

The Anti-Dean Campaign

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The unrelenting onslaught by presidential defenders against the credibility of President Nixon's deposed White House counsel, Joh W. Dean III, partly rests on shaky factual foundations about Dean's activities during those frantic April days when the Watergate scandal broke open.

Contrary to published reports, federal prosecutors say Dean never told them in April that he had no evidence linking Mr. Nixon with the Watergate cover-up. Contrary to claims of Nixon defenders, Dean offered to tell all to federal investigators in return for immunity from prosecution before, not after, Mr. Nixon decided to fire him. Moreover, Dean's lawyers claim that the torrent of personal innuendo about Dean amounts to calculated libels intended to demolish him as a witness.

At stake is whether Dean is believed or not when he testifies before the Senate Watergate committee next week. Of all former presidential aides involved in the scandal, only Dean threatens to wrap Mr. Nixon in the guilt of Watergate. Therefore, the White House and other Nixon defenders have campaigned, furiously, with remarkable success, against Dean's reputation and credibility.

But this campaign's shaky factual foundations, while not insuring the truth of Dean's largely undocumented charges, suggests he should not be written off in advance as irresponsible and unreliable.

A major contention in the anti-Dean campaign is that he began accusing Mr. Nixon of complicity in the Watergate cover-up, only after being fired by

the President. Some Nixon defenders in the press have written that Dean first told prosecutors during sessions with them in April he had no evidence to link the President with Watergate.

In fact, according to highly placed figures in the Watergate prosecution, Dean did not then tell prosecutors he had no information to incriminate Mr. Nixon but merely that he had no information he was prepared to give them at that time.

According to intimates, Dean had not yet decided how much he could say about the President in view of possible demands of executive privilege, the attorney-client relationship and national security.

The charge that Dean offered to tell all only after Mr. Nixon discovered his part in the conspiracy comes from former Nixon aide Charles W. Colson, emerging as the President's leading public defender.

Colson told ABC commentator Howard K. Smith June 6 that he and his new law partner, David Shapiro, "presented information for the President" on April 13 recommending Dean be fired. "It's no small coincidence that the next day," said Colson, "Mr. Dean . . . went to the U.S. Attorney's office seeking immunity."

In fact, however, Dean's immunity negotiations with U.S. prosecutors, covering eight separate late night and weekend sessions, started April 2, 11 days before the Colson-Shapiro recommendation.

All the while there have been underground calumnies on Dean's character peddled around Washington. All, including contradictory rumors that he

is homosexual and goes to massage parlors, are without apparent basis in fact.

More significantly, Dean's lawyers also deny a far more widely circulated and far more damaging report. In early May, CBS quoted one of his lawyers as saying Dean was seeking immunity to avoid jail because he feared sexual assault. That report has been widely repeated, in and out of print, to make Dean a figure of ridicule and contempt here. But his lawyers call it absolutely false, telling us they did not deny it originally for fear the denial would only spread the report.

The anti-Dean campaign has experienced conspicuous success. Even some leading Democratic senators now ridicule his impact as a witness on grounds his dishonesty is a proven fact. Highly-placed federal prosecutors, also say privately that Dean's failing credibility will play a part in the government's eventual decision whether to continue denying him immunity and thus pass up his full testimony.

Even without a campaign against him, the 34-year-old Dean would be hard put to make himself believed against the combined denials of Colson, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, perhaps John Mitchell, and, of course, the President. Nevertheless, the campaign against Dean based in part on faulty information suggests he is not quite so irrelevant as the President's defenders publicly claim. If he seems credible before the Ervin committee next week, the nightmare Watergate scandal will grow still bleaker.