

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Weighing the Credibility of John Dean

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Egil (Bud) Krogh's implication that John W. Dean III lied under oath to the Senate Watergate Committee was tremendously cheering to the White House but added absolutely nothing one way or another to the overriding question of Dean's credibility.

In his taped, nationwide TV interview over CBS' "60 minutes" Sunday night, ex-White House aide Krogh asserted that Dean told him last March 20 the President "just doesn't know what's been going on" in the Watergate cover-up. But in his own prepared and sworn testimony, Dean revealed a similar conversation with another White House aide. In truth, neither conversation sheds any light on whether, as Mr. Nixon maintains, he first learned of the cover-up from them White House counsel Dean March 21.

Actually, the possibility of the President's cover-up involvement—central to impeachment proceedings—revolves around what Dean and he talked about previous to March 21. Most important is the March 13 conversation in which Dean alleges—and the President denies—they talked about executive clemency and cash payments for the Watergate burglars.

Either by design or accident, Krogh's interview with CBS' Mike Wallace dovetailed with the renewed White House assault on Dean's credibility. Talking publicly after his sentencing for the "plumbers" burglary of a psychiatrist's office, Krogh seemed eager to assert confidence that the President had no part in the Watergate cover-up.

"I would like to say the reason is not just faith," said Krogh. His evidence is a two-hour March 20 meeting with Dean in which Dean said: "Bud, the President is being badly served. He just doesn't know what's been going on." From that conversation, Krogh concluded Mr. Nixon knew nothing about the cover-up until informed by Dean March 21.

While declining to call his "very close friend" Dean a liar or perjurer, Krogh implied as much. He indicated that Dean "might not have perjured himself" if he was not telling him the truth March 20—adding, "but I believe he did" tell him the truth.

However, in prepared Senate testimony last June 25, Dean told of a March 20 conversation with another White House aide, Richard Moore: "I

told him that I really didn't think the President understood all the facts involved in the Watergate and particularly the implication of those facts." That is consistent with what Krogh says Dean told him later the same day.

But Dean also testified in June "I did not discuss with Moore the fact that I had discussed money and clemency with the President earlier (March 13)." If by his own testimony the generally closemouthed Dean withheld this from Moore, it would scarcely strain credibility if he also withheld it from Krogh.

Thus, the President's involvement depends far less on the tape recording of March 21 than of March 13. Yet Mr. Nixon's defenders have stressed the March 21 tape, contending its disclosure would exculpate the President.

On Oct. 31, presidential chief of staff Alexander Haig so informed Senate Republican leaders. Shortly thereafter, Minority Leader Hugh Scott examined a White House "document" concerning the March 21 Nixon-Dean conversation.

After we reported recently that congressional examination of Dean by the special prosecutor's office indicated it did not consider him a perjurer, Scott de-

clared the tapes cleared the President and contradicted Dean.

Scott contends he saw a transcript of the March 21 conversation; people in a position to know believe he saw only a summary containing verbatim quotes. But there is no argument about this: it concerned only the March 21 tape, which in itself cannot clear the President and condemn Dean.

Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski's investigators have now read transcripts of all tapes. Contrary to the mistaken impression of many (including Krogh, who declared over CBS that Dean could not be prosecuted further under his immunity agreement), Dean most definitely can be prosecuted for perjury before the Senate committee. But the prosecutors have found nothing to warrant such prosecution.

Until the tape transcripts are actually released, this transcends all else. While a Nixon adviser found Krogh's account of his conversation with Dean to be "damned helpful" to the President, in fact it changes nothing and reveals precious little.