

JOHN DEAN: THE SECRET-SHARER

One of the fixtures of Richard Nixon's White House has been its supply of interchangeably personable bright young men. John W. Dean III seemed no different from any of the others until last Aug. 29—the day Mr. Nixon told the nation that Dean, the White House counsel, had completed an investigation showing that “no one in this Administration, presently employed,” had had anything to do with the Watergate break-in. Since that humble beginning, Dean's

turing backyard toys and swings, he grew up in the heartland (Akron, Ohio, and Evanston, Ill.) and graduated from Staunton Military Academy, where he roomed with Barry Goldwater Jr. His college career was an odd mix—two years at Colgate University in upstate New York, a term at American University in Washington, D.C., and the rest at tiny Wooster College in rustic Ohio. He pulled little better than average grades, was as much of a hell-raiser as conditions

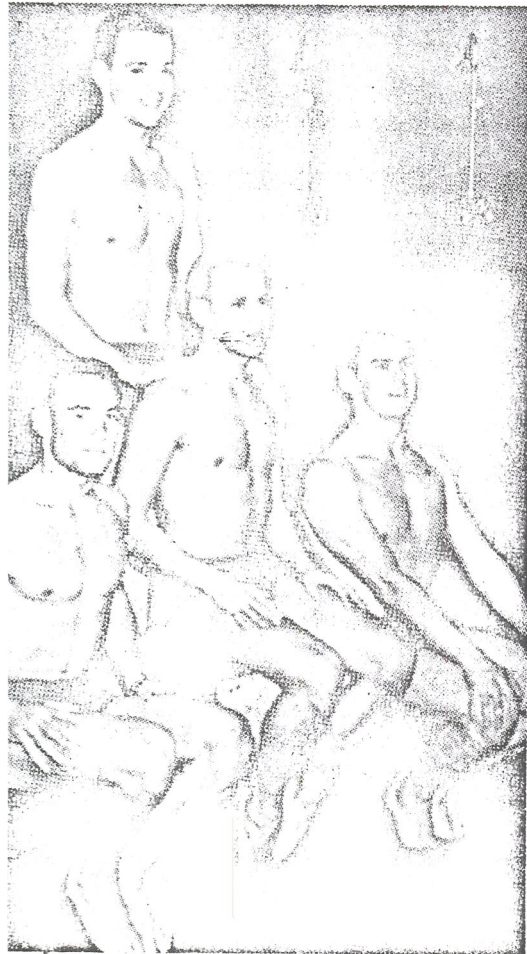
moved to the Justice Department and on into the White House through John Mitchell's patronage in 1970. It was a meteoric rise, yet no one remembers a meteor—only “a likable, totally inoffensive person,” according to one House committee colleague, or “a decent sort, but not long on principle,” as seen by a Justice hand. “You always had the feeling he was keeping his high cards and his real feelings from you,” said a DOJ man last week. “Slick is the word I'd use.”

Dean seemed just a trifle out of place in Richard Nixon's upper echelon—a bit flashier than the standard pattern, owner of the only Porsche in the White House parking lot, divorced and then married again. And perhaps “upper echelon” was an exaggeration anyway. The White House counsel's job was more technical than advisory; when required, Dean drew up legal briefs defending the President's predetermined positions on executive privilege or impoundment of Congressional appropriations, and he spent the rest of his time “putting out fires,” in his own cryptic phrase.

Sit-Ins: The precise nature of Dean's role in the Watergate mess is still far from clear. Admittedly aware of and “uneasy” about subterranean White House operations since the summer of 1971, Dean sat in on many of the most notorious events of the Watergate chronicle—the planning sessions in John Mitchell's office, for example, and the removal of files from E. Howard Hunt's office. In Dean's version, he was merely a conduit and observer throughout, but John Ehrlichman, for one, has said Dean “was in it up to his eyebrows.”

In any case, Dean played along until March of this year, when by his own account he became increasingly perturbed at the failure of Mr. Nixon, Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman to perceive that no effective cover-up was possible. Dean has floated several versions of how he came to air his sensational charges. In his latest, he told NEWSWEEK that on March 23 he went alone on a vacation to Camp David, where he realized that “the senior people were simply not going to face facts.” Washington, he felt, had become a sort of Wonderland where “the White House puts out ‘facts,’ and they are indeed not facts. You begin believing [them] . . . It is going to be realized soon how much that happened over there.”

Dean began talking to Federal prosecutors a week later. When the White House tried to block his negotiations for personal immunity and to lay much of the blame for the cover-up at his feet, Dean went public with his statement that he would not be a “scapegoat.” From there the road has led—through leaks, counter-leaks, charges and denials—to the exit of Dean, Haldeman and Ehrlichman and finally, this week or next, to the Ervin committee microphones.



Frank Johnston—Washington Post

Preppie Dean (left, in middle), at House hearings with wife Maureen

permitted, and distinguished himself mostly by the Madison Avenue haberdashery that still sticks in the memory of his classmates. His only political comment, as far as anyone can recall, came while watching the 1960 Presidential debates: “Look at that ass, Nixon.”

Already married to Karla Hennings, daughter of Missouri's late Sen. Thomas Hennings, Dean waltzed through Georgetown Law School in Washington, then caught on at the small, scrappy Washington law firm of Welch and Morgan. Six months later, he was found to have confused his own interests with those of his client (and perhaps of a senior partner's), and “the next day John was in and out before noon,” a former associate recalls. But Dean was married to a senator's daughter after all (they had one son, and were divorced three years later), and he hooked onto the House Judiciary Committee as a minority staff lawyer.

From there, in rapid procession, he

name has come to occupy an increasingly prominent place in the Watergate scenario—first as the alleged author of two phantom exonerations of the White House staff, and latterly as the source of many of the blackest accusations against Mr. Nixon and his topmost aides. Now, as the youthful lawyer prepares to take his fiercely disputed story before the Ervin committee, Dean stands as the single most important contributor to the Watergate investigation—and the most immediate threat to Mr. Nixon's future.

Dean came to his unexpected Watergate eminence as he arrived at mostly everything else in his 34 years—by a sort of sidling approach. Son of a prosperous vice president of a company manufac-