



By J. ANTHONY LUKAS

Reading these two Watergate memoirs in juxtaposition, I wanted to like Sam Dash's book and to loathe John Dean's.

After all, Dash was a good man, an honest man, who had taken on the tough role of chief counsel to the Senate Watergate committee when the scandal was still largely buried and worked diligently, if somewhat ponderously, to uncover it.

And Dean was one of the sleaziest White House operatives, a compulsively ambitious striver who pandered to his superiors' worst impulses, largely engineered the cover-up of their activities, turned informer just in time to plea-bargain for himself, got sprung from prison after serving only four months and then signed a lucrative contract to write this book.

## Blind Ambition

*The White House Years.*

By John W. Dean III.

415 pp. New York:

Simon and Schuster. \$11.95.

## Chief Counsel

*Inside the Ervin Committee—*

*The Untold Story of Watergate.*

By Samuel Dash.

271 pp. New York:

Random House. \$10.

But, as the pardon of Richard Nixon taught us, we should not expect justice in such matters. Good men are often dull, and evil men can be endlessly fascinating. Thus, Sam Dash has written a plodding, banal recitation of his investigation, while John Dean has helped produce a lively chronicle of megalomania and deception, spiced with intriguing new tidbits and some surprisingly valuable insights.

Dash's book suffers from publishing

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Senate Watergate Committee Hearings:  
John Dean (standing center) at the  
witness table, Samuel Dash left  
foreground, July 1973.

hype: Random House proclaims it "the

first book from inside the Senate Watergate committee itself." That it is not. Fred Thompson, the committee's minority counsel, has already published a provocative, if partisan account of the committee's operations, and James Hamilton, Dash's assistant counsel, provided considerable material on the committee's role in his book on Congressional investigations.

Dash has precious little to add. He does give us new detail on the efforts of Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox to quash the committee's rival investigation, a move which Dash now labels "an unparalleled display of arrogance." He tells how Bebe Rebozo's lawyers outwitted the committee's counsel to avoid a crucial subpoena. And he appends a new memo from Chairman Sam Ervin, recounting the meeting he and Senator Howard Baker had with the President just before the Saturday Night Massacre.

Dash's most interesting observations concern Baker's role. The Tennessee Senator, with his earnest manner and lofty questions, posed on television as a high-minded searcher for truth. Now Dash contends that Baker was actually conspiring with the White House to undercut the investigation, even stooping to "underhanded tactics" and "dirty tricks."

Noteworthy though some of this may be, it is imbedded in a sodden chronology. Dash never achieves a sense of distance or irony, and his attempts at dialogue are frequently stilted (as when Ervin tells him after the revelation of the White House tapes: "That is the most remarkable discovery of evidence that I have learned about in my entire experience in the practice of law, as a judge on the bench, and as a United States Senator." Dash writes just like what he is—a professor of law.

In this respect, Dean had an immense

advantage. His book was largely rewritten by Taylor Branch, an able journalist. It shows. The author and his rewrite man have been far more skillful than Dash in the reconstruction of dialogue (Dean concedes the conversations are not verbatim, but vouches for their "essential accuracy"). Dollops of texture and telling detail help make the book eminently readable, although it falls apart toward the end when it drifts off into an episodic "journal."

If Dash is hardly the first insider to spill the committee's beans, Dean is the first true White House insider to write on Watergate. Previous memoirs have come either from members of the "action team"—Howard Hunt, James McCord—or from a middle rank intermediary like Jeb Magruder. Ehrlichman has confined himself to a *roman à clef*. Haldeman, Mitchell and Nixon are yet to be heard from. Dean's book is the first we have had from a man who was involved in the inner circle of Watergate strategy and cover-up.

One should not expect startling revelations of new Nixonian skulduggery. Dean does come up with a new Nixon memo, dated Jan. 14, 1971, in which the President orders Haldeman to gather information on the retainer which Larry O'Brien, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, had been paid by Howard Hughes. "Per-

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haps Colson should check on this," Nixon said.

