

White House On Watergate: Facts Elusive

By Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein
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President Nixon is deeply confused about the Watergate affair and is uncertain about many of the facts in the celebrated case, according to J. Fred Buzhardt Jr., special presidential counsel.

In a lengthy telephone interview yesterday, Buzhardt, who is handling Watergate matters for the President, said: "I'm sure the President doesn't know a lot about this. Most people are confused to the deuce. What makes anyone think he's in a different position?"

Buzhardt also expressed confusion about the case, saying that he does not know which one, if any, of the President's former aides to believe. "I'm not sure what I believe beyond the innocence of the President," he said.

Buzhardt said the White House is severely handicapped in trying to obtain the facts in the case. "I feel like I've got my hands tied behind me . . . it looks sinister if I call any one" of the attorneys for the former White House aides who are under investigation in the case.

Buzhardt also said the President has not decided whether to publicly answer allegations made last week by former presidential counsel John W. Dean III, who testified before the Senate Watergate committee that Mr. Nixon was involved in the cover-up.

"I don't know if the President is going to answer Dean," Buzhardt said. "I have mixed emotions about what to recommend. There are various forums . . . I'm not sure if we want to put the President in a position to answer a confessed felon."

White accusing the President and top former White House aides H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman of involvement in the cover-up, Dean also confessed that he himself played a major role in managing the cover-up for more than eight months.

To answer Dean could "very definitely" degrade the office of the Presidency, according to Buzhardt. He said it is difficult to anticipate what other witnesses may say, even though news accounts and preliminary interviews are available.

"What do you do? Do you (have the President) testify or make a statement after each witness," Buzhardt said. "There are facts that obviously haven't been gone into yet."

Buzhardt said he was uncertain about how much damage Dean's testimony had done to the President, adding: "Anything of the sort of these type allegations are damaging. How damaging I don't know . . . I have my own personal opinion . . . that his imagination got away from him."

At the same time Buzhardt said that he doesn't "doubt that he (Dean) believes in what he said sincerely."

Having listened to some of Dean's testimony on television last week, Buzhardt had a cross-examination of Dean by the Senators and Watergate committee staff.

"I don't really think we had a cross-examination," Buzhardt said. "Maybe

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that's just a lawyer's frustration but there were questions unasked. . . as senators go, however, in cross-examination, (Sen. Edward J.) Gurney (R-Fla.) made a good effort as did Fred Thompson," the minority counsel of the Senate committee.

Specifically, Buzhardt said that Dean should have been questioned more intensely about a Watergate report that Dean drafted in late March.

The report was drafted after March 21, when both Dean and the President agree the President had been told a large portion of the details about the cover-up.

The draft report, part of which is typed and a larger part of which is in Dean's



FRED J. BUZHARDT
... "my hands tied."

own handwriting was submitted by Dean to the Senate committee.

"For whom was it intended?" Buzhardt asked. "If it was for the public, it is

too damning. If it was for here (the White House), then there is not enough. Dean had told the President more" on March 21.

"Perhaps there is an answer," Buzhardt said, "but I certainly would have liked to hear it."

The Dean report, requested by the President, contains details about plans for bugging operations which were discussed in the office of former Attorney General John N. Mitchell in early 1972.

The report also discusses the payment of money to the Watergate conspirators.

In addition, Buzhardt said that Dean was not questioned about apparent contradictions in his sworn testimony with that of Jeb Stuart Magruder, the former deputy Nixon campaign manager who testified earlier this month before the Senate committee.

Magruder testified that he had a telephone conversation in early 1972 with Dean indicating that Dean had more knowledge of G. Gordon Liddy's intelligence gathering operation than Dean has acknowledged.

Liddy was later convicted in the conspiracy to bug the Democrats' Watergate headquarters where five men were arrested on June 17, 1972.

In yesterday's telephone interview, which was entirely on the record, Buzhardt emphasized his own confusion in the case. "What are the major issues? That is even a difficult question," he said.

In particular, he indicated that the Watergate bugging, which is clearly illegal has become enmeshed in other political and national security activities which have

been unfairly colored by and equated with the sensational Watergate operation.

Buzhardt said that his and the President's confusion about Watergate stems from an inability to get all the facts. He said the White House is even uncertain about what Haldeman and Ehrlichman will say when they testify before the Senate Committee.

Buzhardt said that his role in the White House "is not that of an investigator" but primarily involves supplying information and documents to the Senate committee and the office of special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox.

Asked about the President's reaction to Dean's allegations, Buzhardt would only say: "The President is a tough-minded individual who is going about his business."