

Getting Ready for Mr. Dean ^{Part} 6/11/73

Monday the Senate Watergate committee will start taking public testimony from John Dean III, the former Counsel to the President and a man who has risen from obscurity to celebrity and, in some quarters, to infamy in a very short period of time. Prior to Mr. Nixon's misleading statement last August that John Dean had conducted a thorough Watergate-White House investigation under the President's own direction, it is probable that the public had not the smallest idea of who this young man was—and he was not widely known to the press corps either.

All that has changed. First there came the slow but steady trickle of disclosures: Mr. Dean may or may not have conducted a thorough investigation for Mr. Nixon, it was said (in fact, he conducted none at all), but he did turn out to be—one way and the other—involved in practically all the scandals that now go by the generic name of Watergate. Others might have picked and chosen, but evidently not Mr. Dean. His name turns up in connection with the Watergate espionage, the hush money fund-raising, ITT, the Daniel Ellsberg doctor's office burglary, the destruction of Howard Hunt's incriminating White House effects, the effort to subvert the CIA and the FBI, and the rest.

Things, as we all recall, weren't going terribly well for Mr. Dean at the White House this spring. To be sure, given the state of the White House this spring, that wasn't much of a distinction. What distinguished Mr. Dean's behavior was the fact that he plunged early and in a pretty headstrong way into the scapegoat politics that had begun to prevail, perceiving that in the game of musical chairs that had got underway, his chair—and his alone—seemed to keep disappearing. Mr. Dean went to the federal prosecutors. And he went public: he let it be known that he didn't intend to take all the heat or blame for assorted crimes and scandals that were closing in. He was fired by the President. He has since sought and received a grant of limited immunity for his Watergate testimony before the Ervin committee. And he has also since become the object of a merciless campaign to discredit the worth of his testimony.

To state the case modestly, it is not a pretty business, and no one should confuse John Dean with Emile Zola. But that hardly seems to us to be a clear and present danger at the moment. Rather, the danger seems to be that in a muddle of thought concerning the moral worth of Mr. Dean's motives and with a little "help" from those who stand to suffer most from his testimony, people may deny themselves the opportunity to hear this testimony in a dispassionate, discriminating way. "Turncoat," Sen. Hugh Scott has said in disgust, for example, of Mr. Dean. "Embezzler," he has added. So what else is new? To call a self-confessed criminal a criminal doesn't add a thing to our knowledge, and to denounce him as a "turncoat" carries at least a suggestion that he should have stayed faithful to the conspiracy that is now being broken open. It also carries another suggestion, namely, that Mr. Dean—who threatens to impli-

cate the President—is somehow morally reprehensible in a way that the other "turncoats" and criminals who have been implicating each other are not.

The first thing to remember, we would suggest, is that renegades and lawbreakers who turn state's evidence, from Whittaker Chambers to Joe Valachi, were not meant to be loved but to be heard. Their circumstances put a premium on their telling the truth. Naturally, not all do so. But it is worth recalling in this particular affair that thus far, since his first venture to the pres-

ecutors' office, Mr. Dean has in fact provided a wealth of previously unknown material that has checked out and that the White House has been obliged on a regular basis to revise and render inoperative its statements of the day or week before.

Judging from the interviews and depositions of many of those who, like Mr. Dean, are up to their eyebrows in Watergate trouble, you could get the impression that this admittedly inventive man was solely responsible for what went on across the board, managing to deceive all those who ranked him in the White House and to whom he reported, contriving to juggle the multitudinous scandals on his own and issuing orders to half of Washington to misbehave itself—without a peep getting back to those in charge. That, of course, is the impression you are meant to get from the interviews and depositions in question. One year after the Watergate, however—a year of mind bending revelations—there are still a few things too preposterous to be believed. Not many, but a few—and among them is the proposition that John Dean, acting on his own, systematically and over a period of a couple of years, brought all these things about without the knowledge or understanding of the people he worked for and in whose behalf he was presumably doing them.

The element of knowledge—of knowing and not knowing—is important here, and it will be important to understand it in relation to Mr. Dean's testimony. What is it that people have in mind, or should have, when they wonder aloud whether the President "knew"? First, it should be recalled that we are no longer discussing a single burglary of the Democrats' Watergate headquarters when we confine the question to that particular episode; nor, when we discuss the June 17 Watergate burglary (in which the burglars were caught) are we even discussing the relevant one. The June 17 maraud, we now know, was a patch-up mission, very conceivably organized by Mr. Liddy without his superiors' specific knowledge and undertaken to repair and improve electronic snooping equipment that had been installed in a previous *successful* burglary in May. As a consequence of that previous burglary wiretap material had already been coming into the hands of Mr. Nixon's campaign officials. To the extent that it is still valid or even reasonable to limit one's inquiry about Watergate to the President's specific knowledge of

the break-in and bugging of Democratic headquarters, the focus should therefore be shifted to his knowledge (or lack thereof) of the intelligence operation that culminated in the first, successful break-in in May.

The June break-in, which resulted in the arrests, is important in an entirely different way: it marks the onset of Phase II, a whole new and, in some ways, far more sinister series of crimes. That is, it marks the beginning of the cover-up. On that subject too, Mr. Dean is expected to have a great deal to say, and it is no secret that he is believed prepared to implicate Mr. Nixon directly in the effort to corrupt whatever judicial processes and government institutions were necessary for the purpose of hiding the truth. This will be dramatic and potentially explosive stuff. That is why we would urge a cold-eyed, dispassionate, discriminating look at Mr. Dean when he testifies. It is not impossible that he will be grinding some ax or that he will be indulging a vendetta. Neither is it impossible that he will be presenting a plausible and persuasive and truthful case. The only thing we know to be impossible is that Mr. Dean did *all* these things *from beginning to end* in total secrecy and on his own. Let us hear him out.