

Dean Navigates Watergate

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This was supposed to be his roughest test, answering a barrage of questions prepared by the White House and facing the heavyweights of the Senate Watergate committee: Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., the Democratic chairman, and Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., the vaguely menacing Republican vice chairman. But John W. Dean 3d as crisply cool looking in a new brown suit as earlier in tans, blues and grays—made it look easy.

Mr. Dean conceded at one point this morning that he had been "extremely nervous" even in a cordial meeting with President Nixon last summer—a startling admission from the young lawyer who has easily kept his committee questioners at bay with his cocksure, just-the-facts, don't tread-on-me manner.

One measure of Mr. Dean's mastery was when Senator Ervin drew his testimony into what sounded like a charge of constitutional malfeasance against President Nixon, Mr. Dean, after baiting that judgment for four days, modestly declined to comment. "I would rather be excused from drawing my own conclusion on that," he said, adding inevitably—or was it teasingly?—"at this point in time."

Baker Sympathetic

Senator Baker, usually chary of conclusions on the evidence, seemed to lay down his arms in the middle of his questioning of Mr. Dean. "I believe the thrust of your testimony," Mr. Baker said, almost casually. If indeed Senator Baker sticks to that belief, the defense of President Nixon now falls to a single committee member, Senator Edward J. Gurney of Florida.

The third Republican, Senator Lowell P. Weicker of Connecticut, has been gleefully stirring up evidence against the President for weeks and exploded today with another blast at White House "pressure."

Before Mr. Baker came to the Senate in 1967 he was an esteemed defense lawyer in the violent hillbilly country of East Tennessee. Courtroom buffs around Scott County flocked to hear his speeches before juries, and he became known as "two to ten Baker" for the short sentences he wrangled for defendants in the grisliest murder trials.

At the start of the questions today, Senator Baker seemed to be putting Mr. Dean on notice of his skills. Please answer questions "yes" or "no" before explaining, Mr. Baker instructed. He said he wanted to "focus" Mr. Dean's charges against the President, and to "organize" his testimony for him.

"The central question," Senator Baker said—insisting he did not mean to dismiss the host of intriguing peripheral questions—"is what did the President know? And when did he know it?"

Details of Meeting

But Mr. Dean sailed comfortably under the new line of questioning and seemed to welcome the chance to offer a few new details about the meeting in the oval office last Sept. 15, from which he dates President Nixon's knowledge of the Watergate cover-up.

He remembered the time of the meeting—late afternoon—and the chair he sat in—to the right of the President's desk. He even recalled that Mr. Nixon had delayed a trip somewhere to meet with him—adding meaningful weight, as it seemed to Mr. Dean, to

the President's gratitude for his counsel's service in blocking indictment of White House figures.

Mr. Dean granted that his evidence of President Nixon's early knowledge was circumstantial—based on his familiarity with White House procedures and specifically on the working assumption that H. R. Haldeman told the President everything that other staff members told him.

Yet Senator Baker was ready to grant, too, that Mr. Dean had shown an expert's knowledge of how the Nixon White House worked.

"You have been a remarkable witness," Senator Baker said, at least twice.

The job of reading 40-odd accusing questions from the White House was handed to Senator Daniel K. Inouye, the Hawaii Democrat whom the Nixon aides dubbed "ain't-no-way" because "there ain't no way he's going to give us anything but problems." Senator Inouye's resonant baritone gave the questions the full rhetoric force, but true to his nickname, he gave the White House no help in following up Mr. Dean's answers.

The heart of the White

Shoals With Ease

House examination seemed to be: Why, if the President was aware of the cover-up on Sept. 15, did Mr. Dean feel the need to tell Mr. Nixon the facts at the end of last February? And if, as Mr. Dean said again today, Mr. Nixon "didn't understand the implications" of the plot at the end of February, how could he have known the truth last summer?

It was at that point that Mr. Dean explained how nervous he had been in his first "one-on-one" session with the President last September.

He did not respond to the thrust of the questions, but neither did he pause, blush, stammer, turn to counsel or give any other sign of distress. His voice was as steady ducking a question as answering one. Senator Inouye proceeded without comment to the next item on the list.

Moments later in the White House interrogation he stepped lightly away from a puzzle of detail.

Another White House "question" raised a puzzling point of detail. The May 14 issue of Newsweek magazine, Senator Inouye read from the script, had quoted "sources" close to Mr. Dean as saying

that when the one-time White House counsel explained the facts of the cover-up to Mr. Nixon on March 21, "the President came out of his chair into a half crouch of astonishment and shock."

Everything else in the Newsweek article proved an "accurate preview" of Mr. Dean's Senate testimony, the White House noted, yet Mr. Dean now insists that the President never rose from his chair—for any reason.

Mr. Dean said today that he had been a price source, in an interview, for the Newsweek piece. He said that stories attributed to sources close to him — commonly known to mean his lawyers — were generally accurate. But he had no explanation for the business about the President and his chair — and Senator Inouye, once again, did not press the matter.

At the end of his fourth long day on the witness stand, John Dean's ordeal was not over. But he had "run the gantlet" past the full cast of Senate interrogators, and none of them had dented his confidence even a little.
