

Joseph Kraft

The Testimony Of John Dean...

John Dean has served up to the Senate Watergate committee a mountain of material linking the highest officials in the land with grossly criminal actions. The national interest manifestly commands a careful scrutiny of that material.

But the assessment requires time for the meticulous checking of small points. So if Sen. Sam Ervin and his colleagues on the committee want to be taken seriously, they will have to stretch out, and where possible spin off, their deliberations.

Superficially the striking characteristic of Mr. Dean's testimony was in the bold imputation of wrongdoing to the President. For example, Mr. Dean's account strongly implies that President Nixon personally ordered a common crime—the burglary of the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

Because the challenge is so direct, the temptation is to take the measure of Dean's character. The results are not reassuring. Dean's a smart young man on the make, long on ambition and short on principle.

The quality of his ethics is reflected by the remark that he had come to "realize that nothing less than the truth would sell."

But, in fact, Dean's character is no more crucial to the Watergate case than Whittaker Chambers's past as a Communist turncoat was decisive in negating the charges he brought against Alger Hiss. What counts in the present case, as in the Hiss case, is whether the basic story hangs together.

Dean's story is amazing for its wealth of fine detail. His 245-page prepared statement names names and gives dates. It specifies visits and trips. It refers to meetings galore and to telephone calls on a dizzying scale.

The men central to all this bustle were not obscure figures whose doings can only be recollected through the dim workings of memory. They are big shots in the White House and the Justice Department. Their daily actions show up in a fairly well-kept public record.

The checking of this record is not impossible. It is not even very difficult. The chief requirement is to find out how Dean's account dovetails in day-to-day chronology with the actions of a handful of key figures. They are former Attorney General John Mitchell and three former White House aides—H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and Charles Colson.

All of them are due to appear before the Watergate Committee. When they do, the committee should be ready to take them step-by-step through the account rendered by Dean. If that account checks out, then Dean becomes a believable witness. If not, then the weakness of the Dean case will be manifest.

But while such an assessment of Dean is not impossible, it does require a certain amount of self-discipline by the committee. For one thing, the committee needs to master the Dean testimony and become intimately familiar with its most important elements. That in itself requires time. It would surely be desirable for the committee to recess as soon as possible so that the

staff and such senators as are interested can digest the Dean testimony before proceeding to further witnesses.

For another thing, the committee needs to narrow its focus. However important in themselves, issues only peripheral to the central Watergate inquiry are to be hived off. In particular, the question of using intelligence-gathering bureaus such as the FBI and the CIA for political purposes should quickly be passed on by the Ervin committee to some other committee with appropriate jurisdiction.

Finally, the Watergate committee is going to need much more time for key witnesses. Careful and deliberate questioning is required to take the most important of these along the path traced in the Dean account. It is absurd for the committee to try and wrap up major figures in a day or two of hearings.

The key point, accordingly, is that there is no need to rush matters. The only deadline is a report next year. The fairness of the committee has already been demonstrated—and to an extraordinary degree. Now what the committee has to prove is that it can organize itself for a public showing of what actually happened. The need is for the committee to play it long and slow.

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By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

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