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CBS NEWS SPECIAL REPORT

"Watergate: An Interview with John Dean"

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With CBS News Correspondent Walter Cronkite

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WALTER CRONKITE: The man in the middle in the Watergate scandal, accuser and accused, 34-year-old John Wesley Dean III. Fired as counselor to President Nixon after issuing a statement that he would not be a scapegoat, he went to Federal prosecutors, bargaining for immunity if he would tell all. Today he hinted at some of it.

DEAN: I think that a lot of people just don't really accept the truth for what it really is. And I think that-- I felt I could be some sort of catalyst to-- to start getting the truth out. Now, since I have taken the steps I've taken, a number of things have come out. And it's long past time that they come out, and I'm sure that there are going to be a lot more things to come out. And until it's all out and the truth is told and the whole situation is understood, I'm afraid this problem will just go on and on and on. So I would like to see that happen as soon as possible.

ANNOUNCER: This is a CBS NEWS SPECIAL REPORT: "Watergate: An Interview with John Dean". Earlier today, CBS News Correspondent Walter Cronkite met with former White House Counsel John Dean and his wife at his Alexandria, Virginia home near the nation's capital. The details of Dean's first televised interview - in a moment.

[ANNOUNCEMENTS]

CRONKITE: John Dean had a rapid rise in life - just five years from law school graduate to White House Counsel, the President's lawyer. To the outside world, at least, he was one of the inner circle - that powerful group of young men who sat at the elbow of the President of the United States. He came here by way of a short term in a prestigious Washington law firm, a couple of years as a committee counsel on Capitol Hill, and a stint at the Department of Justice, where he came to the attention of Richard Kleindienst and John Mitchell. And so, on to the White House! But there, after two years, the bubble burst.

Now he's a central figure in Watergate - that whole complex of illegal or shady acts that mark the 1972 re-election campaign of President Nixon.

It has seemed that at almost every twist and turn of the Watergate labyrinth, there Dean or his ghost appeared - from grand jury testimony that he was in on the original planning for Watergate, to the White House charge this week that his investigation of the White House involvement was inadequate.

Dean's defense is an offense that he is being made the "fall guy" for the true sinners.

DEAN: I was always aware of the fact that from time to time various individuals at the White House have taken--for lack of a better word--the "heat" for other people, when in fact they had no involvement at all.

I can think of, without going-- elaborating an awful lot on this, I can think of one example - is the Shipley ads that ran during the '70 campaign. There were some rather rough campaign ads. And the heat descended upon Chuck Colson on those. And I had learned that really the heat didn't belong on Chuck Colson for those. And I'd just as soon defer as to who it belonged on, but it-- this was an example to me.

I recall the incident regarding the FBI's investigation regarding Daniel Schorr, where ultimately an answer was put out that doesn't really meet with reality. But yet it was an answer, and somebody was put out in front, in this instance Mr. Malek, to explain what this was all about.

So I was aware of this sort of thing happening. I'm aware of other examples where it's happened. And I saw a pattern developing. I think one would be the Dean report that was given by the-- announced by the President on August 29th, when I had not had any meetings with the President about this subject, between the June 17th break-in and his August 29th statement. I recall I had one meeting with him, but it was on a totally different subject and there were, oh, half a dozen people in the office. It was relating to his-- to some personal matters and they had outside personal attorneys in. And Mrs. Nixon was in the office. It certainly wasn't an occasion for any discussion of anything regarding the Watergate.

CRONKITE: Well, you know, about that, why, if you were--flabbergasted, I think, was the word you used--when you heard that for the first time, sitting in your hotel room in San Clemente, I believe, isn't that right?

DEAN: That's correct.

CRONKITE: You heard the President's statement that you had issued a report and that there was no involvement in the White House. Why didn't you go immediately to the President at that point and say, "Look, you've been-- Somehow or other, this thing's out of hand"?

DEAN: Well, I didn't have access to the President. And I always thought it somehow presumptuous if I, you know, would try to get in to see the President about anything. I-- I'm aware of other members of the staff who repeatedly tried to see the President on different things, and they didn't get in to see the President.

CRONKITE: Do you mean that they were setting you up for this?

DEAN: I don't think that I can say that they were "setting me up" at that point in time. I never believed that. I had numerous discussions with colleagues on the staff, of equal level or lower level, one or two very particularly close friends, where I used to say, "Do you think they would do that to me?" And they always sort of reassured me, "No, they wouldn't."

