

DEAN TESTIMONY TERMED CREDIBLE

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Some Officials Close to
Watergate Believe Him
But Scott Is Dubious
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WASHINGTON, May 3—A number of officials close to the Watergate inquiry have concluded, on the basis of careful review of the edited White House transcripts, that John W. Dean 3d testified with general credibility and lucidity last summer about his conversations with President Nixon.

The officials also are known to believe that Mr. Dean's testimony before the Senate Watergate committee was more accurate than Mr. Nixon has been in his subsequent public accountings of their Watergate conversations.

A similar faith in Mr. Dean's credibility was voiced yesterday and today by three members of the Senate committee—Sam J. Ervin Jr., of North Carolina who is the chairman; Howard H. Baker Jr., Republican of Tennessee who is the vice chairman, and Lowell P. Weicker Jr., Republican of Connecticut.

On the other hand, Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the Senate Republican leader,

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told newsmen today that the transcripts supported his earlier allegation, made after he was provided with partial White House transcripts last January, that Mr. Dean lied when he said that the President knew of the cover-up of the Watergate break-in before March 21, 1973. The transcripts, released Tuesday, have convinced many of those close to the inquiry that Mr. Dean, in his Senate committee testimony, was generally able to recall with precision the flow and substance of many of those conversations, managing on occasion to cite correctly trivialities, such as the title of a book the President casually mentioned he had just finished reading.

Mr. Dean's most significant public error to date, and the one most often cited by his white House critics, concerned his initial report to the Senate last summer that he had told Mr. Nixon of a demand for \$1-million in hush money from E. Howard Hunt Jr., one of the Watergate conspirators, on March 13, 1973, instead of March 21.

The transcripts also disclosed, however, that Mr. Dean had warned the President on March 13, "There is a certain domino situation here. If some things start going, a lot of other things are going to start going, and there can be a lot of problems."

Doubts About Image

The transcripts raise questions about the image Mr. Dean attempted to present during the Senate hearings—that of having been a loyal aide urging his President to put an end to the cover-up. The transcripts depict Mr. Dean, then the White House counsel, as eager to please and willing to be expedient.

For example, shortly after again warning the President during their long March 21 meeting that "it will get real nasty . . . and the person who will be hurt by it most will be you and the Presidency," he discussed two alternatives with Mr. Nixon—to attempt to delay and battle the Watergate inquiry at every turn; or to take the public relations offensive by, among other steps, giving Cabinet members and congressional leaders a special briefing.

"If we go that route, sir," Mr. Dean said of the latter step, "I can give a show we can sell them just like we were selling Wheaties on our position."

In his Senate testimony, however, Mr. Dean alleged that he had been disappointed by the President's call for special briefings.

'Impressed With Knowledge'

"After I finished [telling the President about the cover-up]," he testified, "I realized that I had not really made the President understand because after he asked a few questions, he suggested that it would be an excellent idea if I gave some sort of briefing to the Cabinet, and that he was very impressed with my knowledge of the circumstances but he did not seem particularly concerned with their implications."

It is in this area, centering on Mr. Dean's personal character and his own sense of what he felt and what he said, that the White House transcripts appeal to observers to be most damaging to him.

But in terms of his ability to recount specific facts and actions, Mr. Dean, in the eyes of many knowledgeable about Watergate, has emerged, from the publication of the transcripts with his credibility largely intact.

The three Senate committee members publicly declared that the transcripts tended to bolster Mr. Dean's credibility.

Senator Ervin said they "very strongly corroborate" Mr. Dean's testimony. Senator Baker said in Philadelphia that "much of the testimony of John Dean has been corroborated."

'Great Credibility'

Senator Weicker told an interviewer: "You have to go ahead and give great credibility to Dean's testimony. I think it's a question of the credibility of the President of the United States."

The documents released by the White House included a 50-page preface prepared by James D. St. Clair, Mr. Nixon's Watergate counsel, challenging Mr. Dean's credibility at more than a dozen specific points.

