

Magruder Testimony: 'No Trouble for His Bosses'



Jeb Stuart Magruder

Contrary to widespread expectations here that he might implicate his superiors still deeper in the Watergate scandal, former Nixon political aide Jeb Stuart Magruder will give the White House no trouble at all in his sworn public testimony, according to present plan.

Both Magruder's own private interviews with federal investigators, in which he has admitted perjury in earlier testimony, and his attorney's confidential preview of his forthcoming testimony to the Ervin committee point to one conclusion: Magruder, the slavishly loyal Nixon lieutenant, now intends to blame himself for illegal political espionage. "I would say," a high Senate source told us, "that his superiors have nothing to worry about."

This becomes particularly important in light of the decision of ex-White House Counsel John Dean to tell all—even if he does not get the immunity from prosecution he has been bargaining for all spring. The two top former Nixon aides, H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, have clearly decided to rebut Dean at every point, backed by public pronouncements out of the Oval Office.

Latest Dean. With the White House denying Dean the documents he claims are necessary, President Nixon's supporters hope to destroy his credibility in describing the 40-plus meetings he had with Mr. Nixon this year.

All this bears an uncanny resemblance to power alignments of happier days. Dean was a White House agent of then Atty. Gen. John Mitchell and as such a key actor in Mitchell's continuing power struggle with the White House staff. But Magruder was Haldeman's protégé, placed at the Committee for the Re-election of the President (CRP) as acting director to safeguard Haldeman's interests against Mitchell, the future campaign director. Mitchell tried to undercut Magruder there, but Magruder was protected by Haldeman.

The pattern persists. According to lawyers close to the case, Mitchell has told investigators that he gave no espionage instructions to Magruder but adds that Haldeman probably did. Dean is still hoping for corroboration from Mitchell on the witness stand, though both Mitchell's credibility and predictability are clouded by recent erratic behavior.

When U.S. Atty. Harold H. Titus Jr. announced May 24 that a key figure in

the Watergate case — later identified as Magruder — had agreed to plead guilty and testify as a prosecution witness, it was assumed that meant trouble for Magruder's bosses. The ingratiating Magruder humbly told friends that he was willing to tell the truth, take his punishment and then start a new life.

But that obviously did not mean implicating his superiors. According to government and Senate sources, Magruder is saying that he inferred too much from broad directions given him by the White House. The blame, he is expected to testify, is his.

That is obviously the best of news for Ehrlichman and Haldeman, who are simply denying everything and admitting nothing — not taking the fifth amendment, not claiming executive privilege, not seeking immunity. Their denials and the strategy to discredit Dean have clearly become key points of the Nixon defense strategy.

Simultaneously, Dean is suddenly finding trouble getting the documents he contends will back up his charges. Dean has told investigators that Mr. Nixon scribbled Watergate comments

in the margins of his daily news summaries, but any effort to subpoena those records almost surely will be rebuffed.

Dean claims he cannot even get access to his own files, stored in the basement of the Executive Office Building. According to his account, he was denied access last Saturday to his own chronologies which he says could substantiate his testimony.

Nevertheless, the White House position is shaky. Without testimony from either Dean or Magruder, Ehrlichman and Haldeman are still likely to be indicted, in the opinion of many lawyers. The fact that Dean's leads to prosecutors have so far proved quite accurate means his testimony may well severely damage the President and his top aides even without substantiation by other witnesses and documents.

Against this background comes Jeb Magruder's confrontation with the Ervin committee — probably next week — as the highest level Nixon operative yet to testify. Unless his lawyer's preview proves wholly false, it will be a day of testimony bringing some signs of relief at the White House.