

# The Normalcy Caper

By Anthony Lewis

## ABROAD AT HOME

A month ago some Watergate television-watchers were talking about how awkward the hearings might be for President Nixon while Leonid Brezhnev was in Washington. No, said one, the President would somehow work things out with the Senate committee so that it would hold off any dramatic public hearings during the Brezhnev visit.

It is hard to give up our old belief in a President's ability to control the pace of political events, but the point about Watergate is that the process of inquiry is now beyond any politician's control. That prediction could not have been more wrong: During Brezhnev week the Senate committee is hearing its potential star witness, John Dean. It could be the week that was.

The coincidence of John Dean and Leonid Brezhnev in the headlines and on the screen is a nice one. For the two men symbolize the two main White House tactics for dealing with Watergate: to condemn the accusers, especially Mr. Dean, and to urge the importance of ending the inquiries and getting on with the normal business of the Presidency.

Mr. Dean has been the target of a venomous campaign of denigration carried on by White House flacks paid and unpaid. They have tried to paint him as unreliable, disloyal, slimy, the sort who crawls out from under a stone. If they have omitted to accuse him of walking over his grandmother, it is only because one of their own patented that phrase.

The reason for all this is no secret. Mr. Dean let it be known that he would not be a "fall guy," he decided to talk.

There is no reason to think that John Dean is any less moral, or any less clean-cut, than the other men in-

involved in Watergate. It is true that his lawyers have been using leaks to get him immunity from prosecution, but that is natural. Witnesses who testify against criminal conspiracies do not have to be nice fellows. Our system of law and order often depends on criminals turned state's evidence, and they may be people we would not ask to dinner.

The important question about such witnesses is whether they are telling the truth. And from what we know about that, Mr. Dean has performed remarkably well. The score was tallied the other day by Mary McGrory of The Washington Star-News.

Item. Mr. Dean was the first to let out the stories of the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, and of the improper approach by President Nixon and John Ehrlichman to the judge trying the Ellsberg case, Matt Byrne. The stories sounded fantastic, but they were true.

Item. Mr. Dean leaked out some details of a 1970 Nixon plan for setting up a secret police operation in the United States. In his statement of May 22 Mr. Nixon admitted the broad outlines of the plan, while seeking to justify it in terms of "national security." Documents published since show that the plan involved illegal eavesdropping, burglary and other crimes.

Item. Mr. Dean's denigrators put it about that he had little first-hand knowledge of Mr. Nixon's actions in Watergate because, as White House counsel, he had seen the President only two or three times in months. Mr. Dean let it be known that he had met Mr. Nixon 35 or 40 times between last January and April. The

White House then huffily confirmed that.

Ever since the Watergate break-in a year ago, the President and his supporters have operated on the principle of attack rather than honest explanation. The original crime was dismissed by that exemplar of candor, Ronald Ziegler, as a "third-rate burglary." There was long and determined resistance to the appointment of an independent prosecutor. Mr. Nixon himself has given two inconsistent accounts of his role. He has gone into hiding from the press for months in order to avoid having to answer questions about Watergate.

The other tactic has lately been getting great weight. That is to press for a speedy end to the Senate hearings, and to the public's attention on Watergate, so that the President can get back to what he called in his April 30 television speech "the larger duties of this office."

Mr. Nixon emphasized then the "vital work . . . toward our goal of a lasting structure of peace in the world—work that cannot wait." That is the role Mr. Brezhnev is to play this week, to dramatize the President as peacemaker. Mr. Brezhnev's interest in doing so is hardly surprising: He has a good deal staked on relations with Richard Nixon, and he is not likely to suffer in dealing with a weakened President. Others will find irony enough in an implicit Nixon-Soviet pact.

But judging the public mood as best one can, the Brezhnev visit is not going to blanket John Dean's testimony or make the whole Watergate inquiry seem secondary. Most of the American public understands, profoundly, that the most "vital work" before the United States today is to cleanse the office of the President.