That summary, and a special memorandum on Mr. Dean's credibility prepared by the White House this week at The New York Times's request, placed much emphasis on Mr. Dean's error about the date on which he first informed Mr. Nixon of the Hunt demand for hush money.

The White House memorandum said that neither the demand nor the subject of clemency came up on March 13, as Mr. Dean initially told the Senate.

"None of these matters," the memorandum said, "which would have implied Presidential knowledge of a cover-up, was raised on the 13th of March, contrary to Mr. Dean's testimony."

The White House point was that President Nixon had not

known of the cover-up until March 21, 1973, when he and Mr. Dean talked for more than 90 minutes, because Mr. Dean did not discuss the hush money or a clemency demand by Mr. Hunt until then. But the memorandum did not describe other information provided by Mr. Dean on the 13th.

But the transcript for March 13 showed that, although neither clemency nor hush-money payments were discussed, Mr. Dean did tell Mr. Nixon that some high-level White House aides were involved in Watergate, among them Gordon C. Strachan, then a key deputy to H. R. Haldeman, the White House Chief of Staff.

At one point, the President asked whether Mr. Strachan knew of the break-in and was told "yes."

"He knew?" the President asked. Again Mr. Dean said, "Yes."

"About the Watergate?" "Yes," was the reply.

Mentioned Haldeman

"Well, then," the President said, "He probably told Bob [Haldeman]. He may not have."

Mr. Dean then depicted Mr. Strachan as "judicious" in what he told others in the White House, and added: "Strachan is as tough as nails. He can go in and stonewall, and say, 'I don't know anything about what you are talking about.' He has already done it twice you know, in interviews."

At that point, Mr. Nixon acceded to the suggestion.

"I guess he should, shouldn't he?" he said, and added—with apparent sarcasm—"I suppose we can't call that justice, can we?"

A moment later, the President complained, "To think of [John N.] Mitchell [former Attorney General] and Bob [Haldeman] would have allowed—would have allowed—this kind of operation to be in the campaign committee!"

Some of those knowledgeable about the Watergate inquiry cite that passage—on March 13—as providing information that the President was legally obligated to turn over to the Federal prosecutors. The transcripts show that only rarely during the next seven weeks did he, despite receiving far more damaging information, consider or even discuss telling the whole truth to the public or to investigators.

Remarks on Hunt

Similar analysis, based on the transcripts, appears to many analysts to undercut much of the White House criticism of Mr. Dean.

Thus, Mr. Nixon, in his public statements, and many White House aides have repeatedly pointed to the President's March 21 remark that "you can't do this . . . it would be wrong," to demonstrate that

he did not authorize a \$120,000 hush payment to Mr. Hunt, a member of the Watergate break-in team who was threatening to tell of the "seamy" things he had done in 1971 for the White House.

But the transcript also shows that President Nixon, as many news accounts have noted, also told Mr. Dean that "you have no choice but to come up with the \$120,000."

Furthermore, the March transcript also shows, the President returned to the subject of paying hush money to Mr. Hunt at least 10 times after it was first brought up by Mr. Dean.

It was during one of those discussions on March 21 that Mr. Nixon noted, "This is why the Hunt problem is so serious, because it had nothing to do with the campaign. It has to do with the Ellsberg case."

Role in Burglary

He was referring to Mr. Hunt's role, in September, 1971, as a member of the White House "plumbers team," in the burglary of the office of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg's former psychiatrist. That operation was depicted by Mr. Dean as a simple crime that had to be kept secret.

"What is the answer on this?" the President asked at one point. "How do you keep it out? You can't keep it out if Hunt talks."

It was at that point that Mr. Dean and Mr. Haldeman, who were both with the President, suggested that the Ellsberg burglary could be suppressed on "national security" grounds. The President agreed: "With the bombing thing coming out and everything coming out, the whole thing was national security." Mr. Dean then noted, "I think we could get by with that."

