

The Biggest Rat or A National Hero?



Mary McGrory

IS HE the foremost rat in history," as charged by a man from Front Royal, Va. Or should he get the Medal of Honor as a veteran from Greenview, Calif., recommends?

"He," of course is John W. Dean III, Richard Nixon's former counsel and the principal witness against him. His five days of testimony has sent the country into its most vehement reaction on the whole Watergate matter and divided it right down the middle.

The mail is booming into the Ervin committee staff headquarters at the rate of 2000 letters a day.

One hundred twenty-three letters scooped up from the torrent, show that letter-writers split just about 50-50 on Dean's testimony, character and motives.

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SIXTY of the letters called Dean variously a "squealer," a "Judas," a "rat-tlesnake" and a "weak-faced, third-rate lawyer."

In 64, he was viewed as a credible witness. "I believe John Dean," a nun from Kentucky wired Chairman Sam Ervin. A family from Quincy, Mass., said Dean was being "framed by the White House."

Ten of those who believe Dean against the President, berated Senators Edward Gurney (Rep.-Fla.) for his vigorous cross-examination of Dean.

A Laguna Beach, Calif., woman accused Gurney, the only Republican on the committee to stand up for President Nixon, of "character assassination." Two Hutchinson, Kan., watchers, both women, charged Gurney with "harassment."

But a Portland, Texas, woman acidly suggested that the committee "ask Dean with today's inflated dollar what is the value of 30 pieces of silver."

A Park avenue resident, also a woman, wrote on crested, perfumed stationery that "the President's big sin was in appointing little pipsqueaks like Dean, Magruder et al to such high position."

And a woman from Alabama wrote Chairman Ervin as follows: "I believe Dean is as guilty as anyone. He is just a tattletale."

But a retired schoolteacher from Kentucky called Dean "a brave young man to come out as he did."

Two senior citizens from Leucadia, Calif., wired Ervin that "John Dean's testimony has certainly stood up well from where we sit."

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A FLORIDA LAWYER thinks Dean submitted no evidence that is believable that the President had "participated in coverup activities."

And a woman from Provo, Utah, wrote, "I get the feeling he would sell his mother down the river to better himself."

A man from New York City said that Dean "should be arrested for degrading the President."

These letters represent only the early returns on Dean's testimony. It seems obvious that despite his ready answers, his millions of words and piles of documents Dean has been unable to assist Americans conclusively to answer the central question, which still is, "Was Richard Nixon guilty?"

Washington News-Star