

Anatomy of a White House

ANALYSIS

By James McCartney
Knight News Service

WASHINGTON — Here is a case history of one small battle in the crisis of credibility at the White House — a crisis President Nixon now acknowledges.

It involves an admission by the President in his latest Watergate statement that he couldn't find a dictated tape recording that he thought he had made last April.

In effect, a third White House tape recording turned up missing. The chronology of this one episode among many in recent weeks illustrates some of the problems the President is having in trying to reestablish his believability with Congress and a majority, according to polls, of the people.

The new missing recording — like an earlier missing tape — involved a meeting the President had last April 15 with his ousted counsel, John Dean.

It was a meeting, according to testimony from Dean, in which the President said he had been "foolish" to discuss executive clemency for Watergate burglars with White House aide Charles Colson. Such a discussion would implicate Nixon in an attempt to cover up Watergate.

The story begins last June when Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox, since fired by the President, got word that

a tape recording had been made of the April 15 meeting.

On June 11, Cox promptly wrote a letter to J. Fred Buzhardt, then the President's main lawyer on Watergate matters.

"I am . . . informed," he said, "that the President had a conversation with John Dean on the night of April 15 which was recorded on tape."

He said he wanted to hear the tape and to have a transcript made for use in the Watergate investigation.

On June 16, Buzhardt replied: "The tape to which the President referred in his discussion with Mr. Petersen was a tape on which the President dictated his own recollections of that conversation after it was finished. "It would, of course, not be appropriate to produce that tape."

The dictated tape recording, however, began to arouse the interest of reporters many months later — after Cox had subpoenaed the full, original two-way recording and after the White House reported in late October that a full recording was never made by the automated White House taping system.

On Nov. 2 — just two weeks ago — at Key Biscayne, Deputy Press Secretary Gerald Warren was questioned about it in great detail.

credibility problem

Warren: "What we have established is that there was in fact a tape recording — that he was sure it existed.

"I know," he said, "it was tape recorded, dictabelt, or whatever — I get in trouble when I use brand names. You know what I mean. It was dictated into a recording machine by the President."

Later on, he said: "I know that the . . . President did dictate his recollection of that (the April 15) conversation."

A still skeptical reporter wanted even more assurance: "Have you established that the tape does exist?"

Warren: "That is the one we are talking about, sure." a tape made, dictated by the President, following that conversation."

That was Nov. 2.

Ten days later, on Nov. 12, President Nixon issued his newest Watergate statement.

"I found that my file for that day consists of personal (written) notes of the conversation held with John Dean the evening of April 15, 1973," the President said, "but not a dictation belt."

He said that he "believed in June" that he had dictated his recollections: "However," he added, "I did not review my file to confirm that it contained the belt."

He did not say that he did not dictate his recollections, neither did he say that there never was a dictated tape.

Thus he leaves open the possibility that a tape could have been made and destroyed.

He makes no mention of Gerald Warren's persistent assertions 10 days earlier that existence of the tape was a certainty.

Trying to clear all this up, a reporter asked Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler: Was there a dictabelt on the 15th or was there not?"

Said Ziegler: "There was not."

Warren says now that "we all assumed" there was a dictated tape — and that explains why he answered questions the way he did on Nov. 2.

No one can know whether the dictated tape might have shed any light on the disputed April 15 meeting.

It probably would have been greeted with skepticism, anyway, since it contained only Nixon's version.

It was not under subpoena and destroying it would apparently not have been a crime or an act in the obstruction of justice.

But the story does illustrate why a credibility crisis continues unabated.