This adds another small piece to the puzzle of the Watergate burglary, by confirming that the obsessive White House interest in O'Brien began with the President himself. We had already known of a January 18 memo from Haldeman to Dean—obviously a prompt follow-up to the President's note—asking for information on O'Brien's ties to Hughes. Meanwhile, we know, Colson approached his friend Robert Bennett for information on the same subject.

(Dean recounts a prison conversation he had with Colson in which they speculated about the reasons for the Watergate burglary. Although neither claimed to know for sure, they both suspected it had something to do with O'Brien, Hughes and the mysterious Bennett, who at one time served the White House, the C.I.A. and Hughes simultaneously. I found this conversation particularly intriguing because it echoed a pet theory of my own.)

Dean also produces a hitherto unpublished transcript—of a taped conversation between the President and Chuck Colson on June 20, 1972, only three days after the Watergate burglary, in which Nixon plainly proclaims his determination to "just stonewall it." (Dean evidently came by this transcript when, as the star witness in the Watergate cover-up trial, he became a virtual member of the Special Prosecutor's staff.)

There is a provocative account of Haldeman's and Ehrlichman's desperate efforts to shut off an investigation into

the Town House Project, an illegal scheme to raise unreported funds for the 1970 Congressional races. Several underlings were later convicted for their roles in this scheme, but Dean's version now suggests that the President's two top assistants may also have been deeply involved.

And, of course, there is the now much discussed remark that Dean says Colson heard from Nixon: "The typewriters are always the key. We built one in the Hiss case." Some people have interpreted this to mean that investigators fabricated the typewriter on which they claimed Hiss's wife had typed classified documents. But Colson now insists Dean misunderstood him, that Nixon really said "The Hiss case was built on the typewriter." We may never learn the truth behind this tangle.

But the book is valuable less for front page news than for piquant sidelights. Dean has long since demonstrated his uncanny memory for places, events and conversations, and the details he provides now are often revealing:

- Murray Chotiner, the old Nixon retainer, telling him shortly after he joined the White House staff: "If Richard Nixon thinks it's necessary, you'd better think it's necessary. If you don't, he'll find someone who does."

- Ehrlichman and Haldeman proposing that Dean "put a litte microphone up your sleeve" when he talked to Mitchell.

- Dean and his assistant, Fred Fielding, pulling on rubber gloves to examine the contents of Howard Hunt's safe.

Dean is particularly good at reading the intricate network of White House power relationships, through which he once

climbed so surely. His portrait of Ehrlichman is especially interesting. No White House figure has put on so many faces: from the sneering martinet of the Watergate committee hearings to the benign New Mexico hippie of his recent book tour. Now Dean portrays him as the cool, cynical manipulator, far more central to the events of Watergate than even Bob Haldeman.

Perhaps the greatest surprise of the book is Dean's portrait of himself. His lawyer warned him before he testified, "Don't waste their time telling them what a nice guy you are." He has apparently taken this advice to heart. He pictures himself as a "meek, favor-courrying man," who took on dirty assignments to ingratiate himself with his superiors, who played the bureaucratic game with zest and zeal, working his way ever closer to the inner circle "until I finally fell into it, thinking I had made it to the top just as I began to realize I had actually touched bottom."

One of the most poignant moments in the book comes on Aug. 29, 1972, when the President first publicly mentioned the non-existent "Dean Report" that supposedly cleared the White House of any role in Watergate. This was a fore-runner of Nixon's efforts to pin the cover-up on Dean, but the young White House counsel was too overcome by his own celebrity to recognize the approaching danger.

"How about that?" he crooned to himself. "The President was mentioning my name! On national television. That, I thought, was a real vote of confidence. He was saying I could pull off the cover-up. I was ecstatic to be so recognized by the President before the world." ■