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The Adversary's Book

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, June 27—The text for today's sermon is Job 31:35, in which the bedeviled Job, who cannot understand why everything in his life has suddenly gone wrong, cries out: "Oh that mine adversary had written a book!"

The King James translation of the ancient Scripture is not quite on target; the Revised Standard version interprets the word "book" more accurately as "indictment," or bill of particulars. Job felt that only if the accusations against him were laid out in writing, could he refute them, establish his innocence, and climb down off that dung heap.

Richard Nixon's adversary has written a book: 60,000 words, 245 pages, with an appendix of testimony under both powder-puff and penetrating questioning.

John W. Dean 3d (he always insisted on that "the third" even in memos), while an unlikely Zola, writes a workman-like accusatory book. Although his portrayal of himself as a fire-fighting hero-victim is a little hard to swallow, he has amassed facts in a persuasive way and presented voluminous detail in a manner that convinced those who want to be convinced the President "knew."

But in his attack on the President, he has provided the book—at last, the Dean report—that gives the defense a bill of particulars.

The greatest single difficulty facing the President in preparing his defense has been that he did not know all the facts himself. When the man at the center of his defense turned out to be the man at the center of the conspiracy, and when that man turned on him, the President and his counsel had to painstakingly reconstruct the story from other sources—and he could not turn to his own Department of Justice for help.

Now most of the accusation is set forth in detail. But in all those facts and allegations, no hard evidence has been presented that shows the President "knew"; Dean 3d had no bombshell to explode, no moment when he could say, in the phrase made famous by Joe McCarthy, "I have here in my hand . . ."

In the memorandum provided by the White House to Senator Inouye and read to Mr. Dean 3d this afternoon, the part that shook the witness most were contradictions of Dean testimony by Richard Moore, 59, Presidential aide, who has the respect of such unlikely pairs as Haldeman and Mitchell, the President and Mr. Dean 3d. Moore was in the Oval Office with Dean and the President during the most crucial meetings leading up to the moment of truth on March 21. When he testifies, Moore — a mature and trustworthy man — will be believed.

The White House counterattack is relatively low-key, written by lawyers and submitted to a committee of the Senate. There is a confidence in this approach, an evident lack of panic, that is a refreshing change from previous reactions.

The President himself is silent because the book of charges is still being written. Moreover, a flashing, no-holds-barred counterattack would surely backfire; instead, presentation of evidence will best chop away at the "thesis" that the President was aware of the Watergate break-in cover-up.

Senator Gurney used that word "thesis" properly in demolishing Mr. Dean 3d's assertion that the President showed that he was in cahoots with the cover-uppers when Mr. Nixon said, "Good job," or words to that effect, to his counsel. Mr. Dean 3d had hardly ever seen the President up to that time; suddenly, according to this thesis, they were on the same wave length, and Dean 3d was able to read into that Presidential backpatting all the guilty knowledge he had in his own mind.

The Adversary's Book will continue to be dissected by good legal minds, and men will come forward to challenge it with first-hand testimony on matters involving the President, especially centered on "The Ides of March" — the week of March 14-21, 1973. Then, with all his ducks in a row, as the President likes to say, he will step up himself and make a convincing case for the defense.

For the month ahead, Mr. Nixon's hardest job will be to differentiate between cover-ups. One cover-up had to do with the misbegotten plumbers operation; the President has already asserted he directed that cover-up for national security reasons, and because he suspected the F.B.I. might uncover a C.I.A. operation.

The second cover-up—the Watergate break-in—was the one kept from the President until March 21. This was the criminal cover-up, the conspiracy to obstruct justice, and no evidence presented connects the President with it.

Then there was a third cover-up—the legitimate reaction of many men conducting a political campaign to charges that the Nixon campaign was behind the break-in at the Watergate. At that point, good partisans who did not know the truth vigorously attacked the accusers; that, too, was a cover-up in a sense, but an innocent one—and fully participated in by the President.

The week so far has been damaging but not destructive, and at last the main body of the charge is available to come to grips with. The worst of the crisis is passing, the trumpet sounds more certain, and the President can say with a scourged Job: "I am escaped with the skin of my teeth."