



John Dean—who blew the whistle on Watergate—is shown in the Republican Convention arena. He covered the event for "Rolling Stone." Now, his aptly named book, "Blind Ambition," tells it like it was with the Nixon gang.

John Dean and His 'Blind Ambition'

by Lloyd Shearer

WASHINGTON, D.C. John Dean, who for awhile played a cunning shortstop in the Nixon-managed ball team, "The Stone-wallers," has written a fascinating confessional, *Blind Ambition*, in which he blows the whistle loudly, clearly, and irrefutably on his former teammates.

As of this writing, *Blind Ambition* has already sold more than 125,000 copies and is rapidly ascending to the top rung of the best-seller ladder.

Simon & Schuster, which seems to specialize in Watergate exposés, will have paid Dean \$125,000 or more by the time its soft-cover subsidiary, Pocket Books, releases the paperback version of *Blind Ambition*.

Moreover, David Susskind, the TV producer, is reportedly offering Dean a

hefty sum for the television rights. And according to David Obst, Dean's literary agent, "There's a very good chance for a movie sale."

Thus, John Dean at 38 plays with the possibility of grossing \$500,000 or more from his first literary effort. Not bad for a disbarred lawyer who at one time was widely regarded—along with Nixon, Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Colson, and their satraps—as a member of the most vindictive and contemptible group of men to have ever controlled the executive branch of the U.S. government.

Air of credibility

What separates Dean from the other Watergate felons is that he is not a liar. Self-serving, yes. But a liar, no. So that his book, fleshed out with corroborative detail, dialogue, and anecdote,

becomes immediately credible and intriguing. No small accomplishment in view of the feeling, as Dean so pithily puts it, that "... no one likes a squealer, a Judas, an informant, a tattletale, especially one who is also guilty. . . ."

A sizable share of the credit for the readability, pace, and structure of *Blind Ambition* must go to Taylor Branch, 29, a tall, red-haired, walrus-mustached writer, formerly with *Harpers* and now with *Esquire*, who collaborated with Dean. Taylor is a Georgian from Atlanta who was educated at the University of North Carolina and Princeton.

Nowhere in the book is Taylor Branch acknowledged as the collaborator-editor of *Blind Ambition*. He is merely mentioned up front with 15 other names as a recipient of the author's gratitude.

The truth is that Simon & Schuster paid Taylor Branch \$20,000 to rewrite and restructure John Dean's original version of *Blind Ambition*, which from all accounts was "as interesting as a laundry list."

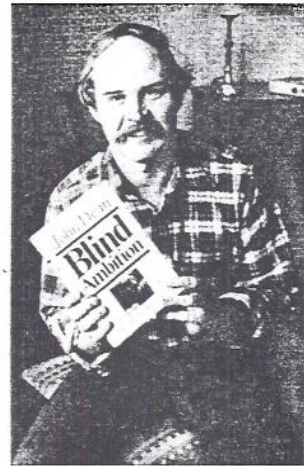
Dean was not a professional writer (he is now), and although he slaved on his book in 1975—during which time he was valiantly and intermittently aided by Alice Mayhew, one of Simon & Schuster's editors who superbly edited the Woodward-Bernstein books—Dean spawned a manuscript that was "dull, dragged-out and, most important of all, non-commercial."

By January of this year it was obvious to the powers at Simon & Schuster that John Dean desperately needed literary help. They had advanced him \$35,000, on which he lived for 13 months, and they had the choice of writing off that money or investing a little more for the services of a professional writer who might help produce a potential best seller. Surely, Dean had all the basic material in his original 500-page manuscript for a successful book.

Knew the truth

He had, after all, served as the linchpin in the Watergate coverup conspiracy. Everyone from Richard Nixon to John Mitchell had confided in John Dean, sought his advice, told him their dreaded truths. He knew who did what to whom in the White House, and his judgments of the men in the Nixon cabal were perceptive and profound.

"It was in part a case of getting Dean to dramatize and color what he had previously droned out to the Ervin committee," says a source. "It was a case of getting him to relax and open up, to



Taylor Branch worked with Dean to rewrite and reshape a book that should gross \$500,000. He was paid \$20,000.

look back and find the humor and the human interest aspects, to add flavor to the Watergate tragedy."

Taylor Branch flew out to Los Angeles in February, 1976, moved into John and Maureen Dean's house atop Coldwater Canyon. For two-and-a-half months he and Dean worked night and day, using the first Dean manuscript as a jump-off point.

"I spent the first few weeks," Branch later told a friend, "just getting to know John, trying to get him to tell stories. He's a marvelous storyteller, especially when he thinks of something that's funny or outrageous or interesting. He'd talk stories into the tape recorder. Then it would be my job to write those stories down in readable literary fashion. Then we'd go over them together.

A pressure job

"We had a feeling of tremendous pressure, of having our backs to the wall. John had gotten a relatively small advance from Simon & Schuster. The publisher had no commitment to publish. John would get no more money until they accepted the manuscript. They could pull out at any time. We had to work fast and well. There was always the hint from New York that the end of the Watergate book market was approaching rapidly. Besides, the publisher was coming out with *The Final Days* by Woodward and Bernstein. We slaved under pressure. I think in all the months I was at John's house, we ate out three times. All the rest of the time we cooked for ourselves.