Mr. Nixon's own description of the March 21 debate over the Hunt hush money demand, as outlined in his television speech the night before the transcripts were publicly released, provides an example of why—in the eyes of many sources—his credibility has been diminished.

A 'Sharp Surprise'

The President began his discussion of the controversial March 21 meeting by noting that Mr. Dean's revelations about the cover-up "were a sharp surprise." He did not mention the information about high-level White House involvement in Watergate that Mr. Dean provided on March 13.

The President then noted: "I

was particularly concerned by his [Dean's] report that one of the Watergate defendants, Howard Hunt, was threatening blackmail—and that he was attempting to blackmail the White House not by threatening exposure on the Watergate matter, but by threatening to reveal activities that would expose extremely sensitive, highly secret national security matters that he worked on before Watergate."

Mr. Nixon did not mention that the transcripts show that neither he nor his key aides ever described Mr. Hunt's 1971 activities against Dr. Ellsberg in other than harshly critical terms.

In his television statement Monday, Mr. Nixon declared that after his March 21 meeting with Mr. Dean, "I knew the facts about the Watergate cover-up would have to be made public, but I had to find out more about what they were before I could decide how they should be made public."

'Put a Cap on It'

The transcripts show that in the weeks after March 21, the President was constantly seeking ways to—as he said once—"put a cap on it [Watergate]. On one occasion, after being told that a number of former aides were testifying before the grand jury, he was reassured by Mr. Haldeman that one potential witness "will do everything he can not to hurt the President."

"Yeah," Mr. Nixon answered, "that has got to be true of everybody because it isn't the man, it's the office."

The President, in his statement on Monday, conceded that "I recognize that this tape of March 21 is one into which different meanings could be read by different people." But he added, "My actions and reactions as demonstrated on the taps that follow show clearly that I did not intend the further payment to Hunt or anyone else to be made."

It is that allegation—that Mr. Nixon did authorize and knew of the March 21 hush money payment—that was at the heart of the Watergate grand jury's conclusion last March that the President was indictable for his cover-up, highly reliable sources have said.

Talk on 'Payoff'

In a transcript made available by the White House of a conversation on April 14, 1973, Mr. Nixon recalled what he termed "the payoff thing" during a conversation with Mr. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, his domestic affairs aide.

"Dean, Dean, Dean asked, told me about the problems of Hunt's lawyer," the President said. "Needed sixty thousand or forty thousand dollars or something like that... I frankly felt he might try to get it but I don't know where. And then, he left it up with Mitchell and Mitchell said it was taken care of and after [unintelligible]. Did he talk to you about that?"

Mr. Ehrlichman told the President he had talked about the cash with Mr. Dean, but added that he had told him he "wouldn't have the vaguest notion where to get it." Later he saw Mr. Mitchell, Mr. Ehr-

lichman told the President, and learned from him that "it's taken care of."

Mr. Haldeman then quoted Mr. Dean as saying that he had talked with Frederick C. LaRue, a former Republican re-election committee official who was cooperating with the Federal prosecutors.

Would Bus Them to Senate

Mr. LaRue told Mr. Dean, the President was told, that "if I were in charge of this now what I would do I'd get a large bus, and I'd put the President at the wheel and I'd [put] everybody we've got around here in it, and I'd drive up to the Senate and I'd have the President open the door and say, 'You all get out and tell them everything you know'."

Three days later, in another rambling discussion with Mr. Haldeman and Mr. Ehrlichman, the President referred to Mr. Mitchell's delivery of the hush money to Mr. Hunt and said, "I suppose then we should have cut—shut it off."

Mr. Haldeman then told Mr. Nixon how Mr. Mitchell, in a meeting on March 22, had asked Mr. Dean, "Have you taken care of the other point—the Hunt problem? After that exchange, Mr. Haldeman further told the President, "We assumed... that Mitchell had taken care of it and there was no further squeak out of it."

These portions of the transcripts conflicted sharply with Mr. Nixon's statement, made a few days later in April to Justice Department officials, that "as far as I'm concerned, [I] turned it off totally."