

How White House Sized Up Committee

Washington

Top-level White House officials tried to influence the Senate's Watergate hearings by pressing for friendly committee membership and staff, former White House counsel John W. Dean III said yesterday.

Dean told the Watergate committee that when the committee finally was named, White House officials felt they had only one sure friend on the panel, Senator Edward J. Gurney (Rep-Fla.) and one possible friend, the vice chairman, Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. (Rep-Tenn.).

Several overtures were made to Baker from the White House and, in February of this year, Baker and Mr. Nixon met at the White House, Dean said. He added that one White House official told him after the meeting that he thought Baker would be helpful to the administration.

(Baker said later yesterday that whatever suggestions the White House may have made to either him or Senate Republican leader Hugh Scott, were not agreed to by either of them.)

The efforts to influence the hearings began, Dean said, around the first of the year when two White House aides, Wallace H. Johnson and Fred LaRue, talked to Senator James O. Eastland (Dem-Miss.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"The White House wanted Senator Eastland to hold such hearings because they felt that Senator Eastland would be friendly and that the White House had more friends on the Judiciary Committee than on Senator (Sam) Ervin's Government Operations Committee," Dean said.

When Ervin was chosen to head the Watergate inquiry

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it was "much to the displeasure of the White House," Dean said.

CALL

On February 9, he said, he received a telephone call from San Clemente, Calif., from John Ehrlichman, President Nixon's chief domestic adviser, telling him to fly to San Clemente immediately with Richard O. Moore, special counsel to the President, to discuss strategy regarding the hearings.

Dean said he, Moore, Ehrlichman and White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman met for between 12 and 14 hours over a period of two days and that, when he left, Haldeman gave him a set of written instructions regarding a counter-offensive to the Senate hearings. Dean said he was surprised that Haldeman would put such things in writing, but "cover-up had become a way of life at the White House."

During one of those California meetings, Dean said, the assembled group analyzed the Senate's Watergate committee membership.

When talking about Senator Daniel K. Inouye, Dean said, Ehrlichman said his name should be pronounced "ain't-no-way" because "there ain't no way he's going to give us anything but problems."

OPINIONS

On other senators, Dean said Ehrlichman sized them up this way:

- "Senator Lowell P. Weicker was an independent who could give the White House problems.

- "Senator Gurney would help the White House and would not have to be told to do so . . . Senator Gurney was considered a sure friend

and protector of the President's interest.

- "Senator Baker was an unknown and neither Haldeman nor Ehrlichman knew which way he might go."

Dean said "both Ehrlichman and Haldeman felt very strongly about having a man as minority counsel who could work with the White House."

One of the exhibits that accompanied Dean's statement was an "eyes only" memo from Haldeman, written last February, stressing that "the key on the Ervin committee is the minority counsel."

"We've got to be sure we get a real tiger, not an old man or a soft head, and although we let the committee membership slip out of our grasp, we've got to find a way to be sure we get the very best man we can for counsel," Haldeman said.

CHOICE

The eventual choice for minority counsel, Fred Thompson, was not a White House choice.

"After the President met with Senator Baker (in late February), I was informed by Haldeman that the senator had appeared to be very interested in being cooperative and the President had the impression that he might be helpful," Dean said.

"Haldeman told me that Senator Baker had urged the President to waive executive privilege and send members of the White House staff to the hearings as quickly as possible, but the President had told Senator Baker that he was going to hold the line at written interrogatories.

"Finally, I was told that both the President and Senator Baker had discussed that there should be an effort to get the hearings over as quickly as possible."

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AP Wirephotos

SEN. DANIEL INOUYE
'Ain't no way'



SEN. EDWARD GURNEY
Considered a friend