"We would start at 9 in the morning and work through until *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and *Metro News, Metro News*, which were over at midnight.

"John and I would consume a helluva lot of scotch every night, because it was the only way to wind down and go to sleep. We had practically no visitors.

The Colsons visit

"One night, however, the Colsons, Chuck and Patty, were in Los Angeles promoting his book *Born Again*. They came up for dinner, and Colson got very drunk. He had been to six prayer breakfasts, and John Dean was very nervous about Colson's religious conversion and rediscovery of God, because John himself is heavy into EST [Erhard Seminars Training, a self-improvement course].

"It was my job to make jokes and keep everything on a friendly, even keel. But I got too nervous and couldn't do it, so it was Patty Colson who picked up the slack.

"When we sat down to dinner, everybody was uncomfortable. Colson was sitting there as if he planned to say the blessing. John, who hadn't said a blessing in 30 years, was wondering what to do. Finally, he said, 'Chuck, would you like to say the blessing?' Then Patty Colson broke into the widest grin and



His wife Maureen watches intently as Dean jots down some notes before he resumes his sensational testimony at the Senate Watergate Committee hearings.

said, 'John, you got an hour?'

"Colson was so embarrassed he couldn't even talk. But his wife kept making these jokes. She'd say, 'I know Chuck's very sincere about all this religious business, but he was also very sincere about the Marines. And of course he was very, very sincere about Nixon.'

"It was a fun evening, and it wound up in a big argument about who was the most evil, Haldeman or Ehrlichman? John Dean thinks that Ehrlichman is a much more sinister character than Haldeman. He thinks Haldeman is far too simple-minded to be very sinister. Colson, on the other hand, thinks that Haldeman is more sinister because he is simple-minded and that Ehrlichman tries at least to get something done.

"I remember Colson saying that Ehrlichman is the kind of a guy who, if he were riding in a limousine, would run over a hippie because the hippie in his way was delaying his time schedule. Haldeman, if a hippie were standing in front of his limousine, would order the chauffeur to drive by the hippie so that he, Haldeman, could reach out and drag him by the hair through the street. The implication by Colson was that

Ehrlichman always had a purpose in mind but that Haldeman liked to screw people just for the sake of screwing them. Anyway, they argued all night. I thought Dean won the argument."

People who have studied John Dean say that beyond his undeniable passion for his attractive wife, he is a passionless man. Also a man without ideology, a pure opportunist, a no-holds-barred scrambler for money and power, a main-chancer who turned Nixon in not because telling the truth was the right thing to do, but rather because Nixon had connived to make him the Watergate heavy, and he was not about to play "fall guy."

Whether Dean acted on principle or in self-defense in bringing down Nixon and his band of accomplices is difficult to determine from Dean's book.

While it is rich in detail and reveals Nixon, Colson, Mitchell, Hunt, Liddy, Ehrlichman, La Rue, and Kalmbach—the whole sorry group of Watergate scoundrels—for what they were, it does not reveal John Dean in depth. Dean is a complicated, intelligent man who likes clothes and cars, country clubs and corporation executives. The book says nothing of his first marriage to the

former Carla Hennings, whose father was the U.S. Senator from Missouri, or of his 10-year-old son or of his vital, early, formative years. He analyzes neither his background nor his guilt, just lays it out.

As a teen-ager John Dean roomed with Barry Goldwater Jr. at Staunton Military Academy. One day young Goldwater took Dean to meet his father, the U.S. Senator from Arizona.

According to a friend, "Dean at that time didn't really know what he wanted to do with his life, but he became so enthralled by what he had seen in Washington that when he returned to Staunton, Va., he began reading the famous speeches of great men like Churchill and imagined himself being the guy delivering the speech. He got hooked very hard on that power trip.

Visions of glory

"When you talk to John Dean, you get the impression that he wanted all the trappings of power, to be the guy who rode in the big, black limousine. His view is that most of the bureaucrats or politicians in Washington are exactly like that. You know, they're all saying, 'Let's feed the poor, let's get jobs for the unemployed, let's cut down on inflation.' But what they really want is to ride in the big, black limousine. I don't know how John Dean got hooked on all that stuff.

"But he sure did. And a funny thing is John didn't make the 'A' White House limousine service until after Watergate. He was really a low-level schnook until all the Watergate dirt started falling in his lap. The more dirt he got on people, the higher his status skyrocketed in the Nixon White House. So he came to believe that one played the game that way. 'Be of service. Become a confidant. Get the intelligence. Get the dirt.' He learned that in the Nixon Administration the more dirt you got on people, the more valuable you became; the more fear you stimulated, the higher you rose.

Character fault

"John Dean is a classic example of a young-man-on-the-move who lacked the character to prevent corruption by environment."

There are glimpses of all this in *Blind Ambition*, but they are few, fast and fleeting.

The book, however, is rich in truth and record. Dean enjoys the rare power of total recall. *Blind Ambition* is the best book written to date by any major figure involved in the Watergate scandal. It should be bought and kept and read side by side with Richard Nixon's forthcoming memoirs. John Dean has yet to be caught in a Watergate lie. The same cannot be said of Richard Nixon, the President driven from office by the confession of his lawyer, John Dean.