

'Operation Candor': Unanswered Questions Proliferate

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 27—In the third week of its "operation candor," the White House finds itself mired once again in contradictory stories and growing incredulity.

For all of President Nixon's efforts, in statements, public speeches and meetings with members of Congress, to re-

build his credibility, the unanswered questions proliferate. Two subjects that dominated this morning's press briefing at the White House illustrate the point. One was the matter of Mr. Nixon's income tax returns, which have become a subject of controversy since it was reported, and he conceded that he paid only nominal taxes in 1970 and 1971. He has never disclosed in detail how he managed this, except to say that he took a \$500,000 deduction for a gift of his personal Vice-Presidential papers to the National Archives.

Last night, following a meeting with the President, Senator J. Bennett Johnston Jr., a Louisiana Democrat, reported that Mr. Nixon had told him and five colleagues that he planned to make public his tax returns. Mr. Johnston said that Mr. Nixon explicitly mentioned the returns, not simply a data summary.

But this morning, Gerald L. Warren, the deputy White House press secretary, pictured Mr. Nixon as undecided about his precise plans. Mr. Warren said that "complete information" would be made available

as soon as an unidentified "working group" had prepared it. But he refused to say that the information would include the returns themselves. Had Mr. Johnston misunderstood the President? Mr. Warren said he was not suggesting that. Well, what had the President said? Mr. Warren said he did not know because he had not attended the meeting. Had he attempted to find out? No, he had not.

Far more complex, and potentially far more serious, was the second subject: the question of the 18-minute gap in a June 20, 1972, Watergate tape recording—and, in particular, who told whom about it when.

Last Wednesday, J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., a special White House counsel, said in United States District Court here that he learned a week before (on Nov. 14) that a section of the tape was blank.

He also said that tests conducted at the White House the day before (Nov. 20) failed to provide any explanation of how the gap had come into existence. The White House did not know what had happened, he said.

But in a document submitted to the same court yesterday over Mr. Buzhardt's signature, the White House said the gap was caused by the "depression of a 'record' button during the

process of reviewing the tape" on Oct. 1, six weeks before Mr. Buzhardt had told the court that he learned of the problem.

"The incident was detected and reported when made to the President, and shortly thereafter to White House counsel, J. Fred Buzhardt," the document continued. Thus, Mr. Buzhardt knew of the gap, and how it came to be, long before Nov. 14.

Similar discrepancies exist in the testimony of Mr. Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, who was operating the tape recorder when the erasure took place.

Testifying before Judge John J. Sirica on Oct. 8, Miss Woods not only did not mention the

mishap with the tape but also spoke of taking "every possible precaution" to avoid inadvertent erasure.

That was more than a month after she had in fact erased the 18 minutes from the June 20 tape.

'Sorry' About Silence

Yesterday, Miss Woods was back in court, telling how she had made the erasure. Asked by Judge Sirica why she had not advised him of the matter on Nov. 8 she said that she had not thought then that the conversation involved was covered by the subpoena. "I am most dreadfully sorry," she added.

Finally, there is a conflict between Miss Woods's testimony that she informed the President at once (buttressed by the Buzhardt document) and Mr. Warren's account, given earlier yesterday. Mr. Warren, under close questioning, left the impression that Mr. Nixon had known for some time that there was a "problem" with the tape but had learned of the specific trouble and how it had been caused late on Nov. 20. He said nothing about Miss Woods's immediate report to Mr. Nixon.

The point is important, because on Nov. 20 the President told a group of Republican Governors in Memphis that he knew of no further Watergate "bombshells." Within 24 hours, word of the missing 18 minutes was made public.

Today, Mr. Warren said that he had not intended to suggest that the President had learned of the gap after the Memphis meeting, and that if he had done so, he had been in error.