight logs in question were "personal to the president and thus not the proper subject of congressional inquiry."

Officials of the General Accounting Office, Congress' watchdog agency, said it was the first time that the privilege doctrine had been used, at least "in the recent past," to deny information to GAO investigators.

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They cited the episode at the opening of hearing on executive privilege by the House subcommittee on government information.

Urging legislation to limit the practice, GAO general counsel Paul G. Dembling said his agency had tried to review the flights made last September by aircraft assigned to the 89th Military Airlift Wing at Andrews Air Force Base, Md., including the President's plane, Air Force One.

In a letter to President

Nixon's chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, last October 31, Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats, the head of GAO, said his agency had been asked "by a member of the Congress" to review September trips by the President and his family, the Vice President, White House staff members and Cabinet members.

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Staats said the GAO also wanted to determine "the extent" to which the Government had been reimbursed for those flights by the Committee for the Re-election of the President.

In that fashion, GAO officials said yesterday, they might have been able to determine what trips the White House deemed "political" and what flights it considered properly chargeable to the taxpayers.

According to Dembling, the comptroller general's request for access to the passenger manifests and flight logs on file at the White House went unanswered until after Election Day.

Replying for Haldeman on November 20, White House counsel Dean wrote that "information of this nature has traditionally been considered personal to the President" and could not be reviewed.

"All political flights made

during September," Dean added, "were billed to the Committee to Re-elect the President and that data will, of course, be reflected in the committee's financial reports."

In his policy statement on executive privilege last month, Mr. Nixon said he had no intention of using the doctrine "as a shield to prevent embarrassing information from being made available."

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