

Cosmetic Candor at the White House

Nearly four years after President Nixon took advantage of a fast-closing tax loophole to claim a \$576,000 tax deduction for donation of his vice presidential papers, senior White House aides were plotting how to pry it open again to permit an even fatter tax break for his presidential papers.

In late 1972 and early 1973, with the Nixon tide running high before Watergate broke open, such a move was seriously discussed inside the White House by the President's top lieutenants and lawyers. The consensus favored a bill to reinstate tax deductions for contributions of public papers. The savage eruption of Watergate halted all such efforts.

This points up covert preoccupation at high levels of the Nixon White House with the President's personal financial security. It also is one more indication that "Operation Candor," whatever its impact in saving Mr. Nixon's presidency, has hardly been candid at all.

In the Nov. 17 press conference at Disney World, Fla., during "Operation Candor," Mr. Nixon suggested the tax break on his vice presidential papers was not carefully plotted but resulted from Lyndon B. Johnson's casual advice.

In truth, as we recently reported, the White House lobbied frantically to save the tax loophole in 1969. What's more, presidential aides were well aware that this effort was based not on any broad tax principle but on a businesslike desire to feather the President's nest (though, of course, it was not so presented to Congress).

Before and just after Mr. Nixon's 1972 re-election landslide the White

House staff pondered how he could profit from his accumulating presidential papers and discussed seeking help from Congress. Mr. Nixon's personal lawyers, led by Herbert Kalmbach, conferred with the White House counsel's office, then headed by John W. Dean III. The top presidential lieutenants, H.R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, also were periodically engrossed in such matters.

The reason why senior government aides spent official time on the President's personal money problems was pervasive concern, seeping down from the Oval Office, about Mr. Nixon's financial future. To provide for that future, according to one aide, was made a major priority. At Disney World, Mr. Nixon revealed his worry about the future in this confused and cryptic lament: "I have got to find a way to give away (the presidential papers) or otherwise my heirs will have a terrible time trying to pay the taxes on things people aren't going to want to buy."

Obsession with financial security is by no means unique to Mr. Nixon among American Presidents. But this priority at the White House scarcely comports with his attempt in the midst of "Operation Candor" to show himself so studiously nonchalant about personal money matters.

Nor is this the only discrepancy between the real and the synthetic in "Operation Candor." While pledging to reveal everything, the White House reverts to its old non-cooperative self on specific items.

Item: Unable to get in a question during a presidential session with Republican congressmen on Nov. 16, Rep. Charles Whalen of Ohio wrote Mr.

Nixon a letter asking specific questions about operations of the notorious White House plumbers. Apart from a routine acknowledgment, Whalen has received no reply.

Item: At a session between the President and Republican senators Nov. 14, Sen. Charles Mathias of Maryland requested justification of the plumbers. Mr. Nixon promised to send him one, but nothing has been received.

Item: On Aug. 15, the President asserted he first learned on March 17, 1973, about the 1971 plumbers' burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office. When we asked from whom Mr. Nixon learned the fact, presidential lawyers and the White House Press Office declined to answer. With the advent of "Operation Candor," we hopefully renewed the query. We still have no reply.

Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski is now getting cooperation from the White House in supplying evidence—but only up to a point. The President's aides still profess inability to locate certain documents, some concerning the plumbers. It may be significant, therefore, that the Jaworski aide assigned to rummage through White House files belongs to the task force investigating the plumbers.

All this suggests to Capitol Hill that the more things change in Mr. Nixon's White House, the more they are the same. Of course, Congress will not impeach Mr. Nixon for disguising interest in securing big tax deductions. But cosmetic candor does not improve the overall congressional attitude toward Mr. Nixon, and that could prove decisive in the critical months ahead.