

A Gentleman Always Doffs His Gloves Before Stabbing

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The senator from Florida is a gentleman, not given to harsh language, so it was all done very politely.

"I must say it is hard to know where to begin in all this," Sen. Edward J. Gurney said wearily.

The senator wears a constant expression of weariness these days, as if this sordid Watergate business had caused permanent strain to his patrician sense of proper.

"I will ask probing questions," the senator added, ever so politely, just a hint of contempt beneath his native Maine accent, "and I am sure you recognize why this is important."

Then Gurney proceeded through four tedious hours of questioning to bloody the nose of the young witness before the Senate Watergate Committee, John W. Dean III, the former White House lawyer who is accusing the President of complicity in the Watergate cover-up.

Before the national TV audience which is weighing John Dean's credibility, the senator held up for inspection the curious blank spots in Dean's memory. He examined fuzzy impressions which Dean had proffered as hard facts. He insinuated—in the nicest way, of course—that Dean was skimming honeymoon money from the GOP campaign funds, a secret dowry of \$4,850 which Dean insists was merely a temporary loan.

"It seems like a lot of money for a honeymoon," Senator Gurney said dryly. "I am really trying to find out just a rough idea of how

you were going to use all that money?"

Dean's explanation didn't add up to \$4,850 or come even close. He needed the cash, he said, for yard work done at his home, the repair of a patio, wedding preparations, and his honeymoon. Eventually, he spent the money on ordinary everyday expenses like groceries.

According to Dean, he placed his personal check for \$4,850 in the secret stash of campaign money kept in his office as evidence that he intended to repay the money. But the check was cold. "Was there enough money in the checking account to cover it?" the Senator asked.

"No, there was not at that time," Dean conceded, "but on previous occasions, I had overdrawn my account and it had been covered. Within 24 hours, I was able to get the money in the bank and cover it."

Gurney pursued the subject with a puzzled expression. Why, he wondered, didn't Mr. Dean simply use credit cards on his honeymoon? The witness answered too smartly:

"Well, as my wife well knows," Dean said confidently, "I try to use my credit cards as infrequently as possible, because I don't like to live on credit."

The audience laughed and John Dean blushed. It was one of the few moments in three days of testimony in which the cool-headed witness misspoke, as they say at the White House. The subject, of course, is irrelevant to the Watergate, except for what it says about John Dean's veracity.

Gurney scored some other points for the White House

yesterday in areas which are much more substantive. He did not rub it in, but he did bruise the witness.

At one point, Dean tried to play tar-baby with the Florida senator, making a broad allusion to the time when he was White House counsel and used to feed stuff to Gurney's office. The senator brushed it off.

Dean made another stab at it when they were discussing the Watergate hush money. "Senator, knowing the good lawyer you are, I think you would be well aware that this money would be for silence," Dean said familiarly.

"I am not sure I would at all," the senator said stiffly.

The toughest questions came over the most crucial claim which Dean has made implicating the President, namely, that on Sept. 15 Mr. Nixon personally congratulated Dean for his work in covering up the Watergate conspiracy within the White House.

But Gurney wanted to know exactly what it was about the cover-up that the President discussed. "Did you discuss the cover-up money that was being raised and paid?" Dean said they didn't.

"Did you discuss Strachan bringing wiretap information in to Haldeman?"

"No sir."

"Did you discuss Haldeman instructing Strachan to destroy all of these materials?"

"No, I did not."

"Did you discuss the CIA cover-up idea?"

"I did not."

And so on, down the list of specifics.

"Well now," Gurney wondered, "how can you say

that the President knew all about these things from a simple observation by him that 'Bob tells me you are doing a good job'?"

Dean was sure that he did. The President must have been filled in by H. R. Haldeman, Dean insisted. But when Gurney explored that assumption, Dean began adding extra words to what he remembered from the President's mouth. He suggested that the President had said something along the lines that "Bob's been telling me everything you have been doing and you have been doing a good job."

Gurney expressed surprise at this new presidential quotation. "I thought you said that he said, 'Bob has been telling me what a good job you have been doing?'" Gurney asked.

Dean tried to wriggle out. "Well, he said, 'we are quibbling over words —'"

"We are not quibbling over words!" Gurney interrupted, raising his voice. "We are talking about something very important, whether the President of the United States knew on Sept. 15 about the Watergate and the Cover-up."

Dean agreed that the exact words are important, after all. "My mind is not a tape recorder," he offered. "It does recall impressions of conversations very well ..."

Gurney wasn't interested in impressions. "Your whole thesis on saying that the President of the United States knew about Watergate on Sept. 15 is purely an impression," the senator sniffed.

Then, politely, he moved on to other subjects.