

## The Next Witnesses are Crucial

By James Reston  
New York Times

## Washington

How the Senate Watergate committee handles its investigation in the coming days—particularly who it calls to the witness stand immediately after it finishes with John Dean III—can be of critical importance to the opinion of the nation and the reputation of President Nixon.

Dean has made more serious charges against Mr. Nixon than any official has brought against any President in

this century. Anticipating this, the White House has been urging that the Senate committee now call witnesses who are in a position to challenge Dean's testimony—and call them before the July Fourth recess—rather than summoning other witnesses who are likely to follow Dean with support for his charges.

This is a reasonable request. Without passing judgment on Dean's recollection of the events, and without trying to discredit his testimony or impugn his character—as the White House has been doing for days and weeks—the fact is that the selection of witnesses and the timing of their appearance before the national television audience can make a great deal of difference.

For example, if the Ervin committee were to call another witness after Dean who also incriminated Mr. Nixon in covering up the scandals and obstructing justice, or even if he didn't call any other witness before the long July Fourth holiday, Dean's testimony would tend to dominate public opinion well into July, by which time the vacation season would be on us and the rebuttals would be heard by a different and smaller audience.

## CONTROL

Dean has been an effective witness. He makes one wonder how such an intelligent and composed young man could have been so stu-

pid, timid or weak during the coverup. But in the Senate box, he has had total control of his brief, he has put down a foundation for his case that is an explosive mine-field for the President, and he has been responsive to the questions of the senators.

About the only mistake he made was that, by a slip of language, he "crossed his i's and dotted his t's," but otherwise, by a torrent of details and almost total recall of meetings and dates—without keeping either a diary or even a calendar, he said—he led the doubts of the television audience right to the President's door, and was even bold enough to plead that the President should be "forgiven"—a startling word Mr. Nixon denied to those who had defied his policy on Vietnam.

No wonder then that the President's lawyers want his testimony to be followed by witnesses like John Ehrlichman or Bob Haldeman, whom Dean has incriminated, so that Dean's story can be challenged before it sinks in over the Fourth of July holiday, and endures thereafter.

## FAITH

Still, there is a flaw in the White House argument, reasonable as it is. The White House, in order to get a fair hearing, does not have to rely on the good judgment of the Senate committee, and nobody has yet questioned the good faith of Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina.

The President is not exactly an innocent bystander in this controversy, and he is not without power. He doesn't have to leave the important question of the next witness and the doubts of the American people to the Senate committee. He can command the stage, and in the process, overwhelm the committee anytime he likes.

He knows all the options. The press is outside his gate at San Clemente, watching Dean on the TV cutting him up, and being told the President will have nothing to say. He can call a press conference and command the headlines anytime he likes before the next witness.

## CONTROL

He had told several stories about the espionage and the sabotage and the coverup, all of which have now been

denied by John Dean and others, who have questioned his control of his staff, his judgment, and even, by inference, his integrity.

This is not the sort of thing that can go out over national television, and be dealt with effectively by silence or by picking the next witness before the Senate committee. Especially by an administration that has paid so much attention to public relations and public opinion.

If the President is so sure that he is innocent, that he is being misrepresented by John Dean, and villified by a hostile press and television, he has an obvious remedy. He can come forward himself and offer voluntarily to give a deposition to the Watergate special prosecutor, or if he is really sure of his case and concerned about the reaction of the television audience, and wants to be bold and command public opinion, he can volunteer to be the next witness himself before the Ervin committee and the American people.

The chances are that he will do none of these things—neither answer the questions of the press, make a deposition to the prosecutors, or volunteer to appear before the Senate committee, but even so the calling of the next witness on the Hill is important.

John Dean has not knocked the President out, but he has hurt him badly. He has talked for hundreds of pages, and incriminated the President and many of the President's closest associates before one of the largest audiences in the history of television.

Accordingly, whatever the President does or refuses to do, the fair thing is to maintain some kind of continuity

in the search for the facts. And this surely means calling Ehrlichman and Haldeman as soon as possible to answer Dean's charges before the July Fourth recess, and before nobody remembers anything, except what Dean had to say incriminating the President.