

Dean tells of Ford's contribution woes

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PLAINS, Ga. (AP) — Former Nixon aide John W. Dean III says he was told in 1972 that then-House Republican leader Gerald R. Ford "might have some problems" involving unreported campaign contributions from a lobbyist.

The remark about Ford is contained in Dean's book about Watergate to be published next month under the title "Blind Ambition." Dean was the young White House counsel whose testimony against President Richard M. Nixon in the Watergate coverup case eventually led to Nixon's resignation.

A brief excerpt from the book was leaked to The Associated Press and several major newspapers.

The AP was told Thursday that William E. Timmons, the supposed source of the Ford story, was unavailable, but he was quoted by three newspapers as denying Dean's account. The White House said Ford would have no comment.

In the excerpt, Dean recounts efforts by the Nixon White House to block a Watergate investigation by the late Rep. Wright Patman's House Banking and Currency Committee.

During the summer and fall of 1972 — while the Nixon reelection campaign was under way — Patman was seeking subpoena power to enable his committee to call White House and Nixon campaign aides in an effort to look into the Watergate case.

Dean says he asked White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman how to "turn Patman off" and Haldeman told him:

"Call (Treasury Secretary John) Connally. He may know some way to stop Patman. And tell Timmons to keep

on Jerry Ford's ass. He knows he's got to produce on this one." Connally and Patman were both Texans. Timmons was chief lobbyist for the White House.

Dean said he called Connally and was told: "I understand from the grapevine down in Texas that Patman might have a couple of weak spots, and one of them is he might have some campaign contributions he would not want exposed. Now, I believe I heard the congressman received some contributions from an old lobbyist up here. I don't believe Mr. Patman has reported them either."

"Timmons, who met regularly with Jerry Ford," Dean wrote, "had explored with him Connally's suggestion about Patman. 'What do you think?' I asked Timmons. 'Do you think we ought to dig into this stuff?'"

"Well, John, you know this is kind of sensitive," said Timmons, "and I talked to Jerry about it. Jerry doesn't think it would be such a good idea. And, frankly, I'll tell you the problem is that, uh, Jerry himself might have some problems in this area, and so might some of our guys on the committee. I don't think we ought to open this up."

"I see. I guess that scraps that."

"Yeh, I guess it does."

The excerpt does not say when the problem contributions may have been made or whether they were illegal.

Before April 7, 1972, when a major campaign finance reform law took effect, it was common practice for candidates to skirt the reporting requirements. One widely used loophole was the so-called "D.C. committee," an inactive campaign committee set up in the District of Columbia, which did not require congressional candidates to report individual contributions.

Candidates could thus accept funds from sources that might prove embarrassing in their home districts —

such as lobbyists for special interests or labor unions — and deposit the funds in their D.C. committee accounts. Their regular campaign committees at home could then accept a transfer of funds from the D.C. committee, and the original source of the money would not show up in campaign finance reports.

The Los Angeles Times reported that Timmons, reached for comment, branded Dean's account of Timmons' alleged talks with Ford "an absolute fabrication."

Timmons added he was distressed that excerpts from the Dean book were being leaked on the eve of the debate between Ford and Democratic nominee Jimmy Carter.

Carter's press secretary, Jody Powell, said the Democratic candidate was unaware of the contents of the Dean excerpt prior to the various newspaper reports.

The Washington Post quoted Timmons as confirming having had a conversation with Dean about using the campaign information against Patman, a plan Timmons said he rejected. And, the Post said, Timmons denied discussing the Patman probe with Ford.

The New York Times quoted Timmons as calling Dean's account "an absolute lie, a boldfaced lie."