

# Sources Say Nixon Candor Drive Fading

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The White House has decided to scale down "Operation Candor," President Nixon's campaign to aggressively defend himself in public against charges arising from the Watergate scandals, according to White House sources.

Accordingly, the White House will not publicly release transcripts or summaries of presidential tape recordings and will resist attempts by the Senate Watergate Committee to obtain such materials, the sources reported.

The decision was reached Wednesday after the President and his senior advisers concluded that the contents of the tapes, if disclosed, could lead large segments of the public to believe that the President was involved in the conspiracy to cover up Watergate — even though the tapes might not legally incriminate him.

According to senior presidential aides, the White House tape recordings indicate that — at a minimum — Mr. Nixon had knowledge at least several days before March 21, 1973, the date that the President maintains he first learned of administration involvement.

Two presidential aides who had consistently maintained that Mr. Nixon was not involved in the conspiracy to cover up Watergate, now tell the Washington Post they are no longer convinced.

Their latest comments reflect mounting concern in the White House about the President's future and a developing strategy aimed less at regaining public support than avoiding the impeachment or forced resignation of the President.

Instead of publicly releasing

the transcripts, the President and his senior advisers decided Wednesday that any such material would be made available in the future only to the House Judiciary Committee — which has begun a preliminary inquiry into the possible impeachment of Mr. Nixon — the sources said.

As part of the same decision, the public release of in-

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formation on other Watergate-related matters, including Mr. Nixon's role in the ITT and milk fund controversies, is in question, the sources said.

"The problem is still in some dispute and I still think there is room for movement," said one senior presidential adviser who unsuccessfully argued for immediate release of the ITT and milk information. "But as of now, the only possible release of anything would be requests from the Judiciary committee. That way we at least give the appearance of cooperation."

In the case of the tapes, release to the committee would be far less damaging than making their contents public, the sources said, because most senior White House aides believe the transcripts do not comprise legal proof that the President broke the law in Watergate.

However, the White House has ruled out public disclosure because — in the words of one source — "most of the public and news media would read the transcripts and conclude that the President was involved in a conspiracy."

The sources said that, at a minimum, the tapes show that the President was aware that there was an organized effort last year to deceive the public and "contain" Watergate because it represented a threat to Mr. Nixon's re-election in the 1972 campaign.

The sources said that the transcripts of the tapes indicate that former presidential counsel John W. Dean III was wrong in some of his key allegations against the President. However they refused to be specific about

which of Dean's allegations might be shown mistaken.

Dean's testimony before the Senate Watergate committee included assertions that the President indicated as early as Sept. 15, 1972, that he knew of the Watergate coverup; that Mr. Nixon told him on March, 13, 1973, that he had authorized executive clemency for at least one of the seven convicted conspirators\* and there would be "no problem" raising money to buy their silence; and that, on April 15, 1973, the President told him he had been "kidding" about the alleged offer of clemency.

The White House has said that no tape recording was made of the April 15 conversation. The March 13 conversation was among the tapes the White House had once considered releasing publicly.

"Dean need only be right on one charge or appear to be right on one charge and, in the present atmosphere, that might be enough to take the President down," one of the sources said.

Another source described the situation as follows: "Any time you play something back, it's the impressions of the listener that count . . . you would almost have to have been in the room at the time to judge . . . something could be said tongue-in-cheek and be very funny, but if it was meant seriously it could be very damaging."

The sources emphasized that the transcripts also reveal embarrassing language and attitudes on the part of the President. One source said they demonstrate Mr. Nixon's reported concern with "petty" political retributions and another said: "There are a lot of really nasty comment about individuals."

The most damaging material to the Presidents case, the sources said, is not necessarily contained in the seven tape recordings already turned over to the Watergate special prosecutor, but in the tapes of nearly 500 conversations and meetings recently subpoenaed by the Senate Watergate committee.

Public release of trans-

cripts or summaries of the seven initial conversations would set a precedent the White House wants to avoid and would also tend to give legitimacy to the Senate subpoena for more tapes, the sources said.

According to White House officials, the President and his advisers have decided to

resist the Senate request at all costs and will either ignore it or try to stave off its demands by engaging in a protracted court battle.

The decision to agree to the release of taped materials to the House Judiciary Committee was virtually inevitable, the same sources said, because any clear signal of noncooperation with that committee might enhance the chances of impeachment.

The tentative decision to shelve Operation Candor was made after an intense debate in the White House over whether to release the tape transcripts. Presidential aides arguing for disclosure said that a majority of the public already assumes the worst and the transcripts might at least clear suspicion of the President in some areas.

"Even if the tapes are ambiguous on the question of the President's involvement in the coverup, my feeling is that ambiguity is better than conviction by 75 per cent of the American people" one senior White House official said. "To me, that's a definition of progress if we can show that."

Other sides argued to the contrary that public disclosure would at minimum do permanent harm to the Presidency and be demeaning to Mr. Nixon personally.

The decision to withhold the taped conversations was reached after several weeks of vacillation which, according to White House sources, was indicative of the growing indecisiveness in the policy-making process there. The President, according to numerous members of his staff, increasingly has isolated himself to the point where he rarely solicits or accepts advice from even his closest aides.

Press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler now plays a pre-eminent role in the White

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House staff hierarchy and has become the President's most trusted adviser and most frequent companion, according to several sources.

Ziegler passes out many work assignments in the President's name — a job that normally has been handled by the White House chief of staff. But Alexander M. Haig, the chief of staff, now is removed from many policy-making decisions and his influence with the President has diminished, the sources said.

Haig has maintained a grueling work schedule and is nearly exhausted, according to White House officials. He also has been known to make pessimistic and cynical comments about the President's situation, two sources said. Another source described Haig as "disillusioned," adding: "He's gotten a real education and has seen some things he had trouble believing."

Morale among the staff apparently is so low that senior presidential aides regularly joke with both insiders and outsiders about the deterioration of the Nixon presidency and its possible demise.

A contributing factor in the decision to shelve Operation CAndor and withhold disclosure of the tapes was the experience earlier this month in releasing details of the President's finances and taxes, according to several White House officials.

They said the President and many of his aides were upset with what the White House regarded as negative press and public reaction to those disclosures. At one point, two sources related, the President bitterly asked if he would also be expected to "disrobe" in front of the press corps.

In eight months since the departure of former presidential aides H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, the President's hostility toward the press and his critics has only heightened, according to White House sources. One said the President used the word "Conspiracy" to describe the move

to impeach him.

Senior White House aides have long emphasized that the President did not want to disclose the contents of the recordings or details of his personal finances because he did not want to embarrass or cause legal problems for his friends, including Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo.

The same aides now feel that if the President is going to maintain an effective legal defense, he should abandon some of his friends.

"He may never be able to do that," one source said. "It's his number one commandment to stick with your friends, and the conflict only makes him retreat more into himself and his narrowing circle (of friends and aides.)"

Two sources said that J. Fred Buzhardt, special counsel for Watergate matters, is also extremely unhappy and wants to leave the White House staff in the next three or four months at the latest.

"The client (the President) is a damned hard guy to be an attorney for," one source said. "Fred's had it."