

The Dean Delay

Part 6/24/73

The abrupt one-week postponement of the Watergate hearings was arranged in a way that gave defenders of President Nixon maximum ammunition in their campaign to destroy the credibility and reputation of ousted White House Counsel John W. Dean III.

Dean, badly damaged previously by his feverish bargaining with federal prosecutors for total immunity, was the witness ready to tell all in public last Tuesday when the postponement was suddenly announced. Large chunks of what Dean planned to say were leaked to the press by Republicans, greatly diminishing his impact when he does testify. Moreover, the White House was given another week to blacken Dean's name.

The timing of the delay was so interesting because it followed only by minutes the distribution to all senators on the Watergate committee of a confidential summary of Dean's closed-door testimony the previous Saturday heard by the committee counsel and investigators. The senators were not present.

Sen. Sam Ervin Jr. of North Carolina, committee chairman, had decided that, because of increasingly embarrassing leaks, closed-door testimony by witnesses being quizzed by staff must be withheld from committee members until the last minute.

Ervin ordered the summary given to the senators one half-hour before Dean was to appear before the committee in

a closed-door session last Monday afternoon intended to prepare the committee for Tuesday's open hearings.

But minutes before the session convened, with Republican senators now in possession of the summary of Dean's closed-door testimony, came the appeal to Ervin for a delay. Sens. Mike Mansfield and Hugh Scott, the Democratic and Republican leaders, asked for the postponement in order not to hurt the U.S.-Soviet summit talks. Democrats, frightened that a vote against delay would make them appear unpatriotic, went along with the request.

Democratic sources now think that Scott and the White House contrived the timing of the request, with Mansfield an unwitting victim. The result has been savage for Dean: a series of headlines removing much of the highly important element of surprise from his public testimony beginning Monday coupled with Scott's charge that Dean is an "embezzler" and a "turncoat."

In addition, defenders of Mr. Nixon have used the week to set in motion a secret investigation of Dean's financial affairs, in hopes of further damaging his reputation.

A footnote: contrary to some published reports, Dean is not being handled by the Democratic majority as a "favored" witness. Committee counsel Sam Dash put five top staffers on a crash study to find loopholes and weak

spots in his secret testimony and plant tough questions for committee members to ask him.