

Dean's 6-Hour Song Numbs Audience

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The six-hour song of John Wesley Dean, so eagerly anticipated by the Capital, turned out to be rather flat music, neither sweet nor sour nor lyrical, just long.

Dean's marathon solo strained his voice. The steady monotone of his sensational material pounded the audience senseless, the way an evening of solid rock numbs the brain.

The young lawyer began reading shortly after 10 in the morning, a neutral voice of the Midwest, horn-rim glasses, serious and undemonstrative. He read and read. It was 6 o'clock, with time out for lunch and a couple of Senate roll calls, before

he had finished his 245-page recitation before the Senate Watergate committee.

The song was so long and so laborious that everyday incredible stories faded into the background as a minor motif—plot to firebomb the scholarly Brookings Institution, the wiretap at columnist Joseph Kraft's Georgetown home, the "Deep Six" destruction of the phony diplomatic cables which were forged at the White House.

All that was minutiae against the political thunder of Dean's main theme—the complicity of the President, the involvement of Mr. Nixon, the incriminating remarks and damaging glances that John Dean claims to have witnessed inside the Oval Office.

"Certainly," he began humbly, "it is a very difficult thing for me to testify about other people. It is far more easy to explain my own involvement in this matter, the fact that I was involved in obstructing justice, the fact that I assisted another in perjured testimony, the fact that I made personal use of funds that were in my custody. It is far easier to talk about these things myself than to talk about what others did."

But John Dean managed to overcome the difficulty. The web of detailed revelations that he described sticks to nearly every major figure with whom he worked at the White House, including the President.

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As for the President, Dean offered what must seem like meager comfort to the Chief Executive whose very status in history is threatened by this testimony from a 34-year-old lawyer from Ohio.

"It is my honest belief," Dean said piously, "that while the President was involved, that he did not realize or appreciate at any time the implications of his involvement. And I think that when the facts come out, I hope the President is forgiven."

Maybe so, but Dean spent a lot of energy yesterday trying to incriminate him. In contrast, the former presidential counsel portrayed himself as the lonely voice of reason within the Nixon entourage, the man who raised constant objections to the bizarre and illegal plots that others were spinning around him.

When he heard about the firebombing idea, counsellor Dean was horrified. "This entire thing was insane," he said.

When someone proposed spying on Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, Dean convinced them it was "a bad idea."

When Gordon Liddy unveiled his extravagant plans for sabotage and kidnaping, Dean rolled his eyes heavenward. The attorney general,

John Mitchell, was likewise amazed, he said.

"At one point," Dean testified, "I gave him a look of bewilderment and he winked." Neither of them, however, translated this expressiveness for Liddy's sake into an audible "no!"

Later still, when presidential adviser John Ehrlichman proposed the destruction of a secret file, Dean said he was "very troubled" and rejected the thought.

"This would be an incredible action," he said, "to destroy potential evidence."

Such self-serving exclamations were laced through the six-hour account though Dean did not spare the details on his own involvement in the cover-up. Nor did he attempt to explain precisely how he came to be alternately alarmed by the mischief, then inspired to take part in it.

That riddle will be central to his performance over the next days as the Watergate committee grills him on the fine print. His own credibility will be tested against the President's. If the senators find even part of what Dean told them believable, then the President may have to expand on his side of the story.

In his manner the young lawyer seemed to accentuate the unsensational, as if he

realized that his material was so sensational that any hint of dramatics would only damage it. So he kept his voice down and his head too. For the television viewers, the only engaging element was the striking visual effect of Mrs. Dean, seated behind him, faithfully listening once more to her husband's story.

In contrast, Dean's portrait of President Nixon suggested a strange detachment — a man who never quite came to grips with the morass around him, even though he was informed early enough of the potential disaster.

In September, as Dean told it, he was received warmly by the President and congratulated for controlling the case, keeping the criminal charges from reaching anyone in the White House.

"I told him that all that I had been able to do was to contain the case . . . I also told him that I thought that there was a long way to go before this matter would end and that I certainly could make no assurances that the day would not come when this matter would start to unravel," Dean recalled.

The President, he said, was unmoved by the warning that Dean claims to have

repeated on numerous occasions in the months that followed.

In late March, according to his recollection, Dean styled the problem more dramatically as "a cancer growing on the presidency." Mr. Nixon was unimpressed, he said.

The only way to keep the White House in the clear, Dean insisted, was "more perjury and more money." Afterwards, the President suggested a briefing for the Cabinet, Dean said.

Later, when it was scapegoat time at the White House, Dean was ducking and dodging with the rest of them. But he was still trying, he insists, to awaken the President to the peril. He argued that Mr. Nixon's top lieutenants were in it as deep as anyone, but the President did not respond.

When Dean himself jumped ship and went to see the federal prosecutors, he had one last strange interview with the Chief Executive.

"As I was on my way out of the office after exchanging parting pleasantries," Dean said, "I told the President that I hoped that my going to the prosecutors and telling the truth would not result in the impeachment of the President."

"He jokingly said, 'I certainly hope so also.'"