

...and Mr. Nixon's Predicament

The political potency of the testimony by John W. Dean III became clear when Republican members of Congress installed a portable TV set in the House cloakroom and, ignoring the debate on the floor, hung on every word uttered by President Nixon's ousted White House counsel.

At the end of the second day of Dean's gripping testimony, the consensus among these Republicans—and many others we talked to inside and outside the Nixon administration—reluctantly gave Dean high marks as a witness. That is, his testimony, though still far from thoroughly tested, was buttressed with an impressive array of seeming fact which gave it, in the view of these Republicans, substantial credibility.

Thus, a climax of historic political importance is in the making in the tortuously long Watergate story: Mr. Nixon's own party leaders will soon be confronted with the nightmare choice of continuing to back a president credibly accused of obstructing justice (incidentally risking the obloquy of substantial numbers of their constituents back home) or of ending their support of the party's and the nation's leader.

As one of the President's own congressional leaders told us, "it is getting tougher every day" to stick with the President. The testimony of Dean, he went on, has had "a devastating impact."

The White House itself holds similar sentiments. One hard-line Nixon

defender told us, "I think this week may determine whether the Nixon administration is destroyed or not."

What gives the appraisal special significance is the fact this particular White House staffer until now was highly optimistic that the President would prevail against what he called "the stool pigeon"—John Dean.

Other Republicans, both in Congress and the White House, are more tentative. They feel nothing Dean has said, by itself, can force the President to resign or result in his impeachment. The credibility of Dean's testimony, according to this opinion, requires corroboration by a future witness of at least some major parts of his charges against Mr. Nixon.

The only future witness who might supply that corroboration appears to be John N. Mitchell, former attorney general and presidential campaign manager. As we reported a month ago, the White House then was becoming uneasy about Mitchell's reliability. Now, that uneasiness has been increased by Dean's testimony that the "sum and substance" of his March 21 meeting with H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman was to make Mitchell the fall guy.

"If Mitchell were to step forward," Dean testified, "we might not be confronted with the activities of those in the White House involved in the cover-up." That testimony by Dean, purporting to be the inner White House plot to save the President's

skin—And Haldeman's and Ehrlichman's—might be the catalyst persuading Mitchell himself to sing.

Mitchell might give the Senate Watergate committee corroboration on two points of Dean's testimony—that Mr. Nixon agreed to executive clemency for E. Howard Hunt and to the payment of "hush money" for Hunt and other Watergate conspirators. The consensus among Republican congressmen is that if Mitchell does, public defense of the President would become politically suicidal.

Even without corroboration of Dean's testimony, Mr. Nixon may now be crippled as President of the United States. All over Washington this week, the offices of senior administration officials have been closed to routine business, their telephones turned off for all but emergency calls and their office television sets turned on. The reason: morbid fascination with Dean's testimony and the efforts of the President's dwindling defenders to prove Dean a liar and crack his credibility.

Thus, no matter what Mitchell says when he now takes the stand, Dean's testimony may have finally broken the self-confidence of the Nixon administration. If that has happened, the President's painful choice lies between resignation or a presidency crippled far into the future.