But it was something that I didn't want to believe myself. And I was surprised with some subsequent events that really did occur rather rapidly, that indicated indeed there is an effort to "leave Dean out there in front."

CRONKITE: Why do you think they selected you to be, in your words, a scapegoat? Why you?

DEAN: I think it was very logical. I was-- I was a man in-- sort of in the middle. I was dealing with various levels of people. I was aware of things going on. And I think, as my testimony evolves, in whichever form it comes out in first, or the like, I think people would understand why I felt that way. And particularly circumstances that evolved in the, oh, early spring, late February, March and April, made it very clear to me that there would be an effort to make me a scapegoat.

[ANNOUNCEMENTS]

CRONKITE: A moment ago we heard John Dean say that he was flabbergasted to hear President Nixon say, last August, that Dean had investigated Watergate and that on the basis of this investigation no one then on the White House staff was involved. Well, Dean said he did not pursue the matter with the President because he did not have access to Mr. Nixon. This raised the question of whether Dean took up the matter at the next highest level in the White House.

Did you go to see Mr. Haldeman or Ehrlichman on that, to-- ?

DEAN: I had been meeting with Haldeman and Ehrlichman about various aspects of the matter. And, as you know, I've-- would like to defer getting into what I call testimonial areas at this point. And I think one of the things that the report meant to me was that I was right out in front at that point in time on this issue, and wasn't particularly happy to be placed out in front that way.

So that-- Your original question was what did I see sort of coming, and-- I didn't want to believe there was anything, you know, malicious or improper. This was sort of the thing that went on on a regular basis, that somebody else went out in front. So I accepted it for what it was - that I was the man to be out in front on this one. And it was, as you know, the statement was repeated on several occasions until we've come down to very recently now, when finally they've said that, no, Dean did not talk to the President. He did not give the report to the President. Rather, now, it's through senior White House aides that I had reported. Well, I'm glad they finally have admitted that there was no Dean report, as such. The--

CRONKITE: Was there a Dean investigation?

DEAN: Well, I wouldn't call it an investigation, per se. I was aware of certain situations and facts. But had I known that my name and a report was going to be put out, I would have certainly proceeded differently and asked a lot of other questions of people that I did never-- I never asked, and probably would have employed a far different procedure to get information than I did.

CRONKITE: Well, Mr. Ziegler said, just yesterday or the day before, that the investigation was not well run, was inadequate investigation, is now the line that is being taken. Do you think it's possible that there was a genuine misunderstanding, between somebody higher up on the staff than yourself and yourself, as to what you were supposed to be doing?

DEAN: I don't think so - for this reason. I have to be very candid in saying that I often have noticed at the White House that a-- that a sort of a public relations position will be postured and justified after it's taken. And I think this was a circumstance of that nature.

I know that Mr. Ziegler also said that I had briefed him on a number of occasions. Well, indeed I did brief Mr. Ziegler on a number of occasions, and I can say that I had asked Mr. Ehrlichman how much I should tell Mr. Ziegler. And he said, "Well, you just tell him enough to answer a particular question at-- on a particular time."

And I had informed Ziegler on a number of occasions, when he was pressing me very hard for more and more information, I said: "I'm sorry, Ron, I just can't give it to you. I don't have authority to give it to you." And this made it very difficult for Ziegler.

As late as the Easter morning call I received from the President, I spoke to Ziegler after that call. At that time I told him, I said: "Ron," I said, "you've continued to use the Dean report as a fact. And I want you to know that I never conducted an investigation, that I never was instructed to go out and check every individual, to turn every stone, to find out what had happened. And if I had been, I would have counseled that the remark the President made on the 29th would have been different than the one that was made."

And this, as I say, was on Easter, Easter Sunday, that I told Ron this. And he said, "I--" He said, "I recognize that now."

CRONKITE: Well, if there wasn't a Dean report, then how did that relate to the statements that were accredited to you that you were called into the President's presence, and said, "Good job!" you know, and ensuring that the cover-up worked well?

DEAN: I think we're-- I think we are working into what I call testimonial areas. And I would just say that, for example, some of the conversations that have thus far been reported in the press are neither completely reflective of the conversation nor completely reflective of the whole series of circumstances that I'm going to

defer until I'm under oath to testify to and lay out the whole picture when called upon to do so.

