

Fearful White House

Final judgment on many details in the massive testimony of John W. Dean 3d on President Nixon's specific part in the Watergate scandal must be suspended until all the statements and recollections can be checked against the words and documentation of all the other witnesses—and ultimately the testimony that will clearly be needed from the President himself.

Like most other witnesses in this unhappy affair, Mr. Dean has played a part in the long chronicle of deceit. But in the wake of a concerted effort by Mr. Nixon's sympathizers to undermine his credibility, Mr. Dean has presented his exhaustive account, accompanied by extensive documentation, with a sobriety which his detractors have not succeeded in matching.

What has already emerged from the Dean account is a terrifying tableau of a President self-imprisoned in a White House atmosphere of suspicion, mistrust and fear of political enemies. It was a world shielded against any expression of dissent, reflective of a police-state mentality in which the President demanded proof of "facts" which existed only in his imagination and solved real problems by denying their existence.

As Mr. Dean told it, a lone demonstrator within range of Mr. Nixon's view from the White House was able to set in motion top-level game plans, including talk about the employment of "thugs" to remove such a threat to the President's peace of mind. In the end, the job was relegated to the Secret Service.

When the President traveled, orders to keep all protesters "unseen and unheard" were not the result of excessive zeal by the palace guard; they were a direct response to the President's displeasure.

It is unnecessary to take Mr. Dean's word for the fact that these protective measures were to be carried out "by any means—legal or illegal." The President's approval of the largely illegal intelligence-gathering plan of 1970 and the subsequent appointment of the White House "plumbers" is ample evidence that Mr. Nixon's fears were considered all the excuse needed for illegal "security" measures.

Once the President had persuaded himself that hostile demonstrators were part of a Democratic master plan against him, he ordered the nation's entire intelligence establishment to bring in the evidence. And even after, in Mr. Dean's words, the investigation failed to produce "a scintilla of viable evidence," the President continued to believe "that the opposite was, in fact, true."

Fact became what the President or his entourage wanted to be fact. Thus, Mr. Nixon was able to refer publicly to the Dean report as alleged proof that no persons in the White House had been involved in the Watergate cover-up, when apparently no such report actually existed. In fact, if his testimony stands up, Mr. Dean seems to have been pleading with the President to put an end to the cover-up of the cover-up precisely because the White House was so egregiously involved.

In this unreal world of the President's isolation, the Watergate was something to "get rid of" as soon as the election was over. The indicted burglars would cease being "a problem," if their financial demands could be met. The Internal Revenue Service could be made "responsive to White House requirements," once it was proved that it had previously been the tool of Democratic Administrations—even though no such proof had been furnished.

In press conferences, Mr. Dean charged—and the record of the by now "inoperative" statements seems to corroborate this—the President frequently made reference "to things that never had, in fact, occurred." Charges of serious wrongdoing seemed in the President's mind to be nothing but public relations matters.

Amid such a mix of wishful thinking and terrified visions, right and wrong became unreal concepts. The ends justified any means, but even the ends—except in the President's secret formulation—lacked definition.

In such an atmosphere, it soon became as natural to tap the phones and record the conversations of friends as to spy on an enemy who sent a man carrying a hostile sign to the White House gates. It is for the creation of this nightmare of distrust, deceit and self-deception—more than for any specific criminal offense—that the President will have to answer to the American people.