

'Operation Candor'—Or Slander?

AS THE PRESIDENT has continued to receive small groups of Republican legislators at the White House over the past week with a view to taking their questions and soliciting their recommendations on the Watergate scandals, one particular line of White House argument has become clear. It is the proposition put forth by both Mr. Nixon and his aide, Gen. Alexander Haig, that Elliot Richardson did not tell the truth in his public account of events leading up to the firing of Special Watergate Prosecutor Archibald Cox—did not tell the truth, what's more, while testifying under oath before the Senate Judiciary Committee on the subject. Specifically, it was suggested at these sessions that contrary to what he later said, Mr. Richardson had originally lent his support to both the curbing of the Special Prosecutor's powers and the dismissal of the Special Prosecutor from his job and had changed his mind and resigned at the last minute, having got—as one version had it—"cold feet."

Now these are very serious and very important charges, and they are by no means disposed of by the White House's subsequent denial that the President had actually used the word "liar" to describe Mr. Richardson or suggested that Mr. Richardson be cited for perjury. The point is that a number of the Republican legislators who were present claim that what Mr. Nixon and General Haig did say in fact amounted to a charge that Mr. Richardson had not told the truth concerning a central event in the Watergate saga—and the White House cannot have it both ways. It cannot seek to get the good of charges made in this particular fashion while simultaneously seeking to escape responsibility for having made them. Either Elliot Richardson's version of his role in these key events was accurate or it was not; either Mr. Nixon and General Haig believe that

his testimony was false or they do not. If they have evidence that the former Attorney General perjured himself before the Judiciary Committee, they have an obligation to make that evidence available to the Senate. And if they believe that Mr. Richardson's account under oath was untruthful on particular points, they should have the courage and decency to say so out loud and unequivocally. Surely whatever the outer limit of public tolerance was for artful dodging and clever insinuation and half-answers on questions so important as these, it has long since been passed.

It matters a great deal whether Elliot Richardson told the truth to the public and to the Senate Judiciary Committee concerning the dismissal of Archibald Cox. It matters at least as much whether Mr. Nixon and General Haig are telling the truth to members of the House and Senate when they describe Mr. Richardson's testimony as false. We do not see how the Senate Judiciary Committee, several of whose members have been present at these sessions, can fail to recall Mr. Richardson and to call General Haig and other White House assistants who were in on the relevant deliberations with a view to resolving the question of who is not telling the truth. Someone is not. Surely the Senate Judiciary Committee cannot allow itself to be so demeaned as to accept without comment official suggestions that perjury has been committed before it by Mr. Richardson. For the sake of a much imposed-upon public and for the sake of its own reputation and self-respect, it has an obligation to find out whether Mr. Richardson was distorting the record under oath or Mr. Nixon and General Haig were distorting it in the course of a series of private conversations with members of Congress, which they labelled—yes—"Operation Candor."