[ANNOUNCEMENTS]

CRONKITE: With Dean, during our talk today at his home in a Washington suburb, was his young second wife. So naturally the subject came up of the effect on their lives of his own personal crisis and how Mrs. Dean is bearing up.

What's life like these days for the two of you? I mean, after all, you're practically newlyweds.

MRS. DEAN: I think that, since this has all happened, there's a closeness that never existed before. We're working together on this. So it seems.

Before it broke, you know, John was always so quiet and so-- kind of down about it. You know, he wouldn't discuss sensitive areas—he couldn't—in his job. And I always felt distant from him because of that. But since this has broken, we're together. [Laughing]

CRONKITE: What are you doing actively to help investigate?

MRS. DEAN: Me? [Laughing]

JOHN DEAN: She has no comment on that. [Laughter]

MRS. DEAN: There's my answer.

CRONKITE: Bugging somebody?

[Laughter]

MRS. DEAN: We're strong.

CRONKITE: What about your friends? Are they around?

JOHN DEAN: Oh, yes indeed.

MRS. DEAN: Yes.

DEAN: Yes, indeed.

CRONKITE: Your personal life - has it changed a great deal in social activities?

DEAN: No. It's kind of hard for my friends to come in and out of the house of recent, because we have so many camera crews outside, and some of them are camera shy and don't want to be on national television every time they come to visit me. But other than that it hasn't changed a lot. [Laughter]

CRONKITE: You're dealing here, quite clearly, with very powerful forces. Do you have any fear for your personal safety?

DEAN: No, I don't personally have any fear for my safety. Other people have raised that with me. They've said that, John, you ought to be thinking about that. And I've said, "If I have to worry about that, I'll spend all my time worrying about that. And I just can't worry about that."

What my-- what my efforts are now-- as I've said, I'm very-- I'm a very small part of a very large picture. And if in that capacity I can be a catalyst to explaining that picture, I hope I can be a catalyst to explaining it, and that's what I'm spending my time doing right now - is trying to do that in the proper way.

I'm also trying not to try a case in the newspaper or try it on any form of the media.

CRONKITE: But Dean has done some talking with the syndicated columnist Mary McGrory. Dean had some good things to say about H. R. Haldeman, but he said John Ehrlichman was "something else!" I asked Dean if he would expand a little on his relationship with the two men and how he felt about them.

DEAN: Well, when I first went over to the White House, I can recall John Mitchell saying something to me that I thought about an awful lot the whole time I was there. And that is that Mitchell said, "I'd be very curious to see how your relationship evolves with John Ehrlichman, because I suspect he'll keep a foot on your shoulder the whole time you're there." And I very much felt that he would keep a foot on my shoulder, because the foot was always right on my shoulder once I got over there.

As far as Mr. Haldeman goes, Mr. Haldeman was always, you know, he's an extremely busy man. I was always amazed at his capacity to get information and, you know, get to the bottom of the matter. He was almost-- he was a very good lawyer, in that sense. He would ask all the pertinent questions when we were having discussions. And my feelings about Mr. Ehrlichman, I think I'll leave at what I said in the McGrory piece, as she reported it, without getting into personalities, which I'd like to defer from.

CRONKITE: I don't have that quote immediately in front of me. I really don't. I'd like to-- What-- Do you remember what it was?

DEAN: I think it said something to the fact that I-- you know, I'd said how hard working and devoted a man Mr. Haldeman was, and then that she went on to say that I had said that John Ehrlichman was something else.

CRONKITE: Did you ever feel that reports that went up to the President were altered by the staff, the high staff officers, before they went to him?

DEAN: Well, I can recall at one point there was a procedure involved where some of the papers from other members of the staff would be sent by my office if they dealt with a legal issue, for clearance. And often the note on top would be: Should this or should this not go in to the President? And I often thought it was kind of strange that, here I am, way down on the line, I'm going to check off on whether somebody else's memorandum should or should not go in to the-- in to see the President, a given piece of paper.

Now, this was a part of this intensive staffing that would limit what the President would see, as to what the senior staff absolutely thought he should see. And then-- then other decisions would be made by them, and come back.

CRONKITE: Were there ever any arguments with the higher staff officers about what should go in or shouldn't go in? Was there a free discussion there?

