

Dean Jeopardizes St. Clair Strategy

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John W. Dean III told the House Judiciary Committee yesterday he had a feeling but wasn't positive that he had told President Nixon about payment of hush money to Watergate defendants before Mr. Nixon contends he first learned of it on March 21, 1973.

If true, this would be a setback to efforts by the President's lawyer, James D. St. Clair, to convince the committee that Dean set in motion the payment of \$75,000 to Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt before giving the President a detailed account of the payments on the morning of March 21.

Dean's day-long appearance before the closed impeachment inquiry was from all accounts a dramatic confrontation between the 35-year-old former White House counsel, whose previous testimony of the President's knowledge of the Watergate cover-up has been damaging to Mr. Nixon, and the President's counsel, a skilled trial lawyer trying to save him from impeachment.

Dean impressed most members with his remarkable memory and his coolness under tough cross-examination. "He has done very well in the face of very skillful cross-examination," said Rep. Robert McClory (R-Ill.).

St. Clair's strategy has been to try to convince the committee that the only possible ground for impeaching the President is involvement in the Watergate cover-up, specifically the payment of hush money. Through a series of witnesses, he has tried to show that the sequence

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of telephone calls and meetings that resulted in the payment to Hunt the evening of March 21 proves it was set in motion before the President knew what was going on, and that this should show he was not involved.

Members said Dean did testify, as St. Clair had hoped, that he telephoned Frederick C. Larue at the Committee to Re-elect the President and relayed Hunt's request for money before he met with the President on March 21. Larue paid the \$75,000 that evening on the advice of John N. Mitchell, former Attorney General and former director of the Committee to Re-elect, who said he was told it was for legal fees.

But three members said Dean also testified that he had a "strong feeling," according to one, or a "vague memory," according to another, that he had told the President about hush money payments in a conversation a few days before March 21.

If that were true, it would demolish St. Clair's contention that it is important to know whether Dean called Larue on the morning or the afternoon of March 21.

The committee has subpoenaed tapes of some of the pre-March 21 presidential conversations, but the President has refused to turn them over.

Dean had told the Senate Watergate committee last year that "the money matter was left very much hanging" at his March 21 meeting with the President. Committee members said Dean clarified that statement yesterday, saying he meant that the question of raising \$1 million overall for hush money was left unsettled.

Several committee members then reportedly tried to get Dean to state whether he left the meeting with the understanding that the President wanted the immediate demand to Hunt paid. Dean reportedly refused to try to read the President's state of mind, saying that the best evidence was the tape of the conversation which is in the committee's possession.

Rep. George Danielson (D-Calif.), who reported that Dean said he had a "strong, lingering feeling" of telling the President before March 21 that they needed to raise \$1 million in hush money, also said that "unless new evidence is presented, I think I have a clear constitutional duty to vote for impeachment." He had seemed to be leaning that way, but had not said so flatly.



By Douglas Chevalier—The Washington Post

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Peter Rodino, left, chats with John Dean during a recess of closed hearing.

A number of members have rejected St. Clair's efforts to make them focus narrowly on one event and to put such stress on the sequence of phone calls.

"The totality of the evidence is what's important," said Rep. Wayne Owens (D-Utah). "That paints a very vivid picture. I think St. Clair's attempt to impeach

the credibility of Dean has fallen flat."

Rep. Lawrence Hogan (R-Md.), on the other hand, said that Dean's admission that he had got dates wrong in last year's appearance before the Senate Watergate Committee and other discrepancies have cast doubt on his credibility.

Rep. Edward Mezvinsky

(D-Iowa) rejected St. Clair's theory of the case, saying he does not think the sequence of phone calls is "critical" to the question of whether the President had knowledge and acquiesced in or directed payment of funds to Hunt.

The committee has the transcript of Dean's March 21 conversation with the

President in which the President seemed several times to approve the payment to Hunt.

Mezvinsky said Dean's testimony "gave the impression that the President was aware before March 21. To me, the burden has shifted to the President to show that he was not."