DEAN: Well, I think most of these discussions probably occurred at what they call the 8:15 meeting, which was held in Mr. Haldeman's office. I was often frustrated that I wasn't even invited to the 8:15 meetings. So I had no idea. You know, I would-- Something would happen in the 8:15 meeting, and I would get a little assignment out of the 8:15 meeting, and--

CRONKITE: Who was in on the 8:15 meeting?

DEAN: Oh, I think they were Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Kissinger, Shultz, Timmons, Ziegler, and I think that was basically the nucleus.

CRONKITE: And the White House Counsel didn't sit in?

DEAN: Counsel didn't sit in.

[ANNOUNCEMENTS]

CRONKITE: There are many things John Dean did not want to and would not talk about today - areas in which he faces questioning by Senate Watergate investigators and perhaps in a court of law. But he was not reluctant to talk about his experiences in the White House and his ideas about what goes on there and elsewhere in government.

Do you think that the Presidency has become too powerful?

DEAN: Well, I've got to say, as a preface, that I-- I am a student of government. After my junior year in college, I began focusing on government studies. And I did graduate work in that. And as a lawyer, I, of course, had further exposure - and working on the Hill. I would rather address it at the fact that the Congress has become too weak. And friends of mine in Congress I've talked to (for example, Barry Goldwater, Junior, and other people) about the fact that the Congress

is really not capable of dealing with the Executive right now. And I've always had the hope, 'cause that was sort of my training ground, that the Congress would make itself more capable of dealing with the Executive branch. There is a terrible lack of information in the Congress. The committee system-- systems are not always the best way to resolve things. The process is cumbersome.

I always had great hope, when the Legislative Reorganization Act was going through, that they would do more than they had done. And I think that one thing that this all is going to do is going to strengthen the Congress. So it's not that the President has become this strong, as the fact that the Congress has become a bit weaker. And I happen to believe strongly that the checks and balances are very good and very healthy for the system.

CRONKITE: The word has been used in regard to the White House staff of "arrogance" of power. Did-- Working in the environment, was there a feeling of this arrogance, of being above the law?

DEAN: I don't know as there was a feeling of being above the law. Let me go back to the word "arrogance" first. I certainly think there was a mood that prevailed in the White House, and may still prevail in the White House, that things can be handled best by the White House.

On many occasions, something that would normally be done by an agency was done in the White House, from development of legislative program, to how best to deal with a confirmation hearing that-- There was a feeling that the White House had some sort of corner on wisdom and knowledge and ability to execute any given program or plan or idea.

To say that there was a feeling to be above the law, I think that there was more of a myth and unreality that exists in the White House. And I found myself very often subject to the same sort of feelings: that you really are not in touch with the rest of the world when you're in the White House.

CRONKITE: Did you have a sense in the White House of the-- of this matter of loyalty to the President, overriding all other considerations, as to a man's personal beliefs, personal doubts, and anything of that sort? Was there this--the word has been used--"fanatical" loyalty to the President? Did you feel fanatical about it?

DEAN: I felt very loyal to the President and very loyal to the other people at the White House. I still feel a loyalty. And I think that my effort to get the truth out is not to me any exercise of disloyalty. I think it's best for the President and I think it's best for all involved. And it's certainly best for the country that the truth emerge.

CRONKITE: You appear at this moment to be kind of a loner in this. I mean, an isolated figure. Are you? Or are you still in touch with those around the White House and your friends there?

DEAN: Well, I, of course, have remained in some contact with some friends, but at this particular point in time I'd say I'm out there all by myself - but for a few that are working with me, in terms of counsel and others. There are many people who have said to me they'd like to come forward and be of any aid they can. But I haven't accepted anything-- any aid of any form other than to try to cooperate with the forums that are investigating this. And I think that I'm prepared to let my whole case ride on the truth - and my ability to tell the truth and document the truth - so that's why I don't feel particularly uncomfortable being alone at this hour. I think that, as this matter evolves, there are going to be other people who may say that "We'd like to assist you."

CRONKITE: John Dean is scheduled to appear before the Senate Committee which began its hearings today. And when he talks, the testimony will be coming from deeper inside the White House than ever before.

This is Walter Cronkite. Good night.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a CBS NEWS SPECIAL REPORT: "Watergate: An Interview